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Salesian youth ministry and family in the light of *Amoris Laetitia*

by Gustavo Fabian Cavagnari, SDB¹

In these pages I would like to reflect on *youth ministry with a special focus on family*. I hope that, by the end of this reflection no one could say that most of the considerations made were on family ministry rather than on youth ministry. Nevertheless, I think we cannot have a different approach to the subject – *youth ministry* – when as Church and as Congregation we have had recently at least three magisterial indications in that direction: the letter of the Holy Father on the bicentennial of the birth of St. John Bosco,² his apostolic exhortation on love in the family,³ and the 2017 Strenna of the Rector Major.⁴ Moreover, I assume that this approach is justified not only for authoritative reasons, but also for practical ones. In reality, we

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2. Francis, “Like Don Bosco, with the young and for the young.” Letter to Fr. Angel Fernández Artime, Rector Major of the Salesians, on the bicentennial of the birth of St. John Bosco, June 24, 2015.

3. Francis, *Amoris laetitia*. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation on love in the family, March 19, 2016. Hereafter: *AL*.

4. Angel Fernández Artime, “We are family! Every home, a school of life and love.” Commentary of the Rector Major on the 2017 Strenna, December 31, 2016, in *AGC XCVIII*, n. 424 (2017), pp. 3-46.

must admit that although so many people working in the field of youth ministry have a good understanding of the workings of youth ministry, they do not always have a similar good understanding of family ministry matters.⁵ Therefore, the purpose of this article is simply to present some relevant ideas which are related to youth ministry, from the perspective of the family, starting with the last pontifical exhortation and complementing it with the other documents previously mentioned.

On love in the family

With its three hundred and twenty five articles, *Amoris Laetitia* (“The Joy of Love”) is an extensive exhortation. Or better, it is the longest document in the history of the papal magisterium. The length of the exhortation justifies Pope Francis’s plea that this official document needs to be read “patiently and carefully,” piece by piece, and then pondered upon as a whole (*AL* 7). That such a remark may be of little use could derive, however, from two different circumstances: first, from the fact that the various opinions before the exhortation set a conditioned context for the reception of *Amoris Laetitia*, by focusing almost exclusive attention on some particular problems;⁶ second, from the fact that most Catholics are simply not going to dive into a text of such depth.⁷

Regarding the first problem, we can probably do something, heeding the Pope’s appeal and discerning carefully what the exhortation recommends in accord with the whole magisterial tradition of the Church. Unfortunately, slanted debates and fallacious interpretations are carried on not only in the media or in certain publications, but even among the Church’s ministers and theologians who have an ideological bias or have not done adequate reflection. Regarding the second problem, we can do more, but that depends on each one. Regrettably, not reading the exhortation would be a loss, because the text says many important things about love, marriage, and family.

5. See Fabio Attard, “Pastoral juvenil y pastoral familiar,” in *Misión joven* LI (2011) 414-415, 25-32: 30.

6. Specifically, proposals for admitting divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to Communion or arguments related to gender questions.

7. See George Weigel, “Pope Francis on love, marriage, and the family,” April 8, 2016, in <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/433832/pope-francis-marriage-document-defends-catholic-teaching>

Finding the young in the exhortation

References to young persons are “splashed” all over the exhortation. Right at the beginning, the Pope mentions *young people* in whom “the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant” (AL 1). We shall ponder on this question later. On the other hand, the Pope also recognizes that “we live in a culture which pressures young people not to start a family” and, in fact, “many young persons postpone a wedding” for several reasons (AL 40; see 44). When the cause is economic, the document requests that States “pass laws and create work to ensure the future of young people and help them realize their plan of forming a family” (AL 43), advertising that if “society and politics fail ... serious effects of this breakdown [can be seen] in families torn apart, the young uprooted and the elderly abandoned, children who are orphans of living parents, adolescents and young adults confused and unsupported” (AL 51).

Later on, many other paragraphs of the exhortation are devoted to different “clusters” of young persons who should be recipients of pastoral care. For sure, there are many more, but the following are those mentioned by Pope Francis:

- *Young people preparing themselves for marriage.* Talking about them, Pope Francis says that the Church has to offer “premarital preparation,” integrating it “into the broader dynamic of ecclesial life” (AL 204). To understand the extensive implications of this statement, however, it is indispensable to have in mind everything Pope John Paul II said earlier in his well-known and fundamental exhortation *Familiaris consortio*.⁸ In fact, on that occasion, the saintly Pope reminded the Church that “more than ever necessary in our times is preparation of young people for marriage and family life.” But, if one wants such preparation to be effective, it

has to be seen and put into practice as a gradual and continuous process. It includes three main stages: remote, proximate, and immediate preparation. Remote preparation begins in early childhood [and continues in the family].... Upon this basis there will subsequently and gradually be built up the proximate preparation.... The immediate preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of Matrimony should take place in the months and weeks immediately preceding the wedding. (FC 66)

Likewise, on the same level, Pope Francis repeats that “marriage preparation begins at birth,” continues with education in the home, and

8. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the Christian family in the modern world, November 22, 1981.

is complemented with “pastoral initiatives” (AL 208). The Church, then, “needs to help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage” (AL 205, 307) through “specific programs of marriage preparation” (AL 206). These programs should not be reduced to “a kind of ‘initiation’ to the sacrament of Matrimony,” but represent “solid” help for living as a family (AL 207). In that sense, the phase of proximate preparation is called to be a crucial part of those programs, because “learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage” (AL 208). As a result, “discussion groups and optional talks on a variety of topics of genuine interest to young people can also prove helpful. All the same, some individual meetings remain essential, since the primary objective is to help each to learn how to love this very real person with whom he or she plans to share his or her whole life” (AL 208). In a proper time and manner (see AL 281), sex education should be provided (see AL 281-284), which also includes “respect and appreciation for differences” (AL 285-286). In conclusion, “both short-term and long-term” marriage preparation should be ensured (AL 211). As we can see, the commitment to formation that we offer in our youth groups’ programs is not irrelevant.

- *Young people who are engaged or living their first years of matrimony.* The exhortation adds that “beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament” (AL 223), young married couples need to be encouraged (see AL 226), helped (see AL 224), and accompanied with: a “solid guidance, to understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns” (AL 36); “the witness” (AL 38, 86, 162, 206) and the experience of other Christian spouses (see AL 223, 225); and the presence of the whole ecclesial community (AL 206, see 230), in which “associations, ecclesial movements, and new communities” cooperate (AL 223). With reference to some pastoral ways to accomplish this goal, *Amoris laetitia* 40 explains that the Church “needs to find the right language, arguments, and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love, and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage.” The pastoral ministry for young people who are engaged or married “should be centered on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church’s teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programs, sound advice, proven strategies, and psychological guidance.” (AL 211; see also 215, 219)

- *Young people who are not living with parents* (even if they are alive). The Pope reminds us that “the sense of being orphaned that affects many children and young people today is much deeper than we think” (AL 173), in part because mothers and fathers “leave the little ones and the young to themselves” (AL 176). Taking this fact seriously, it becomes very important for youth ministry to catch and translate Francis’s suggestion to create a “new embrace” between youths and adults (see AL 191), liberating youth ministry from *giovanilismo* [carrying on indefinitely like a youngster though no longer a youth] and ghettoization. Just to be exact, the Pope speaks of “young and old,” but what he declares about elders could be applied also to mature adults: listening to what adults have to say and witness should enable the young to sink roots in a much “richer soil” (AL 193).

- Young people “struggling with addiction” (AL 197).

- Young people wounded “due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference” (AL 241).

- Young singles cohabiting or divorced and remarried young adults. “As members of the Church, they too need pastoral care that is merciful and helpful” (AL 293).

It is also interesting to point out that, with the colloquial style that distinguishes Pope Francis, in some paragraphs he speaks to the young directly. Against some prejudice or fears, he wants “to say to young people that none of this [the joy and beauty of affections] is jeopardized when their love finds expression in marriage” (AL 131). He insists that this social institution ensures “that their love truly will endure and grow,” and it guarantees that a couple’s relationship “is much more meaningful than a mere spontaneous association for mutual gratification, which would turn marriage into a purely private affair” (AL 131). In that way, he spurs the young to gamble, because “committing oneself exclusively and definitively to another person always involves a risk and a bold gamble” (AL 132).

Which horizon does AL open to youth ministry?

As is expected, *Amoris Laetitia* provides an opportunity for youth ministry to discover or rediscover some ideas with challenging but exciting practical implications.

Educating from desire toward commitment

Starting with the introductory conference of German Cardinal Walter Kasper to his confreres gathered in the extraordinary consistory of February 20, 2014,⁹ continuing through all the discussions and documents of the synods of both 2014 and 2015,¹⁰ until the recent apostolic exhortation that we are commenting on, it has been said, as we have already noted, that “the desire to marry and form a family ... especially among young people” is “an inspiration to the Church” (AL 1). Nevertheless, it would be interesting and informative to understand in which sense this “desire” is assumed.

In postmodern culture, that is, in a culture with its challenging characteristic of postponed maturation, this desire could be something evanescent that leads nowhere. And regarding couples, for instance, it could imply some kind of romantic nostalgia for lasting and faithful bonds that, however, is superficial, fleeting, transitory, and fluid and that, in practice, nurtures intensive ties, but without consequences.¹¹ The Pope defines this kind of desire as “volatile, precarious, and unpredictable” (AL 209). Something like “I wish it but not yet,” or “I wish it now but I don’t know about tomorrow.” In this case, such a desire could be a counterpart to that “general attitude opposed to anything institutional or definitive” (AL 294). It is “the desire for stability and fidelity” that still exists “side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (AL 34); a desire shaped by individualism (see AL 33); a desire ruled by the changing winds of personal wishes and circumstances (see AL 34); a narcissist desire that “makes people incapable of looking beyond themselves” (AL 39); a desire unable

9. The report was later published in book form. See Walter Kasper, *The Gospel of the Family*, ed. William Madges (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2014).

10. See III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Report on “The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization,”* October 18, 2014, 2; XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Report on “The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world,”* October 24, 2015, 2.

11. Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

to go further than feelings, emotions, and passions (see *AL* 143). With that, the “mere desire, or an attraction to a certain value, is not enough to instill a virtue” (*AL* 266), and then it does not motivate a path to action.

Instead, the situation would be different if the desire were understood as something deeper and more intimate; “in a serious sense of a vocation, an attitude, a fundamental aspiration;”¹² in a dream capable of becoming conviction and goal (see *AL* 261). In this case, a properly ordered and appropriately educated desire could be transformed into commitment and plan of life. A disposition like that, however, supposes that one desires “to synchronize the desire with the law,”¹³ that is to say, a coordinate desire (to marry and form a family) with sense (meaning with consequences), choices (on friendship, engagement, sexual life), and responsibility (personal, social, and theological).

In that sense, Pope Francis proposes a challenging goal: “We need to find the right language, arguments, and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love, and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage” (*AL* 40). He is prophetically clear when he says that Christian marriage and family are not just a question of naiveté or mere voluntarism, but a question of love, commitment, and even heroism, and educating the young for this kind of choice is for us pastoral workers a matter of language (style), arguments (contents), and forms of witness (the testimony of our own lives). Through the filter of Don Bosco’s charism, “we can boldly call this paragraph the ‘Salesian paragraph,’”¹⁴ because it both pushes pastoral ministers to recognize the need for a renewed approach to reach the hearts of young people, and appeals to the capacity and initiative of the young.

a) *Language*. Of course, any pastoral worker should avoid vulgar speech, or words that could lead people to feel judged or discriminated against (see *AL* 243). More profoundly, this aspect is an invitation to consider that “young people and adults communicate differently. They

12. Massimo Recalcati, *Elogio del fallimento. Conversazioni su anoressie e disagio della giovinezza* (Trento: Erickson, 2011), 127. If not indicated otherwise, all translations from the original, are the author’s translations.

13. Recalcati, *Elogio del fallimento*, 181.

14. Fabio Attard, “Youth ministry and family. Heritage and guidelines for the future.” Presentation made by the General Councilor for Youth Ministry of the Salesian Congregation during the 35th Days of Spirituality of the Salesian Family, Rome, January 21, 2017, 5.1.e.

“speak different languages and they act in different ways” (AL 136). Consequently, youth ministry has to find “a new and more appropriate language” (AL 281).

b) *Arguments*. Talking about content, the Pope says in the first place that “marriage preparation” has to be grounded “in the process of Christian initiation by bringing out the connection between marriage, baptism, and the other sacraments” (AL 206). That statement is important, because it recalls the formation that we are already offering in the processes of Christian initiation for young people, such as preparation of the young for “Holy Communion and Confirmation.” Can we say that our programs of sacramental initiation are really taking into consideration what relates to marriage?

He mentions also that there must be education in everything that is related to sexuality, with the purpose of reaching full maturity (see AL 281), “self-knowledge and self-control,” “valuable capacities for joy and for loving encounter,” “love and mutual self-giving” (AL 280), appreciation and self-awareness of one’s own male or female identity, and “the accepting of others” (AL 285). All this must be carried out with the help of contributions from “psychological, pedagogical, and didactic sciences” (AL 280). In this matter, “various forms of an ideology of gender” are a challenge (AL 56). Do we seriously consider the ideas and tendencies of contemporary society as a real challenge?

Of course, he makes a reference to what the Bible teaches and what the magisterium clarifies as well, but cautioning that we do not need to teach “the entire *Catechism* or overwhelm [the young] with too much information” (AL 207). That, also, is important because it supposes a classification of catechetical topics. In this, “quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given – along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma – to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help” people to live their lives – as boyfriend/girlfriend, fiancé/e, or spouse – “with great courage and generosity” (AL 207).

c) *Forms of witness*. The best way to educate young people to Christian marriage and family life, even if they come from broken families, is to show them “in a credible way” that “indissoluble and perpetually faithful marriage” is possible (AL 86). For evangelization, it is not enough to teach the objective sanctity of the sacraments, but one must also know the subjective sanctity of the people. In this sense, “the witness of married people becomes especially eloquent” (AL 162). And, in fact, we have an

invaluable resource in “marriages that have not only proved lasting, but also fruitful and loving” (AL 38). With their experience, married couples “can help us reach the hearts of young people” (AL 40). As Giuseppe Colombo says,

perhaps the time is not so far off when Christian spouses aware of their mission will appear – at least to the secular eyes – as members of religious or missionary congregations since they will behave differently from most other people and will follow their own rules of life and have their centers of preparation.... I will insist – if I may – in pointing out that therein lies the crux of the problem; not in the suggestion of a catechumenate for the engaged, but in the fact that this suggestion can come to life only if it has a positive reference to lean on. And the positive reference cannot be but the Christian conjugal life as effectively should be. Therefore, ministry programs will do well to prioritize their objectives: first (logical priority) would be to form groups of spouses who model Christian marriage and family and then can evangelize others; second, a catechumenate for those who must be converted to the reality of Christian marriage and family.¹⁵

This is precisely the way: Church ministry “needs to involve the entire community more extensively by stressing the witness of families themselves” (AL 206). Only they are able to show with their lives how desire must be accompanied by a directed intention. To this end, the will and feelings, too, must be transformed into commitment and responsibility. Youth ministry cannot ignore these couples!

As Salesians, we should evoke in these matters what was previously said in the 1990s by the 23rd General Chapter on “Educating the young to

15. Giuseppe Colombo, *Teologia sacramentaria* (Milano: Glossa, 1997), 589-590. “Forse non è ancora giunto il tempo in cui gli sposi cristiani consapevoli della loro missione appariranno – almeno agli occhi dei profani – come membri di congregazioni religiose o missionarie, perché si comporteranno in maniera differente dalla maggioranza, con le proprie regole di vita e centri di preparazione. [...] Insisto – se mi è concesso – a voler indicare che lì giace il nodo del problema; non nella proposta di un catechumenato per i fidanzati, ma nel fatto che una tale proposta può essere vitale solo se ha un riferimento positivo su cui poggiare. Ed il riferimento positivo non può essere la vita coniugale cristiana così come dovrebbe essere. Per questa ragione, la pastorale dovrà ordinare bene secondo priorità i suoi obiettivi: innanzi tutto (priorità logica), la formazione di gruppi di sposi che vivono, e poi evangelizzano, annunciano il matrimonio cristiano e la famiglia; in secondo luogo, il catechumenato per coloro che devono convertirsi alla realtà del matrimonio e della famiglia cristiani.”

faith.”¹⁶ On that occasion, in fact, the Chapter members recognized as one of the nodes of special commitment *education to love*, given the impact that this education has on the maturity of personality and Christian identity. In the document emerge many topics and means that are present in *Amoris Laetitia* also. A comprehensive and integrated education of boys and girls, with the sustaining power of divine grace, will lead them to achieve an authentic understanding of love, which a Christian cannot acquire except with God’s support (see GC 23, 94; AL 70, 120, 172); an understanding of the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman, calling them to a deep communion able to signify the very reality of God himself (see GC 23 194; AL 56, 155, 221, 292, 321); the authentic values of purity (see GC 23, 197; AL 206); sexuality, as a value which matures the person and as a gift to be exchanged in a specific, exclusive, and total relationship, open to responsible procreation (see GC 23, 199; AL 61, 80, 124, 125, 215).

In order to achieve these goals, the General Chapter, too, reminded us that meeting up with persons who live this kind of love has the force of witness and is a powerful way to understand strongly and intuitively and assimilate values like a gratuitous self-giving (see GC 23, 200); and that a careful catechesis and a positive and prudent sex education will lead young people to understand the reality and dimensions of this love, lead them to the acceptance of the plan of God, and prepare them for its realization in Christian marriage (see GC 23, 202).

Discerning the vocation to marriage

Many times the exhortation makes references to marriage – and the family arising from it – as a vocation (see AL 57, 69, 72, 85, 88, 162, 325). Therefore, if “marriage is a vocation ... the decision to marry and to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment” (AL 72) that begins during the years of one’s youth.¹⁷

In this sense, it is clear that any youth ministry that wants to prepare people for living Christian marriage and family life and enable them to do so “cannot marginalize the vocational aspect; rather, it [youth ministry]

16. Society of Saint Francis de Sales, “*Educating young people to the faith. A task and challenge for today’s Salesian community*”: Documents of the 23rd General Chapter, Rome, 4 march - 5 may 1990 (Rome: SDB, 1990). Henceforth, all references to the General Chapters of the Society of St. Francis de Sales will be indicated with GC.

17. With good reason we can expect that this argument will be developed in depth by the 2018 Synod with its theme being “Young people, the faith and discernment of vocation.”

must put it [vocation] at the center of its thoughts and actions”¹⁸ without delay. Helping youths to recognize their vocation to marriage and family life “requires careful discernment and respectful accompaniment” (AL 243). As in any other existential journey, this implies presence, dialogue, silence, perseverance, grace, prayer – and clear ideas. In fact, “proclaiming the Gospel of the family today” (AL 202-204; see also 60, 63, 76, 208) is a basic aspect and should not be overlooked, because if the crisis of the family is first of all a crisis of faith,¹⁹ “marriage in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39) will always be an option explicit and against the tide (see Rom 12:2). Thus, pastoral ministry “needs to make it clear that [only] the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one’s dignity and fulfillment in reciprocity, communion, and fruitfulness.... values that are clearly needed today, even in the most secularized of countries” (AL 201). If not, any pastoral “support” will bring only confusion.

The 2014 and 2015 synods stated “in a number of ways that we need to help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage” (AL 205). Well, as was just said, this “discovery” or “rediscovery” (as FC 66 calls it) of sacramental Matrimony with all its implications, requires a specific preparation based on a preceding education in the family, offered, “in a catechumenal process” of “more specific preparation for the sacraments” (FC 66).²⁰ This in turn should lead to a personal awareness of

18. Rossano Sala, *Andate e fate discepoli tutti i giovani. Percorso di pastorale giovanile fondamentale*. Ad uso degli studenti del Dipartimento di Pastorale Giovanile e Catechetica della Università Pontificia Salesiana. Roma, Anno accademico 2012-2013, 261.

19. “The union of a man and a woman, their becoming ‘one flesh’ in charity, in fruitful and indissoluble love, is a sign that speaks of God with a force and an eloquence which in our days has become greater because unfortunately, for various reasons, marriage, in precisely the oldest regions evangelized, is going through a profound crisis. And it is not by chance. Marriage is linked to faith, but not in a general way. Marriage, as a union of faithful and indissoluble love, is based upon the grace that comes from the triune God, who in Christ loved us with a faithful love, even to the Cross. Today we ought to grasp the full truth of this statement, in contrast to the painful reality of many marriages which, unhappily, end badly. There is a clear link between the crisis in faith and the crisis in marriage.” Benedict XVI, Homily during the Holy Mass for the opening of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme ‘The new evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith,’ October 7, 2012.

20. The same idea has been proposed again by Pope Francis, even if not in *Amoris Laetitia*. “The Church, thus, with a renewed sense of responsibility continues to propound marriage in its essential elements – offspring, the good of the spouses,

the consequences of one's own faith toward marriage and family life.²¹ It is evident that such training begins during the age in which young people are in our communities and groups.

In that sense, Fr. Pascual Chavez rightly stated “the Salesian Family asks us especially for a combined commitment to provide every young person with an adequate and particular vocational plan (see GC 25 nn. 41, 48).”²² That is why he called the groups of the Salesian Family to be more effective including the young people who belong to it, emphasizing the necessity of initiatives and activities that can lead the Salesian Family to work ever more in the manner of a spiritual, apostolic movement.

In order to achieve this goal, Fr. Chavez also suggested some practical proposals in the formation of the young that can be still useful: to “prepare a gradual and systematic program for education to love”; “to face up to the values of life and the criteria of the Gospel”; to “promote among the young adults where we are involved (leaders, volunteers, collaborators, etc.) practical formation schemes for the discernment and follow-up of the vocation to Christian marriage”; to “encourage in our works the setting up of groups, movements, and associations of couples and of families that can help in the living and deepening of their own vocation to marriage and in actively taking on their educative responsibilities.”²³

unity, indissolubility, and sacramentality – not as an ideal meant only for the few, notwithstanding modern models fixated on the ephemeral and the passing, but rather as a reality that in Christ's grace can be lived out by all baptized faithful. Therefore, a fortiori, pastoral urgency involving all Church structures is leading us toward a shared intention to provide adequate preparation for marriage in a kind of new catechumenate — I emphasize this: a kind of new catechumenate — strongly hoped for by various Synod Fathers.” Francis, Address to the officials of the tribunal of the Roman Rota for the inauguration of the judicial year, January 22, 2016.

21. “A process means systematic actions, or rather, an itinerary reflected and shared by the members of the community, avoiding the risk of making of youth ministry a sequence of deregulated and confused actions without coordination and, sometimes, without any setting.” Sala, *Andate e fate discepoli tutti i giovani*, 357.

22. See Pascual Chávez, “‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man’ (Lk 2,52).” Commentary of the Rector Major on the 2006 Strenna, January 1, 2006, in AGC LXXXVII/392 (2006), 3-46: 42.

23. See Chávez, “‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man’”, 42-43.

Working in alliance

It is clear that the synods were not on youth ministry but on the Church's ministry regarding marriage and the family. However, in the synods it was said that the Church needs "a conversion of all pastoral practices from the perspective of the family,"²⁴ and this includes also pastoral work with young people. On the one hand, there is no doubt that youth ministry's "clients" come from families, with all the footprints, negative or positive, that this home experience leaves upon them. On the other hand, a vast majority of young people will form their own families, which is why our pastoral ministry should prepare and empower them to carry out this responsibility.

So Pope Benedict XVI was on-target when he said to Salesians that helping youths "also requires attention to the family and its involvement,"²⁵ and "your youth ministry must be decisively open to family ministry."²⁶ Somebody could object that we are for the young, not for families. And, in some way, he/she is right: family is an *indirect* part of our mission.²⁷ But, again, a closer relationship in ministry between the young and families, not only as "object but above all [as] subject of pastoral care" (*FC* III), should not be completely odd: "Family is not only a strategically pastoral choice, but the proper way of actualizing the charism" in mission.²⁸ As the Pope emeritus explained:

In the education of youth it is extremely important that the family play an active role. . . . The special tenderness and commitment to young people that are characteristic of Don Bosco's charism must be expressed in an equal commitment to the involvement and formation of families. . . . Caring for families does not mean taking people away from work for young people; on the contrary, it means making it more permanent and effective. I thus encourage you to deepen the forms of this commitment on which you have

24. III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio post disceptationem* by the Relator General, Cardinal Peter Erdő, October 13, 2014.

25. Benedict XVI, "Message to the Very Reverend Pascual Chávez Villanueva for the beginning of the General Chapter XXVI," March 1, 2008, in *Documents of the 26th General Chapter* (see footnote 29 below), 91.

26. Benedict XVI, Address in the Audience to the Chapter Members, March 31, 2008, in *Documents of the 26th General Chapter*, p. 125.

27. Chávez, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man", 33.

28. Antonia Colombo, "To give special attention to the family." Letter 872 introducing the Commentary of the Rector Major on the 2006 Strenna, January 1, 2006.

set out; this will prove advantageous to the education and evangelization of the young.²⁹

In accordance with this plea, the 26th General Chapter³⁰ called upon Salesian youth ministry to be “ever more open to family ministry” (GC 26, 99), to be “attentive to family contexts,” to do a “greater investment of energies on behalf of the family” (GC 26, 204), and to “give privileged attention to the family” (GC 26, 108). The chapter also requested local communities to “see to a ministry to families which uses encounters, reflection, and prayer” (GC 26, 67) and summoned provinces to “coordinate and sustain the efforts of educative and pastoral communities in the affective education of the young and in accompaniment of engaged couples” and “foster family ministry projects together with lay people and the Salesian Family” (GC 26, 110).

Going back in history, after Vatican Council II, when in 1994 Fr. Egidio Viganò, intuited the way forward: “We know very well, and we have said it on several occasions, that no authentic pastoral work for the young is possible without a practical and interrelated pastoral work for the family.”³¹ The idea was sustained by Fr. Chavez, who devoted the 2006 Strenna to this subject and explained it in his letter of January 1, 2006, cited above. And today the message is maintained whereby Fr. Angel Fernandez Artime calls not only for family ministry but also asks youth ministry to place its “bets decisively on giving attention to families, considering this a priority of our educational mission” and to take “a decisive, definitive, and firm step” in the accompaniment of “parents and spouses who accept it; ... children and youths in Salesian presences around the world, especially when they are dealing with difficult family and personal situations; [and] ... youths who manifest in a concrete way that they are developing a plan of life that includes matrimony,” translating into proposals of “spirituality and faith ... even in the most diverse family realities.”³²

Recently, on the occasion of the bicentennial of Don Bosco’s birth, even Pope Francis renewed this call: “I remind you of the imperative need

29. Benedict XVI, Address to the Chapter Members, in *Documents of the 26th General Chapter*, 125-126.

30. Society of Saint Francis de Sales, “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”: *Documents of the 26th General Chapter*, Rome, 23 February - 12 April 2008 (Rome: SDB, 2008).

31. Egidio Viganò, Letter in the Year of the Family, June 10, 1994, in AGC LXXV/349 (1994), 3-32, at 6.

32. Fernández Artime, “We are family!,” 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.

to involve the families of young people. There can indeed be no effective youth ministry without a good family ministry.”³³

Do we need more authoritative indications? We have to recognize, however, that the couplet youth ministry/family ministry is frequently unpaired. Considering families in youth ministry is one of those things that everyone believes is important to do – next time!

Supporting parents

Complementarily, I would like to mention what the Pope’s exhortation says about helping parents.

Parishes, movements, schools, and other Church institutions can help in a variety of ways to support families and help them grow. These might include: meetings of couples living in the same neighborhood, brief retreats for couples, talks by experts on concrete issues facing families, marriage counseling, home missionaries who help couples discuss their difficulties and desires, social services dealing with family problems like addiction, infidelity, and domestic violence, programs of spiritual growth, workshops for parents with troubled children, and family meetings (*AL* 229).

It is clear that youth ministry cannot do all these things. But if not all, at least a few of them. As the former Rector Major says:

GC 24, in connection with the involvement of the laity in the Salesian mission, acknowledged the duty of parents and the role of families in our works, but asked us to intensify our collaboration with the family as having the first educational role for sons and daughters (see GC 24 20 and 177). For this reason it wanted us to esteem more highly the indispensable contribution of parents and families of the young, encouraging the setting up of committees and associations to ensure and enrich Don Bosco’s educational mission by their participation (see CG 24 115).³⁴

As Fr. Chavez asserts, youth ministry implies strengthening in all our works and activities the educational and pastoral community, and giving particular attention to personal relationships and a family atmosphere. In this way the Salesian work will become a place where the youngsters feel at home, and at the same time it will support the families involved. It implies, also, that we “involve the families in the process of education and evangelization that we propose and organize among the youngsters,

33. Francis, “Like Don Bosco, with the young and for the young.”

34. Chávez, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man”, 41.

through initiatives such as sharing sessions between parents and children, family catechesis, the involvement of parents in organizing groups of the SYM [Salesian Youth Ministry], joint meetings and celebrations, and Christian family groups as a point of reference for the journey of faith proposed to the young, etc.”³⁵

Involving young couples

I would like to dedicate a final and particular mention to young couples, the recipients of the pastoral ministries that we direct to both youths and families. In fact, these are couples who are young in terms of both their shared life together and their chronological age.

As was said above, the apostolic exhortation has indicated many times how important it is to accompany couples during the first years of married life (see *AL* 217-230). I will not press that point. But I would like to point out an aspect, in my opinion not emphasized enough: if it is a “great challenge” (*AL* 218) to help couples live their vocation in a “vital and sensitive period” (*AL* 223), they are also a “great resource” with an important role to play, not only in the education of their children, or in the greater community, but even in youth ministry. If it can be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples (*AL* 230), it could be helpful, too, to ask young couples to help youths in their process of maturation and growing in faith.

Renewing the approach to youth ministry

Linked with all the preceding reflections, I am going to conclude by presenting two models of youth ministry that could offer us some ideas for renewing our pastoral work.

- The first one is called *family-based youth ministry*,³⁶ and its core is empowering parents. According to its supporters, isolated youth ministry programs – youngsters seen as a separate population gathered in peer groups with youth leaders and events set up just for them – simply cannot compete with the formative (or “de-formative”) power of the family. Over and over again, like a pattern, young people, even when they pulled away

35. Chávez, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man”, 43.

36. See Mark DeVries, *Family-based youth ministry*. Revised and expanded. Foreword by E. Palmer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2004).

from their families' influence during their teenage years, as adults return to the path their parents have marked out. As a general rule, much of what is put aside during adolescence in an attempt to differentiate themselves from parents is jettisoned just temporarily, and one way or other most of them return to the core values of their families.

The diagnosis may be correct or not. But it is undeniable that youth workers can never replace the influence of a young person's primary socializing structure. What is the proposal, then? In a family-based youth ministry approach, the number one priority consists in empowering fathers and mothers, which means supporting them and equipping them to pass on their faith and values to their children as effectively as possible.

The number two priority, corresponding to the first, is to equip the extended family of the Church. In fact, if we cannot isolate youth ministry from families, neither can we isolate nuclear families from the Church community. In some particular and non-exceptional cases, the extended ecclesial family provides particular benefits for youths who come from homes in which neither of the parents shows interest in the Christian faith. Even more than young people from Christian homes, they need the secure, lifelong structure that a web of relationships with adults in the entire Church can provide. Summarizing: the most substantial youth ministry with the most long-lasting positive result is the ministry that relates to young men and women as members of families. This means that we who do youth ministry are really involved in family ministry. A Nigerian saying puts it well: "It takes a village to raise a child," and the first village for every human being is the family of origin. The Pope has already reminded us of that.³⁷ Therefore, our ministry must encourage and strengthen that original village with friendly, non-exploitative adults who are interested in the young.

- The second one is called *adoptive youth ministry*,³⁸ and its core is an experience of Church as the family of God that fully embraces and includes the young. A child who is accepted and taken in by non-biological parents as a permanent, real, and "full" son or daughter is referred to as adopted. Well, when we talk about adoptive ministry, we are not saying that young are to be adopted like children by a group of "surrogate parents"

37. Francis, Address to students and teachers from schools across Italy, May 10, 2014.

38. For its most develop presentation, see Chap Clark ed., *Adoptive youth ministry. Integrating emerging generations into the family of faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

(the adults in the community), but rather that the “inner circle” of mature persons does whatever it needs to do to draw in, include, and equip all those who normally feel like outsiders – young people – so that they may feel welcomed and included. Adoptive ministry means that while all in the community are siblings – all are sons and daughters of the same Father – those who are mature must take the lead on ensuring that those who have not been cared for are included and invited to participate, even while they are being nurtured, trained, and empowered to grow into a peer level of engagement with the mature, and can grow into well-established life and faith.

If we look deeper, adoptive ministry includes all those who may be or feel vulnerable, such as the elderly, the single parent, the divorced, the outcast, the hurt or injured, the lonely, the lost, and the broken. But we are talking especially about the young. Or, as the Pope says, uprooted youngsters, “children who are orphans of living parents, adolescents and young adults confused and unsupported” (*AL* 51); children and youngsters affected by “the sense of being orphaned” (*AL* 173) partly because mothers and fathers “leave the little ones and the young to themselves” (*AL* 176). Adoptive youth ministry, then, seeks to embrace, support, and develop by appealing to and building from the core reason for their existence: an erosion of what is sometimes called “social capital,” which is necessary for any young person to become an adult, and the lack of an adult community committed to the support and nurture of the young.

This vision has its roots in the biblical and theological calling of partnering in God’s work of adopting children into his family. But for us it can be found even in our charismatic identity. As Fr. Chavez pointed out in his commentary on the 2006 Strenna, the family spirit “is a characteristic of our spirituality (see GC 24 91-93) and is expressed: in unfailingly listening to others, in freely welcoming others, in the animating presence of the educator among the young, in dialogue and interpersonal and formal communication, in shared responsibility for a common educational plan.”³⁹

39. Chávez, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man”, 41-42.

And as Fr. Angel Fernandez remarks, the family spirit and the family atmosphere are “the constitutive element of our being, of our identity, and they make explicit reference to pastoral activity in the family and with families.”⁴⁰

In conclusion:

The call of the Church concerning the family for us today is something very serious and profoundly important. This is not to make cosmetic operations, some adjustments to our times, a few conferences to new or old groups. Here we are all called to put all our ability to dream, all our pastoral energies so that our young people and the family together feel welcomed, accompanied, and formed protagonists.⁴¹

40. Fernández Artime, “We are family!” 5.

41. Attard, Youth ministry and family. Heritage and guidelines for the future, 1.4.