

# MOTIVATION OF VOLUNTEERS WORKING WITH THE YOUNG REFUGEES IN THE SALESIAN HOUSE

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## Introduction

In September 2015, in the middle of the greatest refugee influx to Austria, the Salesians of Don Bosco started a new project,<sup>2</sup> with the aim to offer German courses, counselling and the recreation offer for the young refugees. The project started very quickly and for that purpose it was necessary to gather a big number of volunteers in a short period of time. At that time the motivation from all sides was great because no-one wanted to be only a spectator, everyone wanted to help the incoming refugees. The media coverage of the refugee crisis was positive and welcoming, especially after the photo of the dead Syrian boy named Kurdi who died on 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 2015 on the shores of Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

The people were hurrying to train stations to welcome refugees, bringing food and clothes, many groups were starting different initiatives for refugees like German courses. It was easy to find the volunteers, because everyone was ready to help. But as time passed by, the situation started to change. The media coverage of refugee crisis changed, only negative examples were reported, and lots of initiatives were closed because of the lack of volunteers. The politicians started to close the borders, stating that Europe cannot take all the refugees and that refugees are causing problems.

However, if we look back 200 years ago in the time, when Don Bosco lived, the situation was similar. In 1814 Turin registered 84.320 inhabitants. In 1830 the population rose to 122.424 and in 1848 to 136.840... These were the people who fled to the city in a desperate move for survival and who were largely responsible for the urban growth.<sup>4</sup> The number of inhabitants in Turin almost doubled in a period of 30 years and all those young people were coming to the city in a search for better life.

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<sup>2</sup> The project Don Bosco for Refugees was initiated by the Provincial of Austrian Province P. Petrus Obermüller, who gathered the first group of volunteers for the first meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2015 in Vienna. The courses have started on 19<sup>th</sup> of October 2015.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/if-these-extraordinarily-powerful-images-of-a-dead-syrian-child-washed-up-on-a-beach-don-t-change-10482757.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. A. LENTI, *Don Bosco History and Spirit*, LAS, Roma 2007.

But hard circumstances, lack of education possibilities and the repressive society in 19<sup>th</sup> century made it difficult and almost impossible for youngsters to integrate and get the fair chances. Arthur Lenti in his book *Don Bosco History and Spirit* describes the situation of the youth:

The area to Porta Palazzo swarmed with hawkers, match vendors, bootblacks, chimney sweeps, stable boys..., all of them poor children seeking out of such odd jobs a meager livelihood from day to day... Most of them belonged to one of the gangs, to one of these groups of hooligans gathered for self-defense under the leadership of the older and more daring fellows... These poor creatures grow up in idiocy, poverty and pain, in complete ignorance of any religious and moral truth, defenseless against many dangers to their moral life they meet up with in the work place.<sup>5</sup>

These young people, up to 25 years of age, mostly jobless or marginally employed lived in this situation of poverty, and they were all at risk in material, moral and religious way. Don Bosco understood that these youngsters have a «real need of some kind person who will care for them, work with them, guide them in virtue and keep them away from evil».<sup>6</sup> Don Bosco saw in these boys not just street boys and hooligans, but possible future upright citizens, pillars of the Church and society, now and in the future. His way of seeing youngsters was marked by empathy and love and he gave his entire life for young people. Through his life and example, he left us a preventive system as a tool to work for needy in different contexts.

Although in Europe we live in a rich society (compared to Turin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), many young people are still affected by poverty and marginalization. One of the groups that is specially affected by marginalization and lack of educational opportunities are young refugees. They are often socially stigmatized, and they are living in an uncertainty what the future will bring to them. They came to Europe with the hope to escape the war and the poverty, to get the education and to build better life for themselves and their families. As such, they are similar to the disadvantaged young people of the time of Don Bosco, who came to Turin in 19<sup>th</sup> century in the search for work and better life.

## 1. Project description

In October 2015, in the heart of the biggest influx of refugees to Vienna, Salesians of Don Bosco together with a few volunteers and one Syrian refugee started the project “Don Bosco for Refugees”. The main part of the project are the German courses, because the refugees stated learning German as the greatest need they had. The target group of the project are young refugees, 14 to 30 years old. The project is located in Salesian House in Vienna, called *Salesianum*, in third Vienna district. The project offers German courses from level A1 (basic level) to level B2 (upper interme-

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, 14-19.

<sup>6</sup> From *Draft Regulations* for the Oratory of 1854.

diate level). Courses take place four days a week, from Monday to Thursday in the late afternoon and evening hours.

In the first month 60 volunteers engaged in the project and at the moment (December 2018) 50 volunteers are active. The course is organized in small groups where one volunteer works around one table with 5-6 refugees who have the similar level of knowledge. Each volunteer comes once a week for 2 hours, while refugees come four times a week. That means that 4 volunteers “share” one group of refugees.

When starting the project, the first goal was to help refugees adapt to the new environment by learning the language, but as the project evolved, further goals were formulated. These include: to create daily structure for the unemployed refugees, to foster contacts between refugees and Austrian people (that was stated for the refugees as one of the wishes: to have the contacts with Austrians), to facilitate integration in Austria. For the volunteers the goals are: to get to know Don Bosco and his charism and to experience the joyful community in the spirit of Don Bosco.

Each course starts with the short (15-20 minutes) briefing with the volunteers about the previous day, exchanging the important information about the course and the course participants and with a short Salesian thought. During that time the volunteers are served coffee and cake in order to get in the course atmosphere after the busy day. After the briefing with the volunteers, with two 45 minutes sessions and 15 minutes break in between. Each day the course break starts with a short silent prayer for peace, where everyone is invited, each in his or her way, to pray in silence for peace or some other concern. After the course finishes volunteers come together for another 15 minutes (sometimes even longer) for the short debriefing. Everyone has an opportunity to express his or her observation, problems and suggestions for the next day and the course improvement. Figure 1 shows the typical course setting during one of the days.

*Figure 1. German course participants and volunteers – group setting. Each table is one group at its own level*



Besides the courses, project “Don Bosco for Refugees” offers training and workshops about Don Bosco for the volunteers, excursions to other Salesian projects and to places of Don Bosco for the volunteers and short excursions for volunteers and refugees. Other activities include football, baking cookies, painting Easter eggs, game and movie night, joint celebration in Advent of all volunteers and refugees, carnival party and birthday parties, interreligious prayer and dialogue for peace. The whole project is based on the pedagogy of Don Bosco and on a community experience.

The project tries to be a home that is welcoming towards volunteers and refugees, a place where they are happy to be. Through different actions it offers the oratory experience: a home that welcomes, a school that prepares the young refugees for their new life in Austria, a playground where they can meet friends and a parish where they can freely talk about their faith.

## **2. Research questions and Research methods**

Although the political and social climate has changed from 2015 and the overall acceptance of the refugees decreased, the project Don Bosco for Refugees still counts 50 volunteers and refugees coming to the course and are also very regular in the courses.

Two research questions have motivated a small study about the project. We were interested which factors influence the motivation of volunteers and what motivates the refugees for regular and long-term participation. In particular, we wanted to know if we could relate the motivation of the participants with the pedagogical concept of the course, specifically with implementation of the pedagogy of Don Bosco in the project.

In order to answer these questions, in October 2017 seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with the volunteers that are in the project from the beginning. Also, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with the refugees who have been attending the course regularly for at least 4 semesters. The interview included two main questions: Why did you come to the project “Don Bosco for Refugees” and what are the reasons that you are still involved in a project (as a volunteer or as a course participant)? At the end of the interview both the groups were asked to describe the atmosphere in the course with only one word.

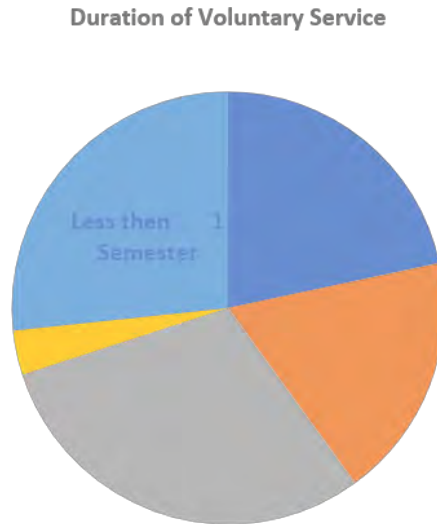
The interviews were transcribed, and the answers were categorized. The words which were used to describe the course were analyzed with the program NVivo11 and the word cloud was formed.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

Figure 2 shows the percentage of the volunteers according to the number of semesters involved in the project. One can notice that most of the volunteers were

active in the project for more than two semesters, with 22% of the volunteers being active for 4-5 semesters, which means from the beginning of the project. At the moment (December 2018), most of the volunteers who have been involved for 4-5 semesters in the project are still active.

Figure 2. Duration of voluntary service in percentages



The answers to the first question, about the reasons why the volunteers came to the project Don Bosco for Refugees were not surprising. Six of seven interviewed volunteers stated that they came to the project because of the positive motivation through media and because they could not just observe the situation. The project also managed to attract former volunteers that made their voluntary service abroad in the project of Salesians in Africa, Latin America and India.

So, two additional volunteers interviewed came to the course because of prior positive experiences in the projects of Salesians. One person also stated the clear structure of the courses as one reason why she came to this project and not to some other initiative. The reasons why refugees came to the course were also not surprising. All of five interviewed refugees came to the course because they wanted to learn German and at that time, they had no other course. They have learned about the course on Facebook and from the friends. Table 1 summarizes all answers obtained from volunteers and refugees.

Table 1. The initial motivation of volunteers and refugees

Volunteers (7)		Refugees (5)	
Positive motivation through media: one needs to do something for refugees, one cannot only observe the situation	6	I wanted to learn German language	5
Positive former experiences with SDB	2	I didn't have any other German course	4
To learn more about the people coming to Europe	1	The course was for free	1
Personal history	1	Contact with Austrian people	1
Clear structure of the courses	1		

In the second part of the interview both volunteers and refugees discussed the reasons why they are still participating in the project. The summary of the responses is visible in Table 2. The main motivation for the volunteers was the familiar atmosphere, warmth and the friendships that were build. Most of the refugees had at that moment also some other compulsory course, but they were still coming to the Salesian project. For them the main driving force were also friends, familiar atmosphere and atmosphere of joy. The interviewer did not mention any of the "Salesian words"<sup>7</sup> in the interviews, not to influence the results. Still, these were the mostly mentioned words in the interview.

The following example shows how the volunteers see the atmosphere in the course:

*I wanted to do something actively for the refugees and not only to talk about them. I heard from a friend about Don Bosco for Refugees and that worked excellent for me. I find it awesome how dedicated the people in the project are and how each person is treated, and the atmosphere is always welcoming and homely, one feels accepted immediately. From that reason I continued to volunteer, because everyone is involved with so much heart.*

Table 2. Motivation of volunteers and refugees after two years in the course

Volunteers (7)		Refugees (5)	
Familiar atmosphere	5	To further improve my German	3
It is nice to see how the people develop	3	Friends	2
The friendships are built	3	Familiar atmosphere	2
Good organization	2	Atmosphere of joy	2
Not to betray the friends	2	I can always ask if I don't understand something	1
Warmness, how people get along	2		
Formations	1		

<sup>7</sup> Here we define familiarity, warmth, atmosphere of joy as Salesian words. Although these words are not exclusively Salesian, we believe that they describe something what is specific for Salesian atmosphere.

The other volunteer said:

*For this course is characteristic that it is Christian course, and one sees the other first as a human and not as a religious enemy (as the society sees the Muslims). Religion is a topic we talk about, but we have developed an interpersonal foundation that enables us to talk openly about religion and other sensitive topics where we have different opinions, and no one feels bad about it. One takes the other as he or she is, but with the brotherly and parental care – I care about you and I will tell you friendly, if I think that you do something which is not good for you.*

These citations show that the volunteers notice and appreciate the familiar and as they say “homely” atmosphere of the project. Here is a short answer of one of the refugees, when asked why he is still coming to the course: *«I want to improve my German and here I can learn better than somewhere else. Here the volunteers are very friendly, and we can learn together and laugh together».*

The other refugee, who is coming to the course from the beginning said:

*When I come here, I feel like at home, I feel like I came home. I spend the most beautiful time in the course because here I meet friends. I have lost lot of friends in the war – some of them were displaced and some of them died. But here I found the new friends and they feel like my friends from Syria. That reminds me of happy times in Syria. The German course here is not only the course, here you have the feeling that the teacher is your friend. The German course is for me like my second family, my second home!*

This quote reminds us of the Letter from Rome [3] where Don Bosco writes that «the teacher who is seen only in the classroom is a teacher and nothing more; but if he joins in the pupils’ recreation, he becomes their brother». The young Muslim Syrian refugee does not know much about Don Bosco, but he managed to feel and describe the core of his pedagogy. The German course tries to be like a family for its participants and volunteers. The young Syrian refugee recognized the course as his second family and second home. His thoughts and feelings are aligned with the spirit of the 2017 Strenna: «We are a family: every home is a school of life and love». Today, one and a half years after this interview was completed, he became one of the volunteers helping others to experience that family spirit.

At the end of the interview the volunteers and the refugees were asked to describe the course with one word. Some of the managed to use only one word, others needed more. All words were analyzed with the program *NVivo11*. The program counts how often does one word appear in the text. The more frequently the word appears, the larger it will be in the word cloud. The Word-Cloud obtained is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Word-Cloud shows the words used most frequently. As the interviews were conducted in German, the words in the cloud are in German. The largest words are FRIENDSHIP, FAMILY and DON BOSCO



One can see that as already mentioned before the most frequent words are family and friendship.

## Conclusion

In this short study we have attempted to analyze the motivation of volunteers and refugees in Salesian project “Don Bosco for Refugees”. All respondents were enrolled in the German courses for more than two years (from the beginning of the course).

The starting motivation of volunteers and refugees was not surprising. As the project started at the time when most of the refugees came to Vienna, their motivation was to learn German and they had no other German course. On the other hand, the volunteers were motivated through the positive media coverage of the refugee crisis and the wish to help in that situation.

The study suggests that the main motivation after participating in the project for the following two years was the familiar atmosphere and the friendship between the participants. The analysis of the interview quotes reveals a lot of words and phrases that we use when we describe pedagogy of Don Bosco and Salesian spirituality. This supports the assumption that we can relate the pedagogical concept of the project with the motivation of the volunteers and refugees. However, this study has the limitation, as only 12 persons were interviewed and only the persons that are motivated



and actively engaged in the project were interviewed. It would be also interesting to see what the reasons are for dropping out from the course, but this was not the focus of this study because we wanted to concentrate on the motives for the long and active participation in the project.

The results of this study could have a possible implication for other projects with refugees and also in other contexts. The familiar atmosphere, as one of the central aspects of Salesian pedagogy, is a value that young people today are longing for and that makes a difference between Salesian and non-Salesian projects. The approach that Don Bosco used with his boys in 19th century is still effective and relevant and could help to increase the motivation and long-term participation in the projects.