

SALESIAN ACCOMPANIMENT IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

by Louis Grech

1. Introduction

Mitch Albom, a successful American sports journalist for the Detroit Free Press, in his inspiring book “Tuesdays with Morrie” narrates his touching experience of meeting a very special person. His name was Morrie Schwartz.

Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back (...). If Professor Morris Schwartz taught me anything at all, it was this: there is no such thing as “too late” in life. He was changing until the day he said goodbye. (...) The last class of my professor’s life took place once a week in his home, by a window in his study. The class met on Tuesdays. No books were required. The subject was the meaning of life. It was taught from experience. The teaching goes on.¹

¹ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 191-

Morrie Schwartz was Mitch's sociology professor back in his college days and was suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS). Morrie was older, wiser and understood youth and all the searching that goes with it. Mitch, for some time had lost track of his spiritual mentor and was losing his way. Intuitions diminished and the world seemed a colder place. Luckily, Mitch had a second chance and he rediscovered Morrie once again. In the knowledge that death was imminent for Morrie, Mitch decided to visit Morrie in his study every Tuesday, just like in the old days back in college. Their renewed liaison turned into one concluding lesson on how to live.

On reading Mitch Albom's inspiring spiritual experience, I couldn't stop observing evident similarities with the Don Bosco story and his vast youth project. In the same way Morrie exerted his enduring positive influence on his past pupil Mitch, Don Bosco, two hundred years on from his birth in 1815 continues to influence youth through his Salesian family. His worldwide family continues to offer lessons for youth today on the meaning of life and on how to live.

The aim of the following research is to investigate what Salesian Spiritual Accompaniment entails in the contemporary western context and offer insight into the following questions:

1. What exactly can we learn from the Don Bosco story and what unique contribution can Salesian spiritual accompaniment offer in a contemporary Western culture?
2. Are Children born spiritual?
3. What challenges do Multiculturalism and Secularism pose to spiritual growth?

2. Are Children Born Spiritual?

Don Bosco was a firm believer that children can become saints. Various studies today reaffirm Don Bosco's belief in child holiness and that spirituality is indeed an intrinsic human dimension. Thus, such a thesis suggests that every child is born with an openness to the spiritual realm and an ability to grasp spiritual concepts. Elaine Champagne,² Rebecca Nye,

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² Cf. Elaine Champagne, "Being a Child, a Spiritual Child," in *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 8(1), (London: 2003): 43-53.

David Hay,³ Adrian Gellel⁴ and Tobin Hart⁵ are among the scholars who express this view. Günter Bräuer claims that the hominoids became human when the essential elements of spirituality fell into place after an evolutionary process that took six million years.⁶

If it is true that children are born with this openness towards this spiritual or divine reality, then spirituality precedes any tool and knowledge developed by humans over the centuries. Spirituality is the dimension that instigated our development into human beings. A careful analysis of the gradual evolution of humanity over the centuries clearly demonstrates that this spiritual development expressed itself through various symbols. These symbols are indeed the primary language of spirituality. Without such symbols, accessing, constructing and experiencing the spiritual dimension would be very difficult. Gellel debates that although spirituality is not a social or cultural construct, yet it needs culture (symbols and metaphors) in order to be accessed and expressed. Hence, offering a valid Salesian spiritual guidance to children today challenges us to make use and promote such symbols that would facilitate spiritual maturity.

If the idea of promoting and making use of symbols was a challenge in Don Bosco's context and age, this has become even more so in our contemporary European secular culture.⁷ If we are to accept the notion that

³ Cf. David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, ed. 2 (London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006).

⁴ Cf. Adrian Gellel, "Empowering Children through a Symbolic Repertoire," paper still in progress, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2015.

⁵ "Children have a secret spiritual life. They have spiritual capacities and experiences - profound moments that shape their lives in enduring ways. These are sometimes stunning, often tender, and reveal a remarkable spiritual world that has been kept largely secret." Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (California: New World Library, 2003), 1.

⁶ The elements which indicate a propensity towards spirituality are: 1) awareness 2) connectedness and 3) meaning. Cf. Günter Bräuer, "The Origin of Modern Anatomy: By Speciation or Intraspecific Evolution?" in *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews*, (2008) 17(1), 22- 37.

⁷ There is a current philosophical debate on how Western contemporary culture can be best described. Jürgen Habermas in particular is a contemporary philosopher who uses the term "post secular" to describe the social contemporary setting in the West. Habermas argues that European society over the past decades has evolved in three phases: (1) the modern age which was generally characterised by the marginalisation of religion; (2) the postmodern secular phase which saw an increased refusal of religion and the growing phenomenon of individualism; (3) the contemporary post-secular age which according to Habermas is dominated by the concept of fairness. Thus religion must take its place again in society. In the face of the contemporary ethical crisis, Habermas makes the provocative point that

children are born spiritual, it seems that as they grow older they can become spiritually disabled due to the trends of today's society. Gellel asserts that this apparent lack of spiritual growth in many children is due to three main reasons:

- due to hyper modernity we are losing the concept of time and space. As a result we are less able to silence ourselves, to observe and to stand in awe;
- symbols and metaphors are fading away. Hence so are the meaning and the intergenerational wisdom that point to the good life and meaning making. As a result there is a return to primordial chaos;
- individualism is seriously influencing relational consciousness.⁸

Gellel's observations present some valid insights for whoever offers youth spiritual accompaniment in Europe today. These reflections also expose some of the core issues which have led to a contemporary Europe that has lost memory of its rich cultural, historical and religious origins. Offering spiritual companionship in such a context brings forth various challenges. To cultivate and nurture in youth the value of silence, reverence, reflection, symbols and metaphors is no easy task in today's consumerist society.⁹ Furthermore, offering a significant community experience is also a challenge today, particularly in a society which

secular Western societies need the moral and spiritual resources of religion to renew the social contract. In this instance, secular and religious actors become equal partners in an open-ended process of production of meaning. For Habermas, the age of post-secularism does not necessitate the refusal of the constant secularizing process and also not a return to the medieval theological predominance. Post-secular society is defined by the continued existence of religious communities in a continually secularizing environment. Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 19-48. Jürgen Habermas, "'The political': the Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 12-16. Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on post-secular society," in *New Perspectives*, 25(4) (2008), 17-29.

⁸ Adrian Gellel, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2015. Regarding the issue of relational consciousness, cf. David Hay, "Spirituality versus Individualism: Why we should nurture relational Consciousness," in *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (2000), Vol 5, no 1, 37-48.

⁹ Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 47.

encourages individualism.¹⁰ For me, this phenomenon appears paradoxically in the “Gestalt Prayer” by Fritz Perls:

I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to
live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you,
and I am I,
And if by any chance we find each other, it's beautiful. If not,
it can't be helped.¹¹

In my view, these few lines exhibit an underlying mentality which is at the very core of our contemporary culture. Adrian Gellel observes that:

Without claiming that religions are the only means to access, develop and experience spirituality (...) an individualised conception of spirituality impoverishes this human dimension. Since spirituality is a dimension that distinguishes humans from other living beings, it needs to interact with the other constituent dimensions that make us human, including our need for community, our characteristics of learning, of being rational and of developing tools that change us.¹²

¹⁰ In this case, the use of the term “individualism” infers the social phenomenon as opposed to the individualistic stage. The latter is a natural stage in development of the human person on its way to autonomy. Jane Loevinger identifies it as the seventh stage in a gradual nine stage progression of the ego. Cf. Jane Loevinger, *Paradigms of Personality* (New York: W H Freeman and Co, 1987), 223. Cf. Melvin E Miller and Susanne R. Cook-Greuter, *Creativity, Spirituality and Transcendence: Paths to Integrity and Wisdom in the Mature Self* (Stamford CT: Ablex, 2000), xv-xxxi. Cf. Susanne Cook-Greuter, “Postautonomous Ego Development: A Study of its Nature and Measurement,” in *Dissertation Series* (Tucson: Integral Publishers, 1999). With regards to the social phenomenon of individualism, David Hay identifies three sources: A) the coming of Literacy; B) the Social Contract in European Thought and C) Cartesian Dualism. Cf. David Hay, “Spirituality Versus Individualism: Why we should Nurture Relational Consciousness,” in *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, vol. 5, no 1, (2000), 40-43.

¹¹ Fritz Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Gouldsboro ME: Gestalt Journal Press, 1992), 15.

¹² Adrian Gellel, “Empowering Children through a Symbolic Repertoire,” 1.

I find Gellel's observations here very much in line with Don Bosco's holistic vision of spiritual direction which maintained that for spiritual growth to occur, the Oratorian family and formative environment were vital. Within such a delicate period in life, the more the young person is immersed within the Salesian formative environment, the more effective and enriching the spiritual accompaniment will be. This Salesian communitarian dimension could indeed be that unique contribution that Salesian spiritual accompaniment could offer today.

Those who are entrusted with the great responsibility of offering spiritual accompaniment to youth, should have a thorough understanding of contemporary youth culture. Being knowledgeable about the context and background of youth today is a key element which renders Salesian spiritual companionship more practical, dynamic, reasonable, kind, effective and ready to respond to the challenge.

Individualism is not the only challenge facing Salesian spiritual accompaniment today. Among the many challenges that appear in our Western European context, I would identify two contrasting realities which have and continue to evolve on the continent. On the one hand there is the phenomenon of multiculturalism and religious diversity and on the other hand there is the ever growing reality of secularisation.

3. A Challenging Responsibility in a Multicultural Europe

The once Christian Europe has over the past fifty years rapidly evolved into a continent characterised by multiculturalism and religious diversity.¹³ Even though Christianity still remains the main religion in Western Europe, Islam appears to be the fastest growing religion.¹⁴ This phenomenon has continued to grow, not only as a consequence of the former British and French colonies in particular, but also through the dramatic increase in immigrants who continue to enter through the EU borders in search of a better life.¹⁵ A substantial number of these

¹³ Cf. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton NJ: University Press, 1994), 3-24.

¹⁴ Special Eurobarometer 393, "Discrimination in the EU in 2012" (Brussels: EU Commission, 2012), accessed on September 19, 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_393_en.pdf.

Cf. Henkel Reinhard and Hans Knippenberg, *The Changing Religious Landscape of Europe* ed., Knippenberg (Amsterdam: Het Spinnuis, 2005).

¹⁵ During the period January 1-December 21, 2015 around one million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe. This was five times more than in 2014. Cf. International Organisation for Migration, "IOM Counts 3,771 Migrants Fatalities

immigrants are Christians fleeing from persecution and nearly 40% are Muslim.¹⁶ Jonathan Laurence in his book *The Emancipation of Europe's Muslims*, speaks of the rapid growth of Islam in Europe and the challenges faced. He asserts that:

Just over 1% of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims reside in Western Europe, yet this immigrant-origin minority has had a disproportionate impact on religion and politics in its new and former homelands. The Muslim population ballooned in just fifty years from some tens of thousands to 16 or 17 million - approximately one out of every twenty-five Western Europeans - in 2010. During the formative decades of this settlement (1960-1990), Europeans permitted foreign governments and NGOs from the Islamic world to have a free hand in shaping Muslims' religious and political life. But persistent integration difficulties and sporadic terrorism persuaded European governments that their *laissez-faire* approach had far-reaching unintended consequences on host societies' way of life. (...) With projections showing continued demographic growth before levelling off at 25-30 million people (or 7-8%) in 2030, Western European governments have no choice but to look upon their Muslim minorities today as angels imprisoned in a block of marble: a community of new and future citizens whose contours are still being sculpted.¹⁷

Laurence's assessment of the European situation is quite interesting and in my view clearly highlights the challenges faced not only in Europe but also in many other societies around the world. According to Joe Mannath, "Multiculturalism and multi-religious settings are becoming the norm in most parts of the world."¹⁸ Europe is no exception.

in Mediterranean in 2015," (December, 2015) accessed on January 6, 2016, www.ion.int.

¹⁶ Orlando Vito, *Attenzione ai Migranti e Missioni Salesiane nelle Società multiculturali D'Europa* (Roma: LAS, 2012) 32.

¹⁷ Jonathan Laurence, *The Emancipation of Europe's Muslims, The State's Role in Minority Integration* (London: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁸ Cf. Joe Mannath, "L'Accompagnamento Spirituale dei Giovani in Scenari Multireligiosi: Contesti, Possibilità, Limiti, Proposte," in *L'Accompagnamento Spirituale*, ed., Attard and Garcia, 213.

Multiculturalism should indeed be seen as a gift rather than a problem. While challenges remain numerous, multiculturalism has the potential to be a remarkable source of vitality and dynamism. It is something to be celebrated, as we can see in the US. In 2008, the election of Barack Obama (the first African American) as president of a white majority country, in my opinion, shows the willingness of a large number of Americans to get over past prejudices and to accept “the other.” While acknowledging that great steps have been made, still more progress needs to be made when it comes to the real integration of minorities into mainstream society. Multiculturalism is truly a gift when there is true reciprocal respect.

Offering spiritual formation and accompaniment in a multicultural and a religiously diverse Europe needs a new type of mentality and sensitivity. Without a doubt, it requires a different approach from that which functions in a largely mono-cultural or mono-religious environment. This can pose challenges and create tensions, even violence.¹⁹ Like many other Church institutions in Europe, Salesian houses over the past few decades have experienced the influx of youth from other cultures and other faiths. The tenth and current successor of Don Bosco, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime,²⁰ highlights this new reality. While affirming that the Gospel is indeed good news for all humanity and that no one should be excluded from receiving it, he calls for pastoral prudence so as to creatively respond to this new situation.²¹

This reality cannot be overlooked, and a more creative response is called for. While acknowledging that there are no easy answers, nothing is gained by denying the reality, or by wanting to withdraw into a fantasy world of cultural, religious, linguistic or racial uniformity. The Salesian spiritual director within this context should be knowledgeable of other cultures, religious texts and spiritual writings of other faiths. There is much truth, beauty and wisdom in them. Reading these texts can open the heart and mind to a spiritual world larger than one’s familiar background. Such an appreciation of other religions can enable the spiritual director to perceive youth of other faiths not as a threat but as welcome members

¹⁹ Cf. Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, “Introduction: Assessing the Backlash against Multiculturalism in Europe,” in *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-32.

²⁰ He was elected during the 27th Salesian General Chapter in 2014.

²¹ Ángel Esposito, *Don Bosco Oggi, Intervista a Don Ángel Fernández Artime, Decimo Successore di Don Bosco* (Roma: LEV, 2015), 201.

within the Oratory with whom dialogue and sharing of common values can be a true process of spiritual growth.

4. A Challenging Endeavour in a Secularised Europe

Concurrently with multiculturalism and religious diversity, Europe continues to face the widespread phenomenon of secularisation. Although there is this growing acceptance of the spiritual dimension, in our contemporary Europe the quest for spiritual direction and its fulfilment still faces various challenges. According to Ivan Platovnjak such challenges were already present during the period following the Second Vatican Council. He asserts that spiritual direction faced an apparent decline during this period.²² Six years after the conclusion of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI in his Discourse to the IV Congress on Vocations in 1971 acknowledged this apparent crisis and called for a revitalisation in spiritual direction.²³ Pietro Brocardo in an article published in 1974 also speaks of this need for renewal.²⁴ One could perhaps attribute the motives for this crisis to the significant influence of modernity and the impact of secularisation, the scarcity of prepared spiritual directors at the time, and the lack of adequate cultural, theological and psychological preparation for the ministry particularly during the period leading up to the Vatican Council.

One observes that during this period, traditional approaches to spirituality and spiritual direction were viewed as practices which instilled childishness and reinforced gullibility. In the realm of philosophy, people like Marx perceived religion as a process of self-alienation, a block to liberation. Nietzsche famously proclaimed that God is dead and reduced religion to a service of mediocrity and fear. Freud saw religion as a form

²² Ivan Platovnjak, "La Direzione Spirituale Oggi, Lo Sviluppo della Sua Dottrina dal Vaticano II a Vita Consecrata (1962-1996)" in *Tesi Gregoriana Serie Spiritualità* (Roma: Gregoriana, 2001), 14-15. This idea seems to be supported by other authors who also offer reflection about this apparent crisis. Cf. Luigi Borriello, "Crisi e Rinnovamento" in *Rassegna di Teologia* 22 (1981), 306-313. Pietro Brocardo, "La Direzione Spirituale si Rinnova" in *Seminarium* 14 (1974), 157-172; *Il Rinnovamento degli Esercizi Spirituali. Simposio Salesiano Europeo*, 1975. Maurizio Costa, "Crisi della Direzione Spirituale," in *Direzione Spirituale e Discernimento* (Roma: Apostolato della Preghiera, 2009), 5-12. V. Caprioli, "Inchiesta sulla Direzione Spirituale," in *Rivista di Vita Spirituale* (1971), 296-302.

²³ "Occorre quest'istituzione, che va deperendo, e che invece dobbiamo tenere in onore." Paul VI, "Discorso al IV Congresso Mondiale per le Vocazioni (1971)," in *Vocazioni I* (1972), 16.

²⁴ Brocardo, "La Direzione Spirituale si Rinnova," 157-172.

of neurosis, an illusion, and under the influence of psychoanalytical thought the role of the father became increasingly questionable. Along with the term *Spiritual Direction*, new terminology began to emerge: *Spiritual Companionship*, *Spiritual Accompaniment*, and ancient terms such as *Soul Friend* were rediscovered. One can notice that in contemporary societies, dominated by secularisation, religious practice is unavoidably looked on with doubt.

Robert Schreiter in his study *Pathways to Evangelisation in the First World* refers to Europe in particular as the heartland of secularity. He notes that in Denmark, Sweden and Norway there is a phenomenon which he calls “believing without belonging.”²⁵ This implied that while people had their own personal beliefs in God, people in general exhibited a very limited sense of belonging or connecting to a Church. On the other hand he observes that in the traditional Catholic countries of Europe, secularity grew quickly and even produced hostility toward the religious institution. This hostility is particularly manifested in a desire for these countries to distinguish themselves from the institution, to be rid of its history and its link to their identities.²⁶

Within this very hostile context, religion is often perceived as an obstacle to the autonomy and creativity of the person, and a manipulative misuse of influence.²⁷ This particular aspect and challenge needs to be constantly kept in mind by whoever engages in the ministry of spiritual accompaniment in the West today. The Western Church in Europe seems to be experiencing dramatic signs of decline and numerous contemporary spiritual authors have referred to this as the “greying and emptying” of the Church.²⁸ Much more than simply a reduction in church members, this is a shift of authority and the role of institution in the present day. This is evident in the increasing marginalisation of religion and the role of the Church in public life and policy making. Being pushed to the margins, faith

²⁵ Robert Schreiter, “Pathways to Evangelisation in the First World,” in *Secularity and the Gospel, Being Missionaries to Our Children*, ed., Ronald Rolheiser (New York: Crossroads, 2006), 107. Cf. Grace Davie, “From Believing Without Belonging to Vicarious Religion. Understanding the Patterns of Religion in Modern Europe,” in *The Role of Religion in Modern Society* ed. Detlef Pollack and Daniel Olson (London: Routledge, 2007), 165-175.

²⁶ Schreiter, “Pathways to Evangelisation in the First World,” 107.

²⁷ Vito Orlando, “Ricerca di Senso nella Società Attuale e Spiritualità Salesiana,” in *La Spiritualità Salesiana in un Mondo che Cambia* 20, ed., Cosimo Semeraro (Roma: Sciascia Editore, 2003), 41.

²⁸ Cf. Daniel O’Leary, *New Hearts, New Models: A Spirituality for Priests* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 1997), 22. Cf. Ronald Rolheiser, *Secularity and the Gospel, Being Missionaries to Our Children* (New York: Crossroads, 2006), 22.

is often considered merely a private choice that has no right to suggest anything to anyone else. Although the spiritual life touches the core of one's being yet contemporary man seems to be suffering from the "absence of dialogue, of spiritual communication with others."²⁹ Secularist culture promotes the idea that the voice of religion should be silenced, or at least demoted to the purely private sphere for "religion or its absence is largely a private matter."³⁰

One observes that the once strong moral voice of the church seems to be gone in many parts of society and any attempt to lift that voice often leads to a cultural withdrawing, even a counterattack on the institutional Church.³¹ In some cases the Church's response to this attack is one of waiting for a better age or a longing for an imagined golden era to reappear.

Furthermore, within the western context, one observes the rapidly developing phenomenon of the *Cultural Creatives*. This term was introduced by psychologist, Sherry Ruth Anderson and sociologist Paul H. Ray to describe a significant portion of the US and European population. According to Anderson and Ray

Cultural Creatives are people who are deeply spiritual without being dogmatically religious, and who enjoy technology and economic prosperity but not at the cost of the environment or community. They understand the world holistically and are deeply committed to non-ideological politics that emphasize practical solutions.³²

Ray and Anderson claim to have found that 50 million adult Americans (slightly over one quarter of the adult population) can now be identified as belonging to this group. They also estimated that at the beginning of the third millennium there were an additional 80–90 million

²⁹ Ignace Lepp, *The Ways of Friendship* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 13.

³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

³¹ Cf. Lorenzo Zucca, *A Secular Europe: Law and Religion in the European Constitutional Landscape*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-22.

³² Cf. Paul H Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 million People are Changing the World*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 2.

Cultural Creatives in Europe. This phenomenon is a significant reality that deserves attention.³³

Earlier on in this research, reference was made to the secular phenomenon of individualism and its potential capacity to disable any spiritual development in children. A further observation worth noting is that individualism exerts a strong influence on the contemporary understanding of spirituality. Jack Finnegan offers valuable insight into this matter. He asserts that individualism could lead to dualistic thinking and actions, and he warns against any form of spiritual accompaniment that preserves or reinforces such tendencies. Finnegan asserts that:

In this light consider, for example, the splitting of inner from outer forms of life or of personal life from the socio-political. Consider processes that maintain and reinforce dualistic patterns of inequality, as well as gender, ethnic, and other power-based dualisms, the kind that at their worst make abuse and human trafficking possible.³⁴

³³ According to Anderson and Ray, the *cultural creatives* demonstrate “(1) a love of nature and deep caring about its preservation, and its natural balance; (2) strong awareness of the planet-wide issues like climate change and poverty and a desire to see more action on them; (3) being active themselves; (4) willingness to pay higher taxes or spend more money for goods if that money went to improving the environment; (5) emphasize the importance of developing and maintaining relationships; (6) emphasize the importance of helping others and developing their unique gifts; (7) volunteer with one or more good causes; (8) intense interest in spiritual and psychological development; (9) see spirituality as an important aspect of life, but worry about religious fundamentalism (10) desire equality for women and men in business, life and politics; (11) concern and support of the well-being of all women and children; (11) support spending more money on education, community development programs, and the support of a more ecologically sustainable future; (12) unhappy with the left and right in politics; (13) optimism towards the future; (14) involved in creating a new and better way of life; (15) concerned with big business and the means they use to generate profits, including destroying the environment and exploiting poorer countries.” Ibid., 12.

³⁴ Finnegan, “L’Accompagnamento Spirituale: Le Sfide del Postmoderno,” 185. “In questa luce si considerino, per esempio, la spaccatura fra forme di vita interne ed esterne o fra la vita personale e quella socio-politica. Si considerino i processi che mantengono e rinforzano i modelli dicotomici della disuguaglianza, così come i concetti di genere, etnia, e altre contrapposizioni legate al potere di coloro che, nella peggiore dell’ipotesi, rendono possibile l’abuso e il traffico di esseri umani.” (my translation).

Offering an authentic Salesian spiritual accompaniment in our contemporary society, undoubtedly entails a constant attentiveness to these dualistic patterns and a vigilance to the distortions and gaps which so often result from such thinking. Finnegan demonstrates exquisitely the dangers of such thinking.

Is it enough to focus on personal growth and wellbeing when so many people are trapped by oppressive systems and poverty? Is it enough to encourage inner peace and ignore a world full of conflict? We live in systemic worlds, in structures and civil and religious institutions. We live in cultures and societies open to the dark and to tragedy. None of us live in splendid isolation immune to what is happening in society and the world around us. What else does it mean when Don Bosco challenges all of us to become honest citizens and good Christians?³⁵

In my view, these insights challenge anyone offering Salesian spiritual accompaniment in a secular world to truly understand Don Bosco's vision of Spiritual accompaniment and his concept of holiness. Such an outlook did not consider spiritual growth as a mere and false sense of inner peace and serenity. On the contrary, spiritual maturation was to be concretely expressed through the practical commitment of an honest citizen and a good Christian who positively contributed to society. Undoubtedly, rendering spiritual growth in young people to such an attractive, practical, reachable and tangible commitment within a secularised and consumeristic society is possibly the greatest challenge facing Salesian spiritual accompaniment today.

³⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 85. "E facciamo abbastanza quando incoraggiamo la pace interna e ignoriamo un mondo pieno di conflitti? Viviamo in mondi strutturati, in sistemi civili e istituzioni religiose. Viviamo in culture e società aperte al buio e alla tragedia. Nessuno di noi vive in splendido isolamento, immune a ciò che succede nella società e nel mondo attorno a noi. Che cos'altro può voler dire, dunque, il fatto che Don Bosco ci sfida a diventare buoni cristiani e onesti cittadini?" (my translation).

5. Signs of Hope

In sharp contrast with Don Bosco's context, the majority of youth in contemporary Europe enjoy "an abundance of material goods"³⁶ where problems of food, housing, employment, education and social security seem not to be of primary concern for many. However, the consumer mentality can become for many an insatiable preoccupation that leaves one's spirit starving. Many young people, notwithstanding their social well-being, demonstrate an apathy for life. They appear fearful of the future; afraid of commitment; satisfied, but with no desire.

The right to privacy seems to cut young people off from meaningful communion with others. Especially in moral matters, privacy reaches a point where no guiding norms are acknowledged except those concerning the regulation of social life. Many young people know only a social climate that champions the "buzz" of new experiences, prompting the young to live their sexuality solely as a means of pleasure, to seek refuge in drugs and alcohol, or to have recourse to violence.

Many young people can no longer expect from their family a firm grounding for the affective needs or socio-cultural development, as they suffer the consequences of various forms of family breakdown. As stated earlier, many young people are sceptical of religious institutions that are (in fact or in appearance) inflexible, and which are not responsive to the innovations continually called for by daily life. Hence, many young people distance themselves from these institutions and live their religious experience as something internal and private, without any significant influence on their practical life. They are most comfortable far away from the Church, and take an eclectic approach to religion. For many, there is a weak connection between life and faith, especially in fields of morality, economy and politics. Furthermore in those youth who do believe, Van Kaam perceives a certain inability "to integrate their spiritual life with contemporary culture, art and science."³⁷

But this is not the entire picture. At the beginning of the new millennium, the 25th Salesian General Chapter affirms that today's youth have a "greater sensitivity to what is sacred, have a clearer openness to the transcendent, and a commitment to a practical solidarity."³⁸ Many youth

³⁶ Egidio Viganò et al., "Educating Young People to the Faith," Documents of the 23rd Salesian General Chapter in *ACG*, 333 (Roma: March 4- May 5, 1990), 18.

³⁷ Adrian Van Kaam, *In Search of Spiritual Identity* (Denville NJ, Dimension Books, 1975), 267.

³⁸ Pascual Chavez Villanueva et al., "The Salesian Community Today," Documents of the 25th Salesian General Chapter in *ACG*, 378 (Roma: February 24-April 22, 2002), n. 22.

demonstrate a critical conscience of civil and religious society, they are committed to spreading the awareness of the real possibilities of change, are sensitive to the economic disparity between north and south, and are committed to the struggle against every form of exploitation, sexism and racism. Given an opportunity, many young people prove that they are generous and have high ideals. With refreshing energy, more and more young people are committing themselves to the centrality of the individual as the beginning, subject and end of social institutions. They want a new way of building relationships inspired by peace and justice. They espouse many values linked with diversity, such as tolerance, ecumenism, respect for what is different, and renewed attention to cultural and spiritual realities beyond purely technical. They are thirsty and searching for God.³⁹

Carolyn Gratton observes that this apparent thirst for God is evident in the revival of spiritual direction in the West. She claims: “We cannot go it alone (...) standing at the brink of the third millennium; people are seeking guidance in overwhelming numbers and for reasons beyond counting.”⁴⁰ Camil Ungureanu in his analysis of the post-modern European secular society claims that:

In the most secularized continent, Europe, religious and quasi-religious experiences remain important for many of its inhabitants, often in heterodox, transformed and disguised forms (...) In several European societies the interest in (individualized) spiritual-religious experiences has grown beyond established institutions.⁴¹

Timothy Radcliffe also gives an optimistic assessment of youth in Europe and affirms this growth beyond the established institutions, particularly in the younger generation. He asserts that young Europeans, in this period of post-modernism, are searching. They explore where they are (especially when they feel lost) in terms of their faith journey. He affirms their need to be able to ask questions in a safe context, which otherwise

³⁹ For an assessment of youth realities cf. Viganò et al., “Educating Young People to the Faith,” 23rd Salesian General Chapter, articles 18, 21, 31, 39, 47, 54, 55 and 58.

⁴⁰ Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, ix.

⁴¹ Camil Ungureanu, “Uses and Abuses of Post secularism,” in *Democracy, Law and Religious Pluralism in Europe, Secularism and Post-Secularism*, ed., Ferran Requejo and Camil Ungureanu (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

might be considered risky. Radcliffe claims that although Europe is secularised:

There is still a deep hunger for God. People do not only look to Christianity alone but to all religions. The young especially are interested in spirituality rather than doctrine. They are interested in God more than the Church. They are greatly preoccupied by death.⁴²

Indeed, without the spiritual dimension the view of the human person is limited and incomplete, and so are the responses to the larger questions of life. Various contemporary authors speak of humanity's uprootedness, one's search for meaning and guidance, one's desire for belonging. Among these, one can mention Janet Ruffing who claims:

The complexities of contemporary life, with its peculiar challenges to faith, and the breath of choices Christians face daily lead many to seek individual guidance and support in their ongoing life of intimacy with God and discernment about their responses to this relationship in the daily concerns of life and discipleship.⁴³

Charles Taylor debates that although Western modernity has undermined and rendered unmaintainable previous forms of religious life,

new forms have sprung up. (...) The salient feature of Western societies is not so much a decline of religious faith and practice (...) but rather a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief.⁴⁴

⁴² Timothy Radcliffe, *The Contribution of Christianity to the Future of Europe*, (May 2, 2005) accessed on March 31, 2014, <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=11878>.

⁴³ Janet Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction - Beyond the Beginnings* (London: St Paul's, 2000), 1.

⁴⁴ Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 594-595.

Challenged with the difficulties of this secular culture highlighted earlier on, Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the island of Malta in 2010 declared that:

Today's culture, like every culture, promotes ideas and values that are sometimes at variance with those lived and preached by our Lord Jesus Christ. Often they are presented with great persuasive power, reinforced by the media and by social pressure from groups hostile to the Christian faith.⁴⁵

On another occasion, in his discourse on religious freedom, Pope Benedict XVI affirms:

Without the acknowledgement of his spiritual being, without openness to the transcendent, the human person withdraws within himself, fails to find answers to the heart's deepest question about life's meaning.⁴⁶

Carolyn Gratton while referring to this profoundly changed society offers insight into the benefits a person could reap from solving such questions. She asserts that:

Questions about meaning, if sincere, are always small openings to transcendence especially when sincerely acknowledged and developed patiently (with the help of a spiritual companion) towards deeper understanding. Moreover, today, many have lost respect for, and indeed lost contact with, their roots, including their faith and religious traditions. As a result some people feel rootless and many are searching for a sense of belonging. The Christian tradition, if entered deeply and faithfully, can provide a story great

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, "The Noble Vocation of Love and Service: Address to Youths at Valletta Waterfront," in *The Times of Malta* (April 19, 2010) 23.

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, *Religious Freedom – The Path to Peace: Message on the World Day of Peace* (January 1, 2011) accessed on March 31, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace_en.html.

enough to provide meaning and address that immense inner longing. In this respect, only a companion who takes into account this post-modern context can be of much help in the process of spiritual accompaniment.⁴⁷

These few lines not only demonstrate the importance of sincerity and patience in the spiritual direction process, but also emphasizes the spiritual director's role in evaluating everything within the present context.

6. Conclusion

Don Bosco, in his day, believed that all youth have desires and aspirations that can be honoured only when the young "person's spiritual capacity is taken seriously."⁴⁸ Within all human beings there is a deep desire to love, to be loved, and to move towards union with the source of all love. It is this that makes human beings "spiritual" by nature. Hence, to be human is ultimately to be spiritual.⁴⁹

This is why Don Bosco aimed at forming good Christians who would consequently be honest citizens. In the process he accompanied youth in their journey to encounter God and enabled them to find some valuable solutions to those "all-important questions."⁵⁰ This aspect of forming young people into good Christians and honest citizens is, according to former Salesian Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chavez, an aspect which the Salesian family needs to relaunch "in a world so profoundly changed from the 1800s."⁵¹

Pascual Chavez emphasizes this required sensitivity to the new youth situation. He affirms that:

⁴⁷ Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 27.

⁴⁸ Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 2.

⁴⁹ Christian spirituality is not concerned with just the spiritual aspect of the person but with the integration of the various aspects of the whole person. The human dimension has always been considered as an integral part of spiritual growth. Cf. Ivan Platovnjak, *La Direzione Spirituale Oggi. Lo Sviluppo Della Sua Dottrina dal Vaticano II a Vita Consacrata (1962-1996)* (Roma: Gregoriana, 2001), 404.

⁵⁰ "The all-important questions have to do with love, responsibility, spirituality, awareness." Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, 175.

⁵¹ Pascual Chavez Villanueva, "Like Don Bosco the Educator We Offer Young People the Gospel of Joy through a Pedagogy of Kindness, Strenna 2013," in *ACG*, 415 (Roma: 2013), 12.

Everything associated with society and the Church has changed profoundly. Young people are living according to new values and have new criteria for their lives which constitute a culture that really is new; the traditional links in the chain for the transmission of culture and religion (the family, the school and the Church) have become weakened and are often in crisis.⁵²

Pascual Chavez emphasises the need of all those involved in the spiritual accompaniment of the young to develop a profound understanding of youth culture and their situation. The claims made here about “weakened traditional links” with the family, school and the church, suggests that Salesian spiritual companions today perhaps need to re-evaluate the traditional school and oratory settings and maybe even recreate new set-ups in which the optimum environments conducive to spiritual growth could occur.

Being in touch with youth culture is pivotal in Salesian spiritual companionship. Without a doubt, a sincere Salesian spiritual direction which is realistically engaged with youth will play a significant and precious role in youth formation today. One cannot interest and influence the young without understanding their pain and without credible efforts to engage with young people.

⁵² Pascual Chavez Villanueva, “Salesian Youth Ministry,” in *ACG*, 407 (Roma: 2010), 12.

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