Storytelling, Pop-Culture and re-launching the Gospel Message with Don Bosco among a new generation of post-modern young people

Joe Boenzi

There would be so much to say on the themes of pop culture, storytelling, the education of the young in a changed and changing world. Each of these vast themes are being addressed in these years by sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, educators and philosophers. And here I am, a Salesian who teaches theology after beginning as an educator of middle-school youth with learning and behavioral disabilities. I say this to help my readers to understand that I am no authority but a student of these themes for the interest and the needs of those among whom I have worked. Because I have facilitated some workshops and taught some courses on these themes, the organizers of the forum have invited me to share something with the group.

Right from the start you should understand the limits of this presentation, which are my limitations. Besides those listed above, I have also limited this paper by looking at pop culture and storytelling mainly as it has developed in the English-speaking world, and more specifically in the United States – propagator of many pop culture icons through the mass media. The dominance of the USA in this field only begins in the decades immediately following World War II, which some think is precisely the period when pop culture was on the rise.

Does pop culture grow out of the American experience? Or has the post-war American mindset been shaped by pop culture? It is not my purpose to resolve this question, but simply to offer some observations from the American experience in the past decades.

Of course, the United States is a nation of immigrants, and so it is not surprising that some of the very icons of American pop culture have arrived from other shores, just as the dominant language used in the USA – English – is colored by the idioms of many different immigrant communities. Formed of many different peoples, America is pluralist in its reality, and Americans strive to stress that which unites them rather than differences that might divide them. Thus, while most Americans consider themselves people of faith, and consider their heritage to be Judeo-Christian, there is not much explicit religious discourse in the public forum. Having said this, it is also true the America is not hostile to religious values and supports the practice of religion, particularly in the areas of civil rights, health care and community organizing and education.

I. WHAT IS POP CULTURE?

First of all, it is important to be precise here and say that 'pop culture', as understood in English-speaking contexts, is not the same as 'popular culture,' (something that Americans would call 'folk culture').

Popular culture is the set of traditions have come down over the centuries from the real life of our ancestors (our folks). To celebrate popular culture is to cultivate the identity of a people in an intergenerational fashion. It speaks of wisdom, of the tried-and-true, of great ideals set in simple, forthright ways.

Pop culture, on the other hand, does not grow out of tradition. It is a manifestation of fashion trends. It changes continuously. If anything, it reflects 'what's hot,' or 'what's in' only at a given time and in a given place. As such, it makes use of an immense field of cultural expression and many forms social media: magazines, newspapers, cinema, radio, television and social media over the internet. It finds expression in music, songs, games, styles of dress and make-up, recreation and sports, travel and the work place. It is no wonder, then, that those who speak most about pop culture prefer not to delineate it rather than define it – that is, to trace its outlines and describe its processes rather than to attempt to confine it within a definitive container.[1]

Pop culture is nurtured by many different subcultures and, in turn, spawns more subcultural expressions. Because pop culture is interested in selling products, it strives to appeal to the largest possible audience. It is shaped by various currents and experiences, but especially by market forces. It is fed by commerce and feeds new commercial ventures, often without intending to do so. Those people who are most inclined to enter into the logic of buying and selling are most in touch with the newest trends; those who are not interested in new products or services (or who cannot afford them), soon find themselves on the outside looking in. However, if they do look in (through the media or the social networks), they may find themselves beginning to participate again.

Pop culture is linked with commodities and social life. It takes into account tastes and performance. It advances, consciously or unconsciously with technology and the market place.[2] While commerce and technology often is only made possible thanks to the contribution of older and well-placed people, pop culture itself is most often associated with young people, or at least with adults who still retain a youthful style and approach – even to the point of being extreme and immature.[3] This may come from the early definition of the term popular in English, which did not originally denote trendy or pleasing to the populace. It was a term used with

(1) Cf. Raiford A Guins, and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz, *Popular Culture: A Reader*, London, SAGE Publications, 2005, p. 19.

(2) Cf. Guins, and Cruz, pp. 83, 147-148, 211, 349-350.

(3) Cf. Morag Shiach, 'The Popular,' in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by Raiford A Guins, and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz, London, SAGE Publications, 2005, p. 57.

disdain, that was often a substitute for vulgar or suitable to the common people – and the common people were those without social or political power.[1]

In this light, pop culture belongs to those who are not politically powerful, but who hold sway by sheer numbers. It is the expression of their likes more than of their aspirations; it represents their values and what they want to celebrate most in life. Typically popular values and expressions are found in the songs that people like to sing, so that a valid manifestation of pop culture can be found in pop music.

II. BROADCAST MEDIA, MUSIC AND POP CULTURE

Pop music began to emerge after Guglielmo Marconi patented the wireless[2], affording opportunities for rapid communications but also for a huge outreach for the entertainment industry.

Not only did radio transform whole sections of distant rural populations from being amateur musicians into expert listeners, radio also broke the divisions of race and ethnicity, language and class – especially among youth. This took a little time to realize. During the first years of radio broadcasting, transmissions were limited to no more than three hours a day.[3] Through the 1920s, as radio stressed content over technology, American families became more enthusiastic over the invention that linked city dwellers with country folk. Radio brought crucial events, live and direct, into American homes: political debates and concerts, market and weather reports; on Sunday mornings radio transmitted worship services complete with choir pieces and stirring sermons.[4] Radio shows designed as entertainment were broadcast live, in front of a studio audience. For rural families that tuned in their radio, this was like a night in the theater or in the concert hall, where they could listen to the latest compositions together and enjoy musical renditions be they traditional or innovative. Between the wars, the radio brought families together.

In the 1950s, television replaced radio as the gathering point in American homes. The new medium brought new types of broadcasts, and only those artists who knew how to innovate were successful. For whereas radio shows revolved around old-fashioned storytelling, the television screen functioned much like a mirror in American homes. How Americans viewed entertainment and learning and politics changed dramatically.[5]

(1) Cf. Shiach, p. 61-62.

(2) For a recent biographical study, see: Calvin D. Trowbridge Jr., *Marconi: Father of Wireless, Grandfather of Radio, Great-Grandfather of the Cell Phone, The Story of the Race to Control Long-Distance Wireless*, Seattle, BookSurge Publishing, 2010.

(3) Cf. Anthony Rudel, *Hello Everybody! The Dawn of American Radio*, Orlando, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008, p. 9-10.

(4) Cf. Rudel, 61.

(5) Cf. David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, New York, Fawcett Columbine, 1994, p. 188.

Radio changed too. Many radio show hosts found themselves in a new role: that of disk jockey. Now radio became a place to play and sell recorded music, but this very fact led the way to a new kind of recording artist – one that would influence American culture in a massive and perhaps subversive way.

Elvis Presley is an example of the new American recording artist. Here is a rural, white boy living in the segregated American South who, without his parents' permission or approval, secretly tunes his transistor radio to African-American radio stations where he falls in love with Black music (Gospel, rhythm and blues). Without really knowing what he is doing, (Presley could not read music and did not read the newspapers), Elvis crosses the race lines in 1954 when he records his first record – it costs him $3.00 to do so in a Memphis back-street studio. Here was a new sound: a white guitarist singer doing black rhythm and blues in the Deep South. The cheap recording went viral.[1] Rock 'n Roll was born along with the invention of the teenager.[2]

The transistor radio, affordable recordings, the invention of long-play, high-fidelity and stereo sound systems – and a teenage population with more disposable funds than ever before, made it possible for country boys such as Elvis, who came from remote and even backward areas, to create music that would be identified with a generation. Teenagers had their own music – music that parents did not understand and barely tolerated, if they did at all.[3] Yet, it was through 'their music' that young people crossed into new terrain, met and accepted people of different races and cultures – often young people their own age – and grew in attitudes of acceptance of those same people whom their parents saw as strange, different, difficult or dangerous. Pop music allowed this to happen. It changed young people, and young people changed pop music.

Even in the 1950s, radio was more regional than not. Elvis Presley quickly conquered the rural American landscape and the South in 1954 as station after station played his songs, but radio alone was not enough to make him a national sensation. For that, Presley's promoters needed television. In 1955 and 1956, the most successful television program was a Sunday night hour-long show hosted by Ed Sullivan. In terms of his personal style, Ed Sullivan was stiff, cautious, meticulous. His voice was shrill and he spoke with an idiosyncratic accent. In his suit and tie and traditional haircut, Sullivan seemed to be the total antithesis of all that television represented. Yet, he was beloved of the American television public because he was able to introduce any variety of entertainers, amateurs, young and obscure, with respect and even

(1) Cf. Halberstam, p. 457-465.

(2) The word *teenager* first came into existence in 1947. The term was not the designation of educators, psychologists or sociologists, but the invention of marketing men who recognized that they could target young people between the ages of 12 and 25 – an age group that had more spending money and less self-control during the immediate post-war period than any similar age group in previous decades. For a thorough exposition of the social history that led to the invention of 'teenagers,' take the time to read: Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Pre-History of Youth Culture: 1875-1945*, London, Penguin Books, 2008.

(3) President Dwight D. Eisenhower despised the small record-players that his grandchildren used, no doubt because he abhorred the music that teenagers liked. His grandson recalls that Eisenhower 'was shocked to learn that 'O Sole Mio' and 'Army Blue,' two of his favorite songs, had been 'adapted' by Elvis Presley as 'It's Now or Never' and 'Love Me Tender.' He weighed banishing the music from his range of hearing.' David Eisenhower, with Julie Nixon Eisenhower, *Going Home To Glory: A Memoir of Life with Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961-1969*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 85.

reverence. He put newbies at ease; he made foreigners feel welcome; he spoke clearly to the television public in such a way as to win their confidence too. Now of course, a man like Ed Sullivan felt that Elvis Presley brand of music was improper on several counts, and it took some pressure before he yielded and arranged for Presley to do three appearances on his Sunday-night program. The first time Presley appeared, the cameras only shot him in close-up, to avoid showing his gyrating hips and sensual dance steps. By the time Elvis made his third appearance, the cameras showed his whole act, ratings for the show were extraordinarily high, and Ed Sullivan ended by telling the audience as he shook the young singer's hand 'I want to say to Elvis Presley and to the country that this is a real decent, fine boy. We've never had a pleasanter experience on our show with a big name than we've had with you. You're thoroughly all right.'[1]

Elvis made his breakthrough in radio, but he became the 'King of Rock 'n Roll' only after his television appearances with the tried and trusted Ed Sullivan. For his part, Ed Sullivan continued to introduce new acts into American homes, including a quartet of British rock musicians in 1964 who called themselves 'The Beatles.' With that gesture, what was popular in Britain became part and parcel of American pop culture.

III. THE HARRY POTTER PHENOMENON

Fast-forward forty years, from the early 1960s to the summer of 2000. Bookstores all over the UK and the USA closed their doors on the Friday night 7 July as usual, but instead of going home, personnel redressed the shops, cleared aisles, and set up counters where they could more easily sell a book that was to be released only on 8 July. At the stroke of midnight, Platform One in Kings Cross Station (London) sounded with the steam whistle of a red-colored, old-fashioned steam locomotive whose cars opened into bookstalls ready to sell thousands of copies of Bloomsbury's new release – fourth book in a literary saga about 'the boy who lived' – Harry Potter. In the USA, book stores opened their doors precisely at midnight to a flood of children and their parents, teens and college kids who had been waiting for months to learn more about the orphan boy Harry who had somehow become their role model and hero. Before the weekend was over, three million copies of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire were sold in the USA alone.[2]

People who had never heard of Harry Potter before were surprised by such manifestation – for the young people who came to the bookstores at midnight were not simply buying a book (and who ever heard of kids who were anxious to buy a book?). Many were in costumes representing favorite characters in the previous three volumes. The doors opened to excited screams of girls who in 2000 outdid the teenagers of 1955 who screamed at the beat of Elvis, or in 1964 howled at the tunes of the Beatles. The night was brighter than Mardi Gras or Halloween – and

(1) Ed Sullivan, quoted in Halberstam, p. 479.

(2) Cf. '2000-2009 – The Decade of Harry Potter Gives Kids and Adults a Reason to Love Reading,' from http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/node/277, retrieved 24 August 2013.

all for a fictional boy who saw himself as ordinary. 'You've made a mistake […] I'm Harry. Just Harry,' he would have said.[1]

Some would contend that Harry Potter is not even just Harry. Harry Potter is just a story. He cannot be 'the boy who lived' because he never lived at all.

Harry Potter, the literary creation of Joanne Rowling (pen names: J. K. Rowling, Robert Gallbraith), who had never published a book before Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. What's more, she wrote the entire book longhand while her first child Jessica, then an infant, napped during the afternoon. With her experience as a middle-school teacher, Jo Rowling wrote with middle school children in mind – particularly boys who had difficulty with reading. Harry Potter, who has the title role in her book, is a boy who has undergone difficulties and for whom school has never been a joy. Young readers – and particularly boys – could understand Harry to be someone like themselves, who had to deal with pain and sorrow in order to find his way. He had to look carefully and find friends among his peers and among adults – often simply opening his eyes to the reality around him for, though at first he dared not believe it, Harry had more friends than they imagined.

With all this, someone who never read a Harry Potter book might wonder if he is a model or an anti-hero? Is he someone who is strong or someone who is unworthy of imitation? And what is this talk about magic? Does Harry live in dangerous territory, and if so, is it prudent to invite young readers to learn his story? Is the Harry Potter phenomenon a product of media hype or does his story truly appeal to children, teens and young adults who see their lives reflected in this new mirror that appears most effectively in the old media of print.

IV. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE READING AGAIN

This is the biggest surprise. After decades of radio and television and a decade of internet streaming video… after years of electric products that 'bring good things to life,'[2] and electronic media that have allowed young people to walk alone, wired into their own immediate worlds[3] – Harry Potter introduces young people to the printed page where their imagination couples with grammar and syntax to awaken them to all that learning can mean. The young were the ones who turned Harry Potter into a pop cultural icon. Tightly written, planned in every detail and every character, makes it 'easy to believe that Harry Potter's prolonged hold on world consciousness can be blamed on strategy, or that it has been crosshatched into the fabric of culture by people who intended to do just that from day one. But Harry Potter has actually been a very intimate phenomenon, the story of small groups of people acting in ways they shouldn't,

(1) The statement comes in the first book of J.K. Rowling's series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

(2) 'We bring good things to life' has been the slogan of General Electric since 1979.

(3) We know so many products, the names of which have become standard terms in contemporary languages: Sony Walkman®, Discman®, Apple products such as the iPod® and the iPad®, and various MP3 players.

doing things they usually wouldn't, and making the kind of history that, without Harry, they pretty much couldn't.[1]

Teens who could never finish a book in the past became the most ardent Harry Potter fans. Some adults were not only surprised, but apprehensive. Here and there accusations appeared before some school board or in some church congregation that Harry Potter had bewitched young people with tales of magic, witchcraft and wizardry. Perhaps because the American edition of the first Harry Potter book was entitled Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone caused some religious people to become suspicious of its contents and merits.[2] Some worried parents even brought lawsuits against school boards and libraries demanding that Harry Potter books be removed from shelves.[3] But the young people understood Harry best, and thousands of young adolescents and college youth reacted most vociferously against the negative accusations and proposed book bans. The young fan base had entered into Harry's suffered journey – for in the books, he goes through great sufferings; they were not about to let him suffer in real life. Fans created new associations, new forms of music, new type of broadcasting, even new sports in order to share their enthusiasm and their passion for the Harry Potter universe.[4]

What made young readers so passionate about Harry Potter? Storytelling – that is the content but also the development of content: the story in its telling.

V. STORYTELLING AND YOUTHFUL HEROES

Storytelling, the foundation of folk cultures from the earliest times, has made a new appearance as part of pop culture during the last several decades in the western world. In particular,

(1) Melissa Anelli, *Harry, A History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Within the Harry Potter Phenomenon*, New York, Pocket Books, 2008, p. 18-19.

(2) Author J. K. Rowling did not re-title her book for America. This was done by the publisher, Scholastic Books, for editors were concerned that children and young adolescents would not understand many of the UK expressions or the classical references. The first three volumes, in fact, were re-written by the editors for this very reason. However, in some cases the practice created real problems. In America, of all places, where in colonial times there were witch hunts, the name *Sorcerer's Stone* conjured negative images.

(3) For an extensive report on accusations against the Harry Potter series in terms of lawsuits, denunciations, appeals to religion, see Melissa Anelli, *Harry, A History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Within the Harry Potter Phenomenon*, New York, Pocket Books, 2008, p. 177-201.

(4) If we had time we could speak of websites, podcasts, wizard rock bands, quiddich games, international conventions and more that young people between the ages of 15 and 25 have made happen since the year 2000. Two important Harry Potter websites were founded and staffed by teenagers (MuggleNet) and by young adults (Leaky). In February 2006 three 15-year-old boys working with Mugglenet launched the first Harry Potter podcast and called it called *Mugglecast*; they made their last podcast today, 27 August 2013, after 269 episodes. The Leaky Cauldron's podcast began a few short weeks later and was called *Pottercast*. Its purpose was to offer news and analysis of the Harry Potter universe, and carried more listener participation that *Mugglecast*. The team at *Pottercast* made their last podcast one month ago, on 31 July 2013 (run a search in iTunes for episodes and dating).

adolescent heroes and growth stories seem to demonstrate a great impact on the imagination and motivation of young people, their parents and educators.

Youthful heroes are not new. The first great work of American literature is the story of a boy who runs away from an oppressive life in the Deep South with a black runaway slave. Their attempt to reach freedom takes place as they paddle a raft up the Mississippi River. I am referring to Huckleberry Finn and the slave Jim – characters first created by Samuel Clemens in 1876 but who appeared in their own adventure in 1884.21 In 1926, the American publisher of children's books, Edward Stratemeyer, commissioned a series of mystery novels that featured two high school boys, Frank and Joe Hardy. The sons of a New York detective, the Hardy brothers and some close friends were depicted as striking out to solve some local mysteries in their small piece of rural America. The first three books appeared in 1927, composed by Canadian journalist Leslie McFarlane under the penname of Franklin W. Dixon. Other writers continued the series, which would include 58 volumes, and go through periodic revisions to update language and attitudes in the late 1950s and spinoff series in the 1980s.[1] As the Hardy Boys proved to be a success, the Stratemeyer Syndicate began publishing for a series for girls called the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories. The first Nancy Drew story appeared in 1930, and over the years several writers composed several hundred books for the series under a penname Carolyn Keane.[2]

Among many such adolescent heroes at the start of this century,[3] we find the names of Bobby Pendragon, Percy Jackson, Michael Vey and Eragon. These American teenagers compare favorably to two younger Europeans: a German boy by the name of Bastian Balthazar Bux, and an Irish lad by the name of Artemis Fowl. Twin or sibling heroes has also become a regular feature of teen fantasy adventures of the new millennium, which has introduced readers to Carter and Sadie Kane, Sophie and Josh Newman, or Alexander and Aaron Stowe. Another twosome, though not blood twins, are orphans who partner to defeat unscrupulous criminals and politicians: Chevron Savon (girl) and Riley (boy), protagonists in W.A.R.P., a series by the author of Artemis Fowl, which is just making its way into lives of teens.

In the lives of every one of these teen literary heroes, there are elements of magic and mystery. Yet, they are all more real than the young heroes of the past. Mark Twain's nineteenth-century boy hero and antihero, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, appeared in five books but they never changed and certainly never grew into manhood. The detective youths of the twentieth century – the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew – go through hundreds of adventures, but remain the same age in every story that was produced over at least three decades. The teen heroes of the twenty-first century follow the lead of the most influential of all the young heroes, Harry Potter.

How? They grow.

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(1) The first volume in the series was: Franklin W. Dixon, *The Hardy Boys: The Tower Treasure*, New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1927; revised series edition 1959.

(2) The first volume in the series was: Carolyn Keane, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1930.

(3) See Appendix A.

During the years in which J. K. Rowling published her seven-book saga (1997-2007), and Harry's story was followed by millions, he grew from an eleven-year old battered child into a seventeen-year-old young adult leader. As he grew, he changed and made decisions – indeed, he assumed his role before a hostile society and gave of himself in the battle against abuse and injustice. This fact – that Harry grows – is what made him real to young readers, many of whom grew up with him. When Warner Brothers brought the Harry Potter story to the big screen (2001-2011), the young readers of Rowling's books became the films' most avid fans and most severe critics.

VI. THE HERO'S JOURNEY

To try to understand the breadth and depth of the Harry Potter phenomenon, scholars turned to the theme of the 'heroic journey' common in mythology and fairy tales. They found a comprehensive outline and description that journey in the works of the American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), who, in his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces. According to Campbell, the heroic journey is an element that is found in all the mythologies of all cultures.[1]

David Colbert essentially follows Joseph Campbell's exposition of the heroic journey, which, according to Campbell, is steeped in human consciousness and is the mythic journey to maturity and wholeness. Following Campbell's lead, Colbert shows the journey to consist of three stages: Departure, Initiation and Return.[2]

Departure

- The hero is first seen in our everyday world. He is beginning a new stage in life. A herald may arrive to announce that destiny has summoned the hero. (Colbert 208)
- The hero may refuse the call to adventure. He may have any number of reasons, from everyday responsibilities to a selfish refusal to help others. But if he does, he will find that he has no choice in the matter. (209)
- The hero meets a protector and guide who offers supernatural aid, often in the form of amulets. (210)
- The hero encounters the first threshold to a new world. The protector can only lead the hero to the threshold; the hero must cross it alone. He may have to fight or outwit a guardian of the threshold who wants to prevent the crossing. (210)
- The hero enters 'the Belly of the Whale,' a phrase drawn from legends like the story of Jonah to signify being swallowed into the unknown. (211)

(1) The theme of the heroic journey represents the core of Campbell's study. See: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces;* Bollingen Series 17; 2nd rev. ed., reprint, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 49-244.

(2) Cf. David Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter: A Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts*. Updated & complete ed., New York, Berkely Books, 2008, p. 208-218.

Initiation

- The hero follows a road of trials. The setting is unfamiliar. The hero may encounter companions who assist him in these trials. Invisible forces may also aid him. (211-212)
- The hero is abducted or must take a journey at night or by sea. (212)
- The hero fights a symbolic dragon. He may suffer a ritual death, perhaps even dismemberment. (212)
- The hero is recognized by or reunited with his father. He comes to understand this source of control over his life. (213)
- The hero becomes nearly divine. He has traveled past ignorance and fear. (213)
- The hero receives 'the ultimate boon' the goal of his quest. It may be an elixir of life. It may be different from the hero's original goal because he is wiser. (214)

Return

- The hero takes a 'magic flight' back to his original world. He may be rescued by magical forces. One of his original protectors may help him. A person or thing from his original world may appear to bring him back. (215)
- The hero crosses the return threshold. He may have difficulty adjusting to his original life, where people do not fully comprehend his experience. (215-216)
- The hero becomes the master of two worlds: the everyday world, which represents his material existence; and the magical world, which signifies his inner self. (216)
- The hero has won the freedom to live. He has conquered the fears that prevent him from living fully. (217)

It is typical of hero literature that the protagonist is the last to realize the powers and gifts that he has. Modesty and humility based in realism is one of the attributes that enable the hero to learn from those around him and to grow into his heroic role. Nor does this mean that the hero is understood, appreciated or affirmed. In responding to the challenges before him, he is faced with opposition, misunderstanding and skepticism, even from his friends. In Harry's case, even his best friends suspect that his motives are less than pure. Ron, in book 5, shows his annoyance that Harry is simply 'acting the hero', while Hermione warns him that he has a 'saving-people thing.'[1]

J. K. Rowling offers us a very human hero in the person of Harry Potter. In his early years, he is embarrassed by how total strangers can make a big fuss over him, while his own family members are likely to forget his birthday and would rather that he not come home for Christmas. In his last years in secondary school, when he knows that he must face many dangers, he fears that his friends will be targeted by his enemies, and he is likely to withdraw with few explanations, only to exasperate his many friends – friends that he cannot believe that he has. The admonishments of his friends will infuriate Harry at the time, but will cause him to doubt himself and his own intentions later. Self-doubt and the need to purify one's intentions is a necessary passage in the journey of every mythological hero. In fact, Colbert notes, 'to

(1) J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, London, Blumsbury, 2003, 646 p.

battle the dark forces in the world, heroes must face the dark forces within, and rediscover in each adventure that they are worthy of victory.'[1]

VII. JOHN BOSCO AND YOUTHFUL HEROES

As we have seen, many youthful figures have been presented to young people, and have captured the imagination of children, adolescents, and youth, as well as discerning adults who live and work among the young. We certainly remember that Don Bosco presented models of youthful heroes to his young people. During this year we have, throughout the Salesian world, reflected on the three youths of Don Bosco: Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco. Actually, Don Bosco presented stories of other young people as well – fictional are real-life boys – but these three seem to be the most outstanding (or at least the best remembered).

What Don Bosco was doing in presenting youthful models was innovative in his day. Three decades before Mark Twain told the saga of Huckleberry Finn Don Bosco wrote the life of Dominic Savio. Both books were bestsellers in their context, even though Finn was fiction and Savio was real.

Europeans were barely beginning to gain a new sense of life stages. 'Adolescence' and 'youth' were new social categories at that time.[2] Don Bosco worked from experience, not from theory, and yet he identified adolescents as models for their peers: 'Ask yourselves,' he wrote in the introduction to the life of Dominic Savio, 'if they could do it, why can't I?'

Models of what? When writing the life of Michael Magone, Don Bosco stressed the role of friendship, counseling, confession, devotion to Mary, and gratitude. In writing the lives of Francesco Besucco and Dominic Savio, however, he focused the reader's attention on love of Jesus and love of neighbor: theological charity and pastoral charity. These three adolescents, Don Bosco told his youthful readers, were models of a good Christian life – heroic models, in fact. In other words, they were models of youthful holiness.

VIII. THE YOUNG JOHN BOSCO AS A MODEL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In preparation for the bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth, the rector major Fr. Pascual Chávez invited the Salesian family to take up some of saint's principal writings: the Memoirs of the

(1) Colbert, Magical Worlds, p. 218.

(2) Cf. Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*, 2d ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 86-87.

Oratory of St Francis de Sales and the Lives of the three young people. New editions have appeared, or older editions have been reprinted and distributed.[1]

What might be interesting to remember is that, besides reading Don Bosco's stories about the young, in the years after his canonization Don Bosco himself became the object of storytelling. Illustrated editions of the saint's biography were produced with young people in mind, not to mention collections of stories for the use of catechists and religion teachers.[2]

In a role reversal, Don Bosco the educator of the young is often depicted as a young person himself. People learned who he was from his earliest days – in the years when he was growing up with his mother and brothers, in his adventures as a poor, barefoot farm boy, through his schooling, in his seminary days, in the early years of his priestly ministry. Many of the stories originated with Don Bosco's own account, extracted from the Memoirs of the Oratory by Giovanni Bonetti, who rewrote his spiritual father's accounts first in episodes which he published in the Bollettino Salesiano, and later in a popular biography published three years after Don Bosco's death.[3]

How faithful to the historical facts are these accounts? Frankly, this is not an issue. What these many books succeeded in doing was to make of Don Bosco an icon of Catholic culture and, if you will, pop culture. Don Bosco, the most photographed saint in the nineteenth century, famous as the 'Vincent de Paul of Italy' and the champion of poor and abandoned youth, is depicted in many of these popular works as rising out of a life of poverty and grave difficulty to become the advocate of new generations. And as his stories became more and more known, artists in other media began to weigh in. Don Bosco became the hero of graphic novels soon after his canonization – the most famous series being done by the most famous cartoonist of the mid-twentieth century, Jijé from Belgium.[4] In 1935 a feature film produced in Turin and

(1) San Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales: Dal 1815 al 1855*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2011); *Vite di giovani: Le biografie di Domenico Savio, Michele Magone e Francesco Besucco*; Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2012); *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: the autobiography of Saint John Bosco;* translated by Daniel Lyons, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, Lawrence Castelvecchi, and Michael Mendl (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989); *Memorias del Oratorio de San Francisco de Sales, de 1815 a 1855*; traducción y notas histórico-bibliográficas de José Manuel Prellezo García; estudio introductoria de Aldo Giruado; con la colaboración de José Luis Moral de la Parte; Collección: Don Bosco, n. 10 (Madrid: Editorial CCS, 2003). In addition to these entries, new English translations are being prepared for publication by Paulines Press in Nairobi in this year.

(2) See, for example: Eugenio Ceria, *San Giovanni Bosco nella Vita e nelle Opere;* Illustrazioni di Giovani Battista Galizzi (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1938); Pompilio Maria Bottini, *Catechismo di Pio X commentato con fatti, detti, sogni e scritti di san Giovanni Bosco*. 3 voll. (Colle Don Bosco: Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1949-1954); Luigi Chiavarino, *Don Bosco che ride: i «fioretti» di san Giovanni Bosco*; 29ª ed. (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 2001); Peter Lappin, *Stories of Don Bosco* (Pallaskenry: Salesian, 1958).

(3) Giovanni Bonetti, *Cinque lustri di storia dell'oratorio salesiano, fondato dal sacerdote D. Giovanni Bosco* (Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1892); English version: Venerable *John Bosco's early Apostolate*. A translation from the work of Giovanni Bonetti, S.C.; with a preface by His Eminence Cardinal Francis Bourne (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1907).

(4) See: Jijé (Joseph Gillain), *Don Bosco* (Dupuis, 1942, 1943; nouvelle version 1950).

directed by Goffredo Alessandrini, was a masterpiece of special effects and sound recording for the era.[1] Nearly half of that film presented the boyhood of John Bosco. The movie was dubbed into other languages and distributed for well over 40 years in 16 mm format in church circles. Other films followed, as did slide montages, filmstrips and radio dramas.

What is the importance of any of this? Nothing, except to reflect that Don Bosco's immense popularity in the middle of the twentieth-century can also be traced to the success in telling his story – an effort made by the Salesians, by past pupils, and by artists, magazine editors and media personalities as well as serious authors, educators and religious. As a result, many people in the Catholic world knew Don Bosco's story, including young people.

IX. STRIKING SIMILARITIES

I'm running out of space here, but let me just mention that there are many similiarities between the image of the young John Bosco and Harry Potter. Both are orphans in infancy – John of his father and Harry of both parents. The death of their parents are their first memories. Both have face difficulties during their childhood – John because of poverty and the attitude of his older step-brother Anthony, Harry because of his isolation and the antagonistic attitude of his physically bigger cousin Dudley. Both leave home at age eleven – John to learn farming with the Moglia family and later to go to school in the city, Harry to go to the school of Hogwarts to develop unknown skills and fulfill the expectations of others.

The parallels are many[2], but I am certain the J. K. Rowling – a Scottish Protestant – had no knowledge of the real-life story of John Bosco when she began to write the adventures of the fictitious but realistic Harry Potter. The stories of Don Bosco introduce young people to the invitation to walk with God; the saga of Harry Potter are an invitation to choose love over hatred, justice over ambition, modesty over false grandeur. In a world of fear and intimidation, those who accompany Harry Potter (certain teachers and certain classmates) call him constantly to calm, to reason, to balance, while he brings a strong dose of charity and compassion to all that he does.

Don Bosco speaks of Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness, and these principles are moved out of abstraction into concreteness in each of the well-know episodes of his life as a youngster, as a priest, as an educator. Harry's steady commitment to do his duty, come what may, is seen by youthful readers as a reasoned approach in a chaotic, oppressive world. He can withstand extreme adversity, he is told by his mentor Albus Dumbledore, because his mother who loved him intensely and heroically, left traces of that love in his blood – and Harry has to learn to make that loving compassion his own. As for Religion, J. K. Rowling does not use religious language explicitly until the seventh book, which features striking New Testament quotations.

(1) The film Don Bosco (1935), directed by Goffredo Alessandrini and staring Gianpaolo Rosmino and Ferdinando Mayer, was produced by Compagnia Italiana LUX (Torino). A DVD version has recently become available, and many segments are available on YouTube.

(2) See Appendix B.

Even so, most of her symbols are Christian ones, from the golden griffon to the song of the phoenix, in an elaborate texture that is not accidental.

All that is presented here is by way of suggestion: the Harry Potter phenomenon in the chaos of what many consider a post-Christian, post-modern pop culture demonstrates that teens can respond not only to a good story, but to stories of goodness. If Don Bosco was one of the most popular figures of holiness to past generations, part of the reason was because his disciples and admirers knew how to tell his story. If we were to recuperate the art of storytelling, might we again invoke the approachable Don Bosco to help us make the Gospel understandable to the young and the working classes in the future?

Appendix A

Recent adolescent heroes	
Bobby Pendragon	Robert 'Bobby' Pendragon is the lead figure in The Pendragon Adventure, a series of ten fantasy/science fiction novels by Donald James MacHale, published by Simon and Schuster (New York) between 2001 and 2010; paperback editions came out a year following each of the original hard-bound versions. Like Harry Potter, Bobby Pendragon ages over the course of the series, beginning at age 14 and finishing the series as he nears 18. Other writers have expanded on the Pendragon universe with short stories that have been included in a three-volume collection called Carla Jablonski, and Walter Sorrells, Before the War, 3 vols. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).
Percy Jackson	Hero of a five-volume saga that begins with: Rick Riordan, The Lightning Thief; series: Percy Jackson & The Olympians, 1 (New York: Hyperion, 2005). Since he first started elementary school, Percy Jackson has been considered little more than an underachiever. Try as he may, everything he touches seems to end in disaster. Other children ostracize him; teachers discipline him until he ends by being expelled. The pattern has repeated itself year after year. Finally at the end of his last year of middle school he finds himself under attack by evil forces beyond his reckoning. Close friends reveal to this thirteen-year old that he is a demigod, and he must be brought to a safe haven where he can be prepared to face the worst. Thus, a 13-year-old New York boy finds himself faced with threats from gods and monsters that would have challenged the original Perseus (for whom he is named).
Michael Vey	Teenage protagonist in a series that begins with: Richard Paul Evans, Michael Vey: The Prisoner of Cell 25 (New York: Mercury Ink, 2011). Michael Vey is a thirteen-year-old boy with special, electric powers that he has received due to genetic experimentation carried out on his parents before his birth. His story appeared in print for the first time in 2011. The third book of the trilogy will appear next month.
Eragon	The saga of Eragon begins with a fifteen-year old farm boy – Eragon by name – and was written by a fifteen-year old country boy by the name of Christopher Paolini. The first volume was published by the author's parents in 2002, and republished for a wide distribution in August 2003 by Knopf. The Inheritance Cycle developed during the writing from a trilogy to a saga, with the fourth and final volume appearing in 2011. See: Christopher Paolini, Eragon: Inheritance Book One (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Through the four-volume cycle, Eragon is transformed into the defender of many different communities besides his own. He is the protector of families even when he fears that he may never have a family of his own. He is helped in his mission because he becomes a dragon rider.

Bastian Balthazar Bux	Michael Ende, Die unendliche Geschichte (Stuttgart: K. Thienemanns Verlag, 1979). English version: The Neverending Story; translated by Ralph Manheim (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983/London: Penguin Books, 1984). Bastian is a boy who reads books, and his reading leads other readers to reflect on the role of fantasy in post-modern life. In the land of Fantastica, Bastian first follows and then teams up with a boy his own age by the name of Atreyu. Bastian, timid and intimidated, must learn to be straightforward and open.
Artemis Fowl	The first book in the Artemis Fowl series appeared in 2001: Eoin Colfer, Artemis Fowl (London: Viking Press, 2001). Colfer went on to write a total of eight books in the Artemis Fowl saga, which became international bestsellers, with Colfer making many appearances to elementary and middle schools to promote creativity in education. He also published teaching aids and stories about other characters in the series. The eighth and final volume of the Artemis Fowl saga was published in September 2012. A radically different hero is this twelve-year old Irish lad. This boy genius is anything but shy. He is a criminal mastermind who, with the help of a loyal Asian bodyguard and a some dear fairy friends, contends with and overcomes the underworld and law enforcement alike.

Twins	
Carter & Sadie Kane	A hearty sibling rivalry exists between brother and sister Carter and Sadie Kane in the Kane Chronicles, beginning with: Rick Riordan, The Red Pyramid (New York: Hyperion, 2010). In addition to the war of the sexes, this brother and sister team bring all the tensions of a culture clash since they are the children of a racially mixed marriage who are separated in childhood after their mother's death. In their mid-teens, Carter is a cerebral, African-American male, while Sadie is a media-savvy, socially adept White girl with a south London accent. At the start of the series they have nothing in common except the same parents (according to Carter). Throughout the series, besides contending with ancient Egyptian curses, they become family for one another.
Sophie & Josh Newman	The fifteen-year-old Newman twins are looking forward to summer jobs in their hometown of San Francisco but end up in the middle of an ancient power struggle between alchemists and wizards. Irish storyteller Michael Scott recounts their adventures in a six-volume series that he first published in 2007 and completed in 2012. Cf. Michael Scott, The Alchemyst: The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flammel (New York: Delacorte Press, 2007).
Chevron Savon & Riley	Chevron and Riley first appeared this year. They are protagonists in a science fiction, political law-enforcement fancy called W.A.R.P., a series by the creator of Artemis Fowl. Cf. Eoin Cofler, W.A.R.P., Book 1: The Reluctant Assassin (New York: Hyperion, 2013).

Alex & Aaron Stowe	The Stowe brothers are identical twins who live in the highly controlled, dystopian land of Quill. For all their looks and mannerisms, the two thirteen-year-olds are very different. One is artistic, while the other is scientific; one is valued and the other is unwanted. How they develop will influence their contemporaries and their community in a startling new series that is still unfolding. Cf. Lisa McMann, The Unwanteds (New York: Alladin, 2011).

Appendix B

Parallel Themes in the young Potter and Bosco		
	Harry Potter	Giovanni Bosco
The good player	Harry as the Quiddich seeker boosts his housemates sense of worth	Giovannino walks tightrope to win his friends to God
Self-image	Harry in the Mirror of Erised	Giovannino who greets the priests on the road
Lost orphan	Harry boards the train to Hogwarts all alone	Giovannino wanders the countryside and meets many refusals until he arrives at Moncucco
School	Harry at Hogwarts	Giovanni in Castelnuovo, and Chieri
Wise man	Albus Dumbledore	Don Calosso
Guides	Minerva McGonagall, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Rubeus Hagrid	Luigi Guala, Giovanni Borel, Giuseppe Cafasso, Marcantonio Durando
Friends	Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Granger, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood	Luigi Comollo, 'Giona' e 'Levi', Giuseppe Blanchard, Giorgio Moglia, Luigi Nasi,
Dangerous places	The Forbidden Forest	Worldly companions in school; the streets of Torino by night
The protector	The stag (patronus)	The dog (Grigio)
The rules	Harry faces the just and unjust rules at Hogwarts, in the Dursley family, in the ministry of magic	Giovanni faces the rules prohibiting frequent Communion in the seminary, the less than pastoral practices of diocesan parishes that neglect homeless youth

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Joe Boenzi
Università pontificia salesiana - Facoltà di Teologia
Piazza dell'Ateneo Salesiano 1
00139 Roma
Italia

jobonz@gmail.com