

Youth Ministry and Family

Sector for
Salesian Youth
Ministry

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- AGC** Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco
- SEPP** Salesian Educative-Pastoral Plan
- EPC** Educative-Pastoral Community

SOURCES

- FC** John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation «*Familiaris Consortio*» (22 November 1981).
- FD** *Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment* (27 October 2018)
- AL** Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family «*Amoris laetitia*» (19 March 2016).
- CV** Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation «*Christus vivit*» (25 March 2019).
- EG** Francis, Apostolic Exhortation to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world «*Evangelii Gaudium*» (24 November 2013).
- FT** Francis, Encyclical Letter «*Fratelli Tutti*» (3 October 2020).
- FS** Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his work Anthological Collection, Rome, LAS, 2014.
- BR** Braido, P. *Don Bosco, prete dei giovani nel secolo della libertà*, LAS, 2003 (trad. *Don Bosco. The Priest of Youth in the Century of Freedom*).
Braido, P. *SAN GIOVANNI BOSCO, Scritti sul sistema preventivo nell'educazione della gioventù*. La Scuola, 1965 (trad. *SAINT JOHN BOSCO, Writings on the preventive system in the education of youth*).
- FR** *The Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of reference*, SDB, Rome 2014.
- YMF** *Youth Ministry and Family*, Acts of the International Congress (27 November – 1 December 2017 in Madrid).
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Presentation



The journey of the Church, the Congregation and the Sector for the Salesian Youth Ministry, in a deeper understanding of the synergy between the youth ministry and the family, emerged precisely in the three-year period 2015-2018 on the occasion of the Synods promoted by the Church (“Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization”, 2014; “The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and the contemporary world”, 2015; “Young people, the faith and vocational discernment”, 2018). These three synods, two on the family and one on youth, have greatly benefited the journey of the youth and family ministry. In the same reflection of the 27th General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation (2014) and in the International Congress “Youth Ministry and Family” (Madrid, 2017) of the Youth Ministry Sector, emphasis was placed on how the family, as a social and ecclesial form, is a key factor in society and in the education of new generations.

In the last quarter of 2020, we found and analyzed the material concerning the paths undertaken by the Congregation on this topic (meetings of delegates, documents by experts and contributions of the Congress); at the same time, we examined the recent literature (following the publication of *Amoris Letitia*), on the international scene, relating to the relationship between youth ministry and the family, coming to produce a document.

Secondly, we asked a large group of people from the various Regions to send contributions and suggestions regarding the contents; at the same time the Rector Major and his Council studied the text in different working sessions (January and June 2021). After having integrated the writings with the indications and proposals submitted, we came up with this final document, which is more refined and consistent with our experience on this topic.

The text you will read, therefore, constitutes a **synthetic and organic collection** of the main points that have emerged during this rich and fruitful journey. This document does not claim to be a family ministry manual. These pages respond to a reflection, definitely not thorough, which highlights

how the involvement and integration of these two realities (Salesian family and youth ministry) lead us to reflect together on the significance and needs that this dual perspective entails for our educative and pastoral renewal. **Can we form the person of our children, adolescents, and youth without examining, clarifying, and reviving family values?**

The objective of this booklet, therefore, is to turn our gaze towards this pastoral direction. The recipients are the Salesians of Don Bosco and all the pastoral workers who are in charge of animating the various sectors and areas.

Faced with the family situation we are living today, in fact, we Salesians, together with the Salesian Family, are called to make an educative pastoral proposal to **accompany all the types of families** that make up our Educative and Pastoral Communities (EPCs) and all young people. Some readers may have the impression that we are moving from a preferential attention to young people to a privileged interest for families. Therefore, it is legitimate to question the meaning, reasons and consequences of what may appear to be a deviation from our first choice. In concrete terms, the choice for young people is not external and occasional, but within the ministry and does not come from the organic nature of the message (evangelization), but from a charismatic preference; we were obviously not born as a movement for the care of the family ministry. As a Salesian Family we are oriented towards a mission for the young, towards a special love for young people, especially for those most in need, for the good of the Church and of society. We can say with Don Bosco: "The Lord has sent me for the young, so I must spare myself in other extraneous things and preserve my health for them".

But while this is true, it is equally realistic that we cannot work with young people without thinking about their families. In the speech Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI gave at the Audience to the participants in the General Chapter of the Salesians (31 March 2008), regarding the new frontiers of evangelization, he clearly expressed that "caring for families does not



mean taking people away from work for young people; on the contrary, it means making it more permanent and effective. I thus encourage you to deepen the forms of this commitment on which you have set out; this will prove advantageous to the education and evangelization of the young". Therefore, this is the horizon of this work

The text we are presenting consists of three parts; the first recalls the value of the family in Don Bosco's experience and in Valdocco, and in the second section it provides a few reflections on the quality of the educational encounter and on family spirit in the Preventive System. In the last chapter, the importance of the family itself is emphasized, as well as its contribution to the ecosystem of the formation of young people, positively highlighting its contribution to the daily life of the Educative and Pastoral Community (EPC). Some concrete guidelines for the SEPP are presented, starting from statements that identify the family as the first and common vocation and place par excellence of the emotional bond; the active agent of ministry in the Educative and Pastoral Communities; the space for an experience of dialogue, respect, love, and attention for young people who want to invest in relationships and family ties.

Before leaving you to read, I would like to express **my heartfelt thanks to all those from the various provinces of the world who have actively participated in the realization of the text**, to Dr. Antonella Sinagoga, and to those who have accompanied us with their expertise and professionalism, by giving us suggestions and guidance.

Miguel Ángel García Morcuende

General Councillor for the Youth Ministry

ROME, 24 JUNE 2021

INTRODUCTION

1

“Caring for the family” ...

Caring for the family arouses great interest around the world. Particular attention is given to the issue through articles, scientific publications and conference documents. At the same time, the family is asked to **take care of the bonds** that make up the dense network that supports the person of young people in the growth process and that increases the quality of life of a community. Therefore, it is necessary to promote adequate educative-pastoral strategies to support the family, on the role it has in building interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, as well as in the overall understanding of the education and accompaniment of new generations.

Today *Francis* invites us to develop a “pastoral care for bonds” (AL, 211) because every family experience is a story made up of relationships, built around a life plan, connected to a cultural, social, economic, and political context. Throughout this story, each family alternates moments in which it is able *to express* its resources, with moments in which it goes through *moments of vulnerability and fatigue*.

In its complexity, each family is like a book that needs to be read, interpreted, and understood with great care, attention, and respect. In our contemporary society, family life has, indeed, certain conditions that expose it to weakness:

- *The weakness and fragmentation of relational networks*, in a culture in which an individualistic vision of existence has developed, and community relations and social practices have weakened, with an impoverishment of the bonds of proximity and affection, the informal aid and support networks and the culture of encounter (cf. FT, 30). Meeting places have changed. Furthermore, digital culture represents a weakness and a resource: new technologies give greater opportunities to participate in social and relational life by sharing virtual places, but this participation may not necessarily be effective and affective. We live in an era of hyper-connection, capable of being in contact with everyone and at any time via internet and social

platforms; at every moment, even when, for example, we are sitting at the table and we should experience a cordial moment, our hands and unfortunately not even our minds can hardly stay away from our smartphone.

- ▶ *Spiritual dryness, turning away from “spiritual things” or the inability to connect with the Divine* for a deeper meaning in life, to live one’s faith in a meaningful way.
- ▶ *Disorientation and the risks associated with overcoming moments of change*, in a culture centered on “self-sufficiency”, particularly in the evolutionary passages of life (adolescence, birth of a child, aging ...) and in moments of unexpected change (such as, for example, the loss of a job, separations, bereavement, ...), often experienced in the intimacy of domestic “homes”.

Dealing with frailties is important, especially since “**no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed**”; families need to grow and mature constantly in the ability to love. [...] Our contemplation of the fulfilment which we have yet to attain also allows us to see in proper perspective the historical journey which we make as families, and in this way to stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come. It also keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty. All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us.” (AL, 325).

The family is subject to **constant transformations**. The various configurations have made it a multifaceted reality: think of nuclear families (father, mother and children) or simple ones; mononuclear families (father or mother with children) or without conjugal unity; extended families and therefore conjugal unity and several cohabiting relatives (with more than two generations in the same nucleus); multiple families (with many generations, more than one conjugal unit and single people). The typology of the family has expanded: separated, newly created or recomposed

families, single-parent, multi-ethnic families, civil unions, stable civil unions. Kinship or marriage are no longer exclusive criteria for defining the family. The reality has become so complex that **today we cannot think of the family in the singular, but in the plural.**

THERE IS NO JUST ONE FAMILY, BUT RATHER FAMILIES.

Despite the various configurations of families, we can affirm that the family relationship is a component of major importance because for better or for worse, it is the only access to the construction and development of one's own identity. The family is a relational context that supports transformation; it is in fact the institution that 'organizes' the primary relationships and fundamental differences of humans. Therefore, the family is a "place" for the encounter of diversities, which are the basis of the human experience between the sexes, generations, temperaments, identities, etc.

For *Francis*, families "are not a problem, they are first and foremost an opportunity" (AL 7), just think of the experience of Jesus in his family (Lk 2:51-52). An opportunity to learn to be, to live together, to help, to heal, to love.

When it comes to caring for the family, first and foremost, this necessarily implies caring for the members of the family, in their diversity and in their dignity; no institution must be above people and their integral human development. **Regarding and experiencing families as good news** is an invitation to live in a space from which it is possible to build a "we". The family as a happy project implies recognizing the lights and shadows of this experience and recognizing oneself as beings in relation and in communion with wider contexts.

2

...to ensure that families “care” for others

The “synod process” on the family, promoted by *Francis* and conceived in two Synods (an extraordinary one, in 2014, and an ordinary one, in 2015) has made it possible to understand that, as Saint John Paul II said: “the family is not an area of pastoral care but it is the horizon and the way of the Church” (*Letter to families*, 1994).

We are convinced that families, **all families, are the subject, and not only the object, of education and evangelization**; therefore, for us Salesian youth ministry workers, the post-synodal exhortation “*Amoris Laetitia*” is an invitation to rethink, by listening to the times, the family at the pastoral service entrusted to us.

Families are the subject of evangelization and education both *ad intra* (towards their children) and *ad extra* (in the ecclesial community and in the EPCs which they belong to). The first aspect is certainly crucial, but more “ordinary” and linked to the dynamics of family ministry; the second is the specific contribution of the argument that we are pursuing as a Congregation.

In this cultural context and in going through the dynamics of change that this era presents, if on the one hand the family is subject to fragility and risks, as we have mentioned, on the other hand it represents **a unique and precious resource in our EPCs**. As part of the 2017 International Congress in Madrid, this analysis was launched with extensive considerations and debates. In addition to the transformations that have characterized and characterize it, a positive reading of the family emerges today, such as:

- ▶ **Place of acceptance and relationships** as it is the most complete manifestation of that fundamental experience of the person which is the relationship with others (in couples, with regard to children, in the relationship between siblings, in extended parental relationships).

It is the encounter of people who have the opportunity to take care of each other and therefore to be meaningful to each other (through daily relationships in which they can measure themselves against the needs and requirements of others and educate themselves to mutual listening and dialogue).

- ▶ **Place par excellence of the emotional bond**, but also the **place of responsibility** towards others.
- ▶ **Place of otherness** between people who, by overcoming the fear of difference and indifference with confidence, begin to experiment positive exchanges with each other, learning to consider them as a resource that, in a dynamic of exchange, allows both to grow.
- ▶ **Place of education**, because the educative process promotes the fulfillment of identity.
- ▶ **Place of humanization**, because the family gives human form and humanizes what is born of it and is bound in it, contributing to the harmonious growth of people.
- ▶ **Place of growth in the faith**; sacred ground where every member of the family grows towards unity with God
- ▶ **Privileged place where the joy of forgiveness is experienced**. It is within the family that we are educated to forgiveness because we have the certainty of being understood and supported despite the mistakes that can be made.
- ▶ **Place of hope** that testifies that in a world that tends towards individualism and appearance, selfless love, generosity, altruism, benevolence, and care for the weakest still exist.

3

The family, the mirror of the times

The family institution, despite the changes and various challenges that threaten it, remains solid, but the family is a life project/experience/reality that **requires a horizon of implementation and constant commitment by all.**

Several challenges and insights have emerged from the pastoral realities from all the regions of the Congregation, which can be analyzed in future formation meetings:

- **The challenge of an adequate placement within the Salesian Educative-Pastoral Project.** It is important to justify the terminology we use to be faithful to our charism: “youth ministry and family”. A term used in the Salesian perspective that does not neglect the preferential and primary attention to youth, that does not give this choice a merely rhetorical sense, without consequences on the operational level, that does not standardize us into an undifferentiated apostolic identity, which does not give rise to parallels or unrelated ministries. Thinking about the two themes together is anthropologically correct, theologically grounded, and pastorally promising and fruitful.

Pastoral care among young people is “style” and “method”, as stated in art. 20 of the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco: «Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the ‘Preventive System’. [...] Don Bosco passes this on to us as our way of living and of handing on the Gospel message, and of working with and through the young for their salvation».

- **The challenge of the protagonism of families.** In addition to making all Christian couples and families and each of them the end of its attention and care, the pastoral objective is to recognize in

couples and families themselves an active and responsible pastoral subject in participating in the life and mission of the Church and in the development of society, carrying out the tasks and ministry that have their roots in the sacrament of marriage.

- ▶ **The challenge to welcome and work with all families**, by opening up especially to families with vulnerabilities and difficulties, by welcoming and helping to heal the wounds that manifest themselves in human relationships, both before and after the formation of the family. Even on a conceptual level, adopting the term in the plural - families - because we are faced with numerous family configurations.
- ▶ **The challenge of the spiritual life in the family context.** Recovering the spiritual dimension to feel its taste, its beauty. The invitation to make family life good news, a reason for happiness, places us in the key to love as a place of self-giving in which relationships originate and come to life, and then lead us to transcend this nucleus to project it into the community.
- ▶ **The challenge of formation.** Promoting formation meetings on issues of interest for families and on the theme of the family, especially in contemporary culture for Salesians, families, young adults, and young couples. Reflecting on God's creative and salvific project on marriage and the family that needs to be discovered and deepened.
- ▶ **The challenge of networking.** The need to network with all institutions (dioceses, other associations, ...) that deal with the most diverse family configurations in order to forge strong alliances.
- ▶ **The challenge to integrate families and SYM**, in order not to lose sight of the youth focus of our ministry, emphasizing the fruitful interaction between two pastoral perspectives, that of the family and that of young people.

DON BOSCO'S FAMILY: A CONCRETE FAMILY

CHAPTER

I



1 1

THE DEATH AND ABSENCE OF HIS FATHER

Meeting Don Bosco is a timeless journey. Following his dreams; understanding his passion for education; learning about his talent for pulling young people out of the “wrong path” to make them “*good Christians and honest citizens*”, to educate them in the Christian faith and social conscience, to guide them to an honest profession, is **an experience of extraordinary human and familiar intensity.**

Don Bosco's experience has deep roots. **His life, indeed, is filled with families**, a multitude of relationships, generations, youth without families, love stories and family crises, from the earliest years of his life, when he has to face the loss of his father at a very young age. The first memories that Don Bosco communicates to his readers in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* refers to an episode whose importance he will only be able to understand later: the loss of his father. The paternal void in Don Bosco's life is transformed into a fruitful womb, rather than a trauma that paralyzes or hinders its potential.

We are familiar with the event, and we know how Don Bosco concluded the story: “I do not know how I reacted on that sad occasion. One thing only do I remember, and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out from the room where he had died, and I insisted on staying behind. My grieving mother addressed me, “Come, John, come with me. If Papa's not coming, I don't want to come,” I answered. “My poor son,” my mother replied, “come with me; you no longer have a father.” Having said this, she broke down and started crying as she took me by the hand and led me away. I began crying too because she was crying. At that age I could not really understand what a tragedy had fallen on us in our father's death” (FS, p 1174)

Don Bosco experienced the sorrow of losing a father twice, when in addition to his biological father (Francis), he lost his spiritual father (Don Calosso). He who was called to care for orphans lived in the flesh this experience of loss that left its mark on his whole life.

While writing about the events of his life, Don Bosco was caught up in the events he was narrating. It is not difficult to notice how, in the background

of the family pictures, he described the great nostalgia for a reality he was unable to enjoy as a child due to his father's death: the tenderness of fatherly affection. Indeed, it is above all around the figure of his father that he portrays the most delicate and moving scenes.

Don Bosco was able to come to terms with the "loss". From being a fatherless boy, he became a model of fatherhood for his boys. In a (Western) social context in which the father figure is unknown or passive, **Don Bosco's embrace of his fatherhood is a sign of hope** that can invite fathers to possess their specific role.

When we read the story of John Bosco, we can interpret or guess that his family is "different" and this is why it is a concrete family, with its strengths and weaknesses, with its emotional relationships and its difficulties. His family is a simple, hardworking, and enterprising family. It is interesting how naturally Don Bosco refers to the problems present in his own family, without hiding them, but simply by **narrating its daily events and efforts**, knowing fully well that God's will is fulfilled within the real and unfortunately complex daily relationships that belong to all of us, marked by Providence indeed, but also by sin and bewilderment.

The death of his father, the difficulty he had with his brother Antony, who often stood in his way, his grandmother who at times became a burden, poverty that forced his choices, the work that employed his days and didn't allow him to think about anything beyond the horizon of daily work, are also characteristic traits of the Bosco family, which are not hidden, but revealed because they will make up in concrete terms the character and future of each of its members.

It is precisely from these difficulties and "shortcomings", which are common to many families of the past and present, that certain essential characteristics of Don Bosco's spirituality will arise. In the following pages we cannot examine in detail how the family influenced the life of the saint, but we can immediately identify a few characteristics that we believe to be of particular significance.

- The loss of his father will lead John to search for other father figures** and to rediscover the primordial and irreplaceable role of a father in the family. The first is Don Calosso from whom John acknowledges that he "began to taste the spiritual life" (FS,

p. 1184), from whom he will feel loved and whose death will touch him profoundly. The elderly priest had not been merely a benefactor and encouraging teacher, but a father, his first spiritual father who, according to him, was exceptionally significant for his interior life and the fulfilment of his vocation to the priesthood.

Forty-five years later he drew a profile of him, intentionally integrated with the extensive and exemplary experience for his priests, Christian youth educators and promoters of ecclesiastic vocations. First of all, "I bared my soul to him. Every word, thought, and act I revealed to him promptly. This pleased him because it made it possible for him to have an influence on both my spiritual and temporal welfare. It was then that I came to realise what it was to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of one's soul. I had not had one up till then. [...] From then on I began to taste the spiritual life; up to then I had acted in a purely mechanical way, not knowing the reasons" (BR, 2003, p. 124).

But it was precisely this experience of emptiness that would make the young priest Don Bosco aware of the difficulties of his own children, of the human and spiritual qualities that he himself would have to learn to take on in his own life in order to be the father of those who did not have a father and who would see him as the one who would let them savour life, in every way.

- The fatigue and good fortune of having brothers.** Valdocco will not be an island of happiness, it will always be a group of children and adults who will have to gradually refine their characters and struggle in order to live fully a kind of dynamic charity, made up of relationships, listening, moments of celebration, outings, sharing; only in this way could it be the cradle and home to many. Don Bosco knew that there was no home without brothers who, having different characteristics, sometimes different ideas and making efforts to live together, however, were able to consider the person next to him a member of their own family, someone who matters to me in a personal way, on whom I can depend and to whom I can show my affection and turn my attention. So right from the start the children who are with him are invited to take care of each other, because this is how one behaves in families, because this is how Joseph, Don

Bosco's brother, will always behave, even as an adult; because even Antony will acknowledge John's qualities, even though after many years; because there is no home without brotherhood.

- ▶ **Daily work** for the good of all: the extreme poverty he experienced as a child in Becchi and the enthusiasm and value of daily work in the fields will remain in Don Bosco's life as a sense of duty and effort, as an object of teaching and educative tool, because good citizens earn their bread with the sweat of their brow and for this and with this he praises his Lord.

1 2

"AN OPEN-MINDED FAMILY" AND THE CENTRAL FIGURE OF HIS MOTHER

What Don Bosco writes about his own perception of his father's death can also be considered a subsequent re-elaboration of maternal commemoration and of his own gradual awareness of being an orphan, increasingly attached to his mother.

Because of her innate physical and moral energy and acquired sense of responsibility, Mamma Margaret took on the role of paternal mother in the firm and prudent governance of the well-established family nucleus. Therefore, John's search for a father figure in benevolent and charitable priests was never anxious: in a solid and supportive parental framework it must have already been sufficiently internalized

A dual approach to Don Bosco's life helps us to have a better understanding of the characteristics of the Bosco family: on the one hand, **Valdocco will be the home to several generations**, with protagonists coming from various social status, because in fact it will imitate what was simply the everyday reality of the Bosco family, who belonged to the working-class, and the families of the time; on the other hand, the **attention to the presence of Mamma Margaret** brings us to the center of family life.

- ▶ **A** When young John lived there with his family, Becchi was a village where people lived and worked, placed within a social and ecclesial context that extended as far as the town of Castelnuovo and in his more extended

friendships and relationships it reached as far as Cascina Moglia and even to Chieri itself.

Don Bosco's family lived in a social context in which being "part of the family" extended more than the close parent/child relationship which we are accustomed to today. It was a society where several generations lived simultaneously, where **taking care of each other was a common occurrence**, because even the neighbors were part of the family.

This is what Mamma Margaret taught in her care for the poor, even those just passing by. It was taught by the relatives and friends who helped young Bosco to find a job, leave home and find the money to study. Don Bosco's family, given the social and socio-economic environment in which he lived, expanded, and developed his mission there; it was a simple working-class world, a gravitating aspect of the mission and a privileged option of his Salesians of the present and future. **Sharing the experiences of a poor world with all its precariousness and values**, imbued his concept of reality and his capacity for compassion for the most impoverished youth. Together with his mother, they wanted to be an open-minded family who would welcome and accompany those who didn't have rewarding experiences in their families. They wanted to assure them a family and home experience in every work that was established. Hence his pastoral option and **the ability to understand the vicissitudes of the working-class world**.

From the ecclesial point of view as well, cultivating relationships between families was a daily pastoral care. Mamma Margaret, in all likelihood, belonged to the group of mothers who, for many years, gathered together by the parish priests of Castelnuovo, had met to pray and deepen their faith, becoming indeed the backbone of the religious education of all their children and families. The common factor that became the cornerstone of Don Bosco's family spirit was the beauty of a genuine relationship.

B Secondly, Mamma Margaret was a special mother for young John Bosco and for all the boys of the first Oratory, who became his family, and whom he often addressed with jokes and proverbs in the Piedmont dialect, which in a few words managed to summarize common sense and experience.

She was a hardworking woman, a woman of faith and prayer, an example of Christian life for her son John. Using an educative language, we could say that Don Bosco “enrolled in his mother Margaret’s school”, a friendly woman whom we could compare with the Good Samaritan of the Gospel; she served her son’s poor and rejected children and youth, as we would say today. **If Don Bosco is a saint, it is because he had a holy mother.**

In the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Don Bosco recalls with extraordinary precision the gestures, words and behavior with which his mother - Mamma Margaret - prepared him for his first Communion. He then presents practically the same approach to describe the preparation for the same event in the life of Dominic Savio (FS, p.1031), Severino and Francis Besucco (FS, p.1033).

Don Bosco’s biographer Johannes Jørgensen (1931) was right to begin his work with the famous phrase: “In the beginning there was his mother”. Indeed, Margaret was the center of the family, in every way. Although she was a widow and struggled to raise a family in conditions of poverty and also relational difficulties (especially with the first son, Antony, who was not hers), **Margaret managed to undertake an admirable educative task**, so much so that she was remembered with nostalgia then insistently sought after by Don Bosco himself when he established his family: Valdocco

Don Bosco learnt tenderness from his mother, that concrete maternal love, full of affection, protective and capable of accompanying boys in their growth, but at the same time tenderness that “is not weak, sweet, approximate, but strong, orderly, disciplined, educator of serious men and Christians of character” (BR, 1965, Regulations). Its characteristics recall *Francis’* words on kindness: To love - he writes – is also to be gentle and thoughtful. It indicates that love is not rude or impolite; it is not harsh. Its actions, words and gestures are pleasing and not abrasive or rigid. Love abhors making others suffer. Every day, “entering into the life of another, even when that person already has a part to play in our life, demands the sensitivity and restraint which can renew trust and respect. [...] Indeed, the deeper love is, the more it calls for respect for the other’s freedom and the ability to wait until the other opens the door to his or her heart” (AL 99).

The cause of beatification introduced for Mamma Margaret Occhiena is helping us to better understand the depth of her faith, but also her educative skills, her example of concrete charity, her ability to accompany her children, each in their own way and in their own vocation, her dedication even to the cross in following and supporting Don Bosco in his mission, her ability to assume as her own children the children that providence gave her in Valdocco, making her the Mother of each and every one.

1 3 IN VALDOCCO LIKE AT HOME

The experience briefly described up to now of John in his family will make an indelible mark on **his vision of life and his idea of education and evangelization of youth**. From a young age, young John was educated to see reality with the eyes of faith and in particular his mother's faith.



The origins of the Salesians do not involve a theory or a scheme of a philosopher, but a story, an experience lived according to a special and concrete docility to the Holy Spirit, the one Don Bosco demonstrated in Valdocco, in Chieri, at the boarding school, at the prisons, ... The oratory reality was built as a family over the years, thanks to the participation of Mamma Margaret, right in that home where mother and father built the family atmosphere that was lived in everyday life. Over the years it will become a characteristic and perpetual feature of the Salesian spirituality/mission.

Throughout Don Bosco's remarkable life, an interesting consideration is reserved for the family and its precious educative and pastoral work. The institutions he founded in favour of poor and abandoned youth, strengthening the family model, **are called "homes"** and the educators who work in them are committed to building a relational atmosphere inspired by the "family spirit".

These are all characteristics that were experienced every day in Becchi, and which also marked the house in Valdocco and the Salesian family atmosphere that was experienced there through:

- ▶ **The clear sense of providence**, which helps and accompanies the daily life of its children and supports them in times of difficulty.
- ▶ **The sense of grace** that can overcome sin and can always lead to good.
- ▶ **Concrete charity** based on good will, effort and commitment, but also on joy and sharing.
- ▶ The possibility of experiencing and making **responsible use of freedom**; also, being an "acrobat", in order to avoid sins.
- ▶ **Caring for others** as a daily means of doing good, against selfishness and withdrawing into oneself.
- ▶ **Hope always**, even in difficult times.
- ▶ **The construction of a house** and **the seriousness of daily commitment**, where several generations can live together, with

different ideas, different styles, different needs, but all united by the ability to help each other, to lend a hand so that the other is happy too, otherwise "I can't be happy either".

- ▶ **Differentiated support**, which leaves freedom of action; which is incisive at certain times; which manifests presence and not abandonment.
- ▶ **The role of adults** as guides and **of children** as a stimulus for new experiences and new ideas, in order never to feel accomplished at an educational level.
- ▶ **The protagonism of young people** for all that it entails in terms of involvement in the construction of the family atmosphere and evangelization. Youth as evangelizers of other young people and whom Don Bosco was able to recognize and bring into daily life (for example with Dominic Savio).

In Valdocco he created an educative environment permeated by relationships that are inspired by family relationships, in a welcoming and reassuring atmosphere, with a spirit of adaptation and a sense of belonging, characteristics that distinguish the human family and that become for the saint the resource and inspiration for the construction of an "oratorian family".

In many respects, Don Bosco's teaching on the family was relevant to the times, in particular with regard to the need to value the specific contribution that each parent is called to offer within the couple and in the sharing of ideals and tasks in the education of their children, according to a fruitful exchange of resources and gifts, focusing more on the sacredness of reciprocal relationships, in order to build an **alliance of commitment**.

In the life stories told by Don Bosco, we also see the continuity between the upbringing young people received in the family and the education they received by attending Salesian houses and colleges. This is the case, for example, of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco. However, in the specific case of Valentino (FS, pp. 1026-1169), Don Bosco highlights, by way of contrast, the effects of a Christian education received at boarding school and the influence of the bad examples

received at home, in the family. Unfortunately, at the end of the novel, Valentino is irretrievably lost, proving that what is received in the family leaves a permanent mark.

The family spirit in the early Valdocco is the founding principle of both the Educative-Pastoral Community and the Salesian Congregation itself and also the Salesian Family: a process that has yielded good fruits.

In conclusion, Don Bosco was inspired by the family model for various reasons. First of all, because of the impact that family experience had on his human and Christian formation. Secondly, for the religious beliefs that matured during the years in preparation for the priesthood, firmly rooted in an idea of the Church, conceived as the great family of God's children. Finally, because in the urban setting of the Turin of his time, John Bosco, a priest, had realised that many young immigrants, in order to work in factories, practically didn't have a family, in an environment which was hostile and incomprehensible to them due to different lifestyles.

Don Bosco, an intelligent educator in step with the times, a tireless advocate of educative prevention, was convinced that **the family is the first and most important place where the Preventive System can be applied and lived fruitfully**. In fact, in principle, the success of education depends on the commitment of parents and those who carry out this mission. It is from their ability to bear witness to values, their ability to demonstrate with a reasonable and loving dialogue the needs required for the integral development of the person, according to personal growth rates, that the convincing path of commitment towards the youth's human and Christian maturity is encouraged.

Furthermore, the family model characterizes the choice of his educative system because it focuses on youth, their attitudes, the values they promote, stirring hearts with gentleness and avoiding all forms of repression and violence. It is a method that encourages harmony between spontaneity and discipline, familiarity and respect for the rules, freedom and duties.

1 4 GOD SEES YOU, WE SEE AS GOD DOES

We conclude this chapter by learning once again from Mamma Margaret, a strong and faith-filled woman, an important characteristic for our Salesian educative-pastoral model.

The phrase with which young John's mother explained to him the eternal providential presence of the Father has gone down in history: God sees you. It was not a threat, but the awareness of being guarded and accompanied by a Father who loves us and who, therefore, never leaves us alone. He was, we could say today, the *ante litteram* figure of the **Salesian assistance** that Don Bosco, with his pastoral gaze of "wisdom", subsequently asked of his members with regard to children, because "this is what God does with us".

This awareness was so internalized in Mamma Margaret's mind and heart that she had earned the equivalent of this phrase, so typical of the popular wisdom of her time: **not only does God see you, but you also learn to see as God does**. When she used to explain to young John the beauty of the starry sky or when she foresaw in the explanation of one of his dreams the vocational call that it actually was, Margaret declared that she had perfectly understood what **double fidelity to God and to everyday life** meant. Not a dichotomy to be put together, not cross-word puzzle that we then must reconcile with difficulty, as if God and the world were on two different levels, but the holy naturalness of those who look at the world with God's eyes, the only ones who truly see it for what it truly is, revealing its goodness and sinfulness. Therefore, the source, the beginning and the development energy of the Salesian charism is found in a love with two inseparable poles, God and youth, the poorest: in the total donation of oneself to God in the youth mission and correspondingly in the total donation of oneself to youth in a movement toward God. For Don Bosco, the education of young people will mature along these lines.

Mamma Margaret teaches us what it means to discern today in our EPCs: knowing that God sees us, so as to build together a vision that can give us the same eyes of God to decipher the dreams that He sows in the hearts of all.

This suggests that, in order for every family to grow in trust toward this ancient and ever new community relational perspective, it is necessary to

educate oneself to an **“ethics of the eye”**, to an ability to pay attention to the reality that surrounds us, which we belong to not only in a material sense, but also in a relational sense.

SYNTHESIS

- ▶ In this chapter, we have seen how the paternal void in Don Bosco’s life was transformed into a womb of fruitfulness, rather than a trauma. The loss of his father led him to search for other father figures, making him more aware of the difficulties and poverty of his own boys, and he eventually became a father to many. His family experience left an indelible mark on his vision of life and his idea of educating and evangelizing youth.
- ▶ In this perspective, we have highlighted the “effort” that Don Bosco made in his family and for families: Mamma Margaret, first of all, and subsequently himself in Valdocco. Together with his mother, they desired to be an open and welcoming family, to the point of founding institutions which, strengthening the family model, Don Bosco called “homes”, engaging educators in the construction of a relational atmosphere inspired by the “family spirit”, thus becoming the resource and inspiration for the construction of an “oratorian family”. It is important for us to highlight, by means of this first part, how precious his insight was.
- ▶ Don Bosco wanted to achieve what he himself had not experienced and this took place through concrete people. This allowed the Salesians, without being direct families of the youth, to experience a family atmosphere. The family model, indeed, characterizes the choice of his educative system because it focuses on youth, their attitudes and context.
- ▶ The family he established in Valdocco, which is supportive, open and welcoming, does not place itself at the center of its attention, nor does it act as an indicator of reality, but is quick to embrace the problems and anxieties of the poorest and the most “rejected” youth of society.

PREVENTIVE SYSTEM AND THE FAMILY

CHAPTER



PREVENTIVE SYSTEM: A SPIRITUAL AND APOSTOLIC EXPERIENCE

“Family and youth ministry is vitally important for the whole Church, and particularly so for the followers of Don Bosco. In his dream at the age of nine, Mary indicated youth as the field in which he ought to work” (*YMF*, pp. 15-32).

The spiritual and apostolic experience of the Valdocco Oratory forged a way of being and doing, of living and working, of communicating the Gospel and collaborating in the salvation of young people, which has been called the Preventive System. The Educative-Pastoral model inspired by it revolves around a central nucleus: the world of young people, whose life and culture, as educators, we are called to live. If a model is without motivation or orientation, it loses its reason for being. Therefore, the **force or current that sustains this movement is pastoral charity**, the center and synthesis of the Salesian spirit.

For Don Bosco, educating implies that the educator shows this special disposition, this rooted conviction: to seek first of all the spiritual good of youth, their salvation and their integral well-being. By devoting himself completely to his mission, he is willing to pay the price and abandon everything else, “*Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*” (give me souls, take away the rest).

This motto, which Don Bosco took on as a prayer, represents in our opinion the synthesis of his fundamental educative and pastoral option. His whole life was dedicated to this project, to see young people grow and mature towards their eternal destiny, understood in its broadest meaning. We can affirm that “pastoral charity” is the educative-pastoral service in the Church that the Salesians offer to the new generations.

“It was a spontaneous expression of love inspired by the love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side, and freely gives his life to save them. Don Bosco passes this on to us as a way of living and handing on the Gospel message, and of working with and through the young for their salvation. It permeates our approach to God, our personal relationships, and our manner of living in community through the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved.” (Const. 20)

In these pages we want to deepen the relationship between the Preventive System and the family. We know that love is the heart of marriage and the family and “the Christian ideal, especially in families, is a love that never gives up” (AL, 119). In this respect, the Church looks to the family as a model that inspires her to take on a more homely and family dimension.

2 2

“CREATIVITY IN CHARITY” COMES TO LIFE IN THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

The cornerstones of Don Bosco’s Preventive System can be summed up in two statements of strong Christian inspiration: “This system is all based on reason, religion and loving kindness”; “The practice of this system is based entirely on the words of St. Paul, who says: Love is patient, love is kind; it bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things” (FS, p. 435).

Authoritarian imposition and the threat of punishments have to be replaced by the methods of the persuasive proposal of love, which attracts and aims to win hearts. Don Bosco’s pastoral care needed to take on the face of a salvific zeal made lovable by the traits of humanity: kindness, meekness, tenderness and affection.

Educative charity is also clothed with “loving kindness”. This pedagogical love involves the desire and enthusiasm for education; the desire to work and savour educative and pastoral enterprises; willingness and the giving of oneself with joyful hearts; feeling attracted to those who are most in need; considering all hard work proportionate and easily overcoming small frustrations; coping with risks and difficulties in the educative relationship as if they were insignificant things.

Consequently, Don Bosco’s great “word”, “loving kindness”, unlike other synonyms, is part of a triad that contains the highest human and educative values, reason and religion. It does not appear only as a pedagogical “means”, but as a true cornerstone, together with the other two, of the entire “Preventive System”.

For a better understanding of the meaning of loving kindness, not only for the affective component, but also for its pedagogical value, it is essential

to recall what Don Bosco wrote in the General Articles regulating the Rules for Houses (1877). In this simple document he presents a synthesis of the Preventive System; he states that **the educator must make himself loved by young people** “by winning their hearts, making it known with words, and even more with facts, that its solicitude is directed to their spiritual and temporal advantage”; “in assistance a few words and many facts, and to give students the opportunity to express their thoughts (FS, p.551).

The affective value of these words becomes pedagogy, when the teacher understands that his presence is not only aimed at controlling and complying with the rules, or giving someone a pat on the back, but that he is there for the young person, in order to accompany him, to listen to him and to understand the reality he is living; he is the active presence of the person who is able to see beyond the body, almost as if he could read the thoughts of the young boy, and is ready to help him, embrace him, give him good advice, or simply listen to him, as a father or mother would do; fully aware of the reality that surrounds the life of his children.

In concrete terms, **this pedagogy of kindness suggests behaviors in educative practice** which, according to a proven family experience, such as the oratory, create correspondence. Don Bosco makes this evident and develops it extensively in his letter of 1884. In his letter he shows us how a father, who deeply loves his children, makes his presence felt, by making visible a fundamental behavior of the family, therefore of the Preventive System. This behaviour is realized in the ability to encounter and in the readiness to welcome others in a family atmosphere. It is implemented by creating, with patient dedication, an environment in which one feels included and helped, an environment rich in humanity in which the proposed values are assimilated with joy. Such attention also tells us about the deep friendship that is established between educators and youth, which arouses trust and creates a prolonged personal educative relationship, which is what really helps the integral development of youth.

This friendship leads to another very unique manifestation of the educative relationship: fatherhood. In other words, **spiritual fatherhood is the extension of an educative fatherhood** made up of community teaching, dedication, loving presence, understanding and complicity. It is more than friendship. It is a loving and authoritative responsibility that offers vital guidance and teaching and requires discipline and commitment. It is love and authority.

“Love what young people love”, take care of them, because as Don Bosco did for young people in prison, they could be lost if “no one takes care of them”. For the individual boy, Don Bosco the confessor and spiritual director is also the one who welcomes him with affection, sustains him, instructs and educates him, and stimulates him to give the best of himself in the community and in daily work. Next to him there are assistants, educators and young friends with whom they can share the same ethical tension, the same spiritual values, in a stimulating and fruitful exchange of dialogue.

2 3

FAMILY SPIRIT AND EDUCATIVE WITNESS: A PRECIOUS HERITAGE

Understanding the family, its new configurations and forms in the 21st century are not the same ones Don Bosco was familiar with in the 19th century; in fact, “anthropological and cultural change in our times influence all aspects of life and call for an analytic and diversified approach” (AL, 32).

In the condition of youth, in the family, in customs, in the way of conceiving education, in social life and even in religious practice itself, we can see the differences between Don Bosco’s time and the present. Even so, the family continues to be a key factor in society today and in the education of the new generations.

Wishing to be faithful to its vocation, the Salesian Congregation, enlightened by the Magisterium of the Church and based on its rich tradition, is called to propose a renewed Preventive System, to better serve the young people of our time, by developing **a method and a familiar face through living and working together** in the EPCs.

One of the attitudes and mentalities to be converted is that of switching from a family considered only as the recipient of pastoral care to the idea that the family is an **active participant in the mission** that must be involved in the Educative and Pastoral Community. (GC28, 15a).

General Chapter 28 (2020) gives voice to the requests presented by young people and clearly expresses: "We are aware that many times we fail to satisfy this very real 'nostalgia for community' that young people and families have: they ask us for time, and we give them space; they ask us for relationships and we provide them with services; they ask us for fraternal life and we offer them structures; they ask us for friendship and we provide activities for them. All this commits us to rediscovering the riches and potential of the 'family spirit'" (AGC 433, p. 72-73).

As educators we are well aware of the importance of creating a family atmosphere for the education of children, adolescents and young people. "Like Don Bosco, we still have to cultivate the art of taking the first step, eliminating distances and barriers and giving birth to the joy and the desire to see each other again, to be friends. This art also consists in creating, with patience and dedication, an atmosphere rich in humanity, a family atmosphere where young people feel very free and able to express and be themselves, joyfully assimilating the values that are proposed to them. This pedagogy of family spirit is also a school of faith for young people. We offer love and unconditional acceptance, so that they may discover, progressively and from an option of personal freedom, trust and dialogue, as well as the celebration and community experience of faith" (AGC 433, p. 27).

Therefore, **the family spirit that characterises the Preventive System:**

- ▮ *develops through meaningful relationships* such as: pastoral fatherhood and motherhood, presence, assistance, closeness, fraternity, help, mutual appreciation, dialogue, forgiveness, realism, an environment that heals wounds, the overcoming of ideological positions, a unifying project.
- ▮ *is made visible with recognizable proposals* having a positive atmosphere, an environment that adapts to the individual and the group, resorting to pastoral creativity that focuses on celebratory and festive moments.

All this is linked to the faith in a greater fatherhood that guarantees and establishes our relationships, so that we do not forget, but repeat, that this relational goodness does not depend on our own efforts, but first and foremost on grace.

In our Youth Ministry we believe that we can seize the opportunities that our educative mission offers us: on the one hand, *the possibility of bringing together young people and families* around the same civil and spiritual values; on the other hand, *the commitment to create a family oratory environment*. Consequently, “pastoral care has the task of realizing in history the Church’s universal maternity through concrete and prophetic gestures of joyful and daily acceptance that make her a home for the young” (FD, 138).

We intend to offer a peaceful and harmonious environment of people, structures, material places, tools and above all an atmosphere capable of involving young people in an intense family atmosphere.

“Only a pastoral programme capable of a renewal based on the care of relationships and the vigour of the Christian community will be important and attractive to young people. In this way the Church will be able to present itself to them as a welcoming home, characterized by a family atmosphere, made up of trust and security” (EG, 288).

2 4

COMMUNICATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Another feature of a renewed Preventive System is **communication from the heart**. If education is a matter of the heart, then communication is the language of the heart. It consists in giving young people the opportunity to open their hearts and communicate what they experience and feel, in total freedom. Communication from the heart is the experience of feeling understood and supported. Those who work in the pastoral practice in concrete terms, from accompaniment to spiritual direction, from confession to a simple chat in the square, must promote this unique, original experience with every single young person. Therefore, the question arises: how can we accompany the “revolution” of puberty and the inner world of adolescents, by treasuring the experiences, in order to help young people in the maturing process?

It is necessary to make a transition from a personal openness **to opening the door of the hearts of others, while respecting personal history,**

experiences and generations. “God loves the joy of young people and invites them in particular to the joy that is lived in fraternal communion, to a sublime joy that shares with others, because “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35) and “God loves a cheerful giver”(2Cor 9:7)” (CV, 166-167).

Christus Vivit brings together different generations; in particular, it leads to a relationship between the young and the elderly, valuing **the significance that hope and memory**, renewal and tradition have in Christianity.

“If we journey together, young and old, we can be firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past in order to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future in order to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom” (CV 199).

Every Salesian house, therefore, must recognize and welcome the **intergenerational bonds** and, in particular, the gift of wisdom which has matured in the hearts of grandparents and the elderly, Salesians and laity, present in each of our houses and which constitute an opportunity to grow and strengthen the family spirit.

“If someone tells young people to ignore their history - *Francis* tells young people – to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that he himself holds out, doesn’t it then become easy to draw them along so that they only do what he tells them? [...] To do so, however, they need young people who have no use for history, who spurn the spiritual and human riches inherited from past generations and are ignorant of everything that came before them” (FT 13).

A key element underlying the exchange between generations in our EPCs is in fact the mutual recognition of the experience and the gift of education, especially that of adults towards young people with the assumption of responsibility.

What we need in the first place, however, is to implement a genuine renewal for all of us, a genuine conversion within an educative perspective, that of **promoting education to community life**. Valuing all the vocations present in the Church, joyfully welcoming the unique contribution that each

one has to offer for the good of the young, living the logic of an ongoing exchange of giftedness, outdoing each other in mutual appreciation are all goals that we have yet to achieve: the art of co-responsibility.

For the Salesian Youth Ministry, it is extremely important to live a spirituality of communion, which must be an agreement that allows the continuity and stability of the educative-pastoral proposal. Consecrated persons, lay people, families and young people together in a real apostolic co-responsibility. It is a matter of bringing out a well-defined relational style, a “relational spirituality” (according to the XXIV General Chapter, held in 1996) that had to be sown, cultivated and brought to maturity.



Working together according to an integrated pastoral care will demand **pastoral conversion** in order to transform the processes:

- ▶ From “doing for the young and their families” to “doing with the young and their families”.
- ▶ From a pastoral care made up of “disconnected events” to leading “a ministry lived in everyday life”.
- ▶ From “large group gatherings” to “responsible individual accompaniment”.
- ▶ From “we’ve always done it like this” to “thinking together according to Gospel values”.
- ▶ From co-responsibility in doing” to “co-responsibility in planning”.
- ▶ From simple “accepting” lay people and families to “valuing” their presence and contribution.
- ▶ From regarding the elderly as something to be thrown away to a meeting of commitment and dialogue between them and the young.
- ▶ From pastoral proposals exclusively and constantly dedicated to young people to pastoral proposals in which young people fit in with the rest of the community.

With respect to this last point, it is necessary to specify how widespread the risk is that young people will be systematically separated from the rest of the community (“Mass for the young”, “Mass for children” “Mass for adults”) with the danger that the end of the experience in the youth pastoral process will also mark the end of the youth’s ecclesial life. Participation in the liturgical-sacramental life requires initiation into the mystery, education not only to the celebration and language, the comprehensible signs and gestures, but also to the sense of community. For this reason, there is a need to consolidate a practice that can help initiate a natural transition for integration within the community.

SYNTHESIS

- ▶ The clear analogy between young John's family experience and the family atmosphere he created in Valdocco as an adult suggests a few of the treasures of the family reality of the Salesian charism, which we can assume and pursue today with greater awareness. In fact, the spiritual and apostolic experience of the Valdocco Oratory forged a way of being and doing, of living and working, of communicating the Gospel and collaborating in the salvation of young people, which has been called the Preventive System and its source of origin is pastoral charity, "apostolic impetus that makes us seek souls and serve God alone" (Const. 10).
- ▶ In this chapter we have seen how a pastoral program capable of renewal is mainly based on the care of relationships and on communication from the heart for which it is necessary to open the door of the hearts of others, while respecting personal history, experiences and generations.
- ▶ The Salesian Congregation is called to propose a renewed Preventive System to better serve the young people of our time, by developing a method and a familiar face that allows us to live and work together in the EPC. The best educative environment to live in synergy with families in the EPCs is precisely the one that follows the family model: it is the external expression of interior and charismatic communion, which reproduces the "experience of the home", where feelings, attitudes, ideals and values are communicated daily by examples.
- ▶ Living in the family and as a family in every environment is not simply a strategic pastoral option, which today is very urgent, rather it is a way of fulfilling our charism and an objective to be privileged in our apostolic mission whose primary objective is the education and evangelization of young people.

**INVESTING IN
THE EDUCATION OF YOUTH**
TO BUILD THE FAMILIES
OF TODAY AND TOMORROW

CHAPTER



A key element for the creation of the Salesian Youth Ministry is the community, which involves young people and adults, parents and educators in a family atmosphere, **to the point of becoming an experience of the Church**: a communion that experiences the various gifts and services as complementary realities, in mutual reciprocity, at the service of the same mission.

The Educative-Pastoral Community is one of the forms, if not the form, in which the family spirit is embodied. In it, the Preventive System becomes operational in a community project. As a large family that is responsible for the education and evangelization of young people in a specific territory, the EPC is the actualization of that intuition which, at the origin of the Salesian charism, Don Bosco often repeated: *"I have always needed everyone's help"*. Starting from this conviction, from the earliest days of the Oratory, he built around himself a family-community that did take into account the diverse cultural, social and economic conditions of its collaborators and in which young people themselves are the protagonists.

We have seen that Don Bosco constitutes around him, from the earliest days of the Oratory, a community-family in which young people themselves are the protagonists. **The EPC is the Salesian way of being present among the young and of being an experience of Church** (FR, 109): being and living as a big family that acts in communion, sharing and co-responsibility, having at heart the education and evangelization of younger generations.

Today, one of the most urgent and primary tasks of the EPC is to value the family and to support it, to plan together with it in mutual dialogue. This requires a renewed alliance between the family and the 'educative places' (oratories, parishes, schools, etc.).

In the educative-pastoral practice, as in family life, **the processes of education and evangelization are neither juxtaposed nor does either of them dominate as successive processes which are mutually exclusive.** They are not delegated as distinct and incommunicable responsibilities. One simply educates, but as a believer. One evangelizes,

but as an educator according to the situation of the youngsters. The two dimensions come together in free and variable ways because they involve the witness of the educator and parents, the promptings of the environment, what has been learned from listening to the youngsters' questions and concerns, the sharing of life experiences enlightened by faith, the availability to commitment in service.

In this strongly relational dynamic, however, it is necessary to emphasize that **the family is the first and indispensable educative community**, the nucleus of society and the Church. The education of young people is the original task of parents, connected to the transmission of life, and a primary duty with respect to the educative task of other subjects. **The role of the EPC is therefore proposed as a complement, not a substitute for the educative role of youngsters' parents.** From this point of view, therefore, every EPC should first of all strive to make parents aware of their educative responsibility.

Pastoral theology, in this process of accountability, enlightens us when it affirms that **the family is the recipient, context and subject of pastoral action.**

When we ask ourselves what we can do for families, we speak of it as an object of pastoral action; when we ask ourselves what the best family conditions are for an effective pastoral action that includes a humble attentiveness, with an uneducated/inexpert attitude, we speak of the family as a pastoral context; when we ask ourselves how to help families engage in the evangelization or education of their children and young people of the ecclesial community, we speak of families as the subject of pastoral action

3 2

AREAS IN WHICH FAMILIES CAN BE INVOLVED

Provided that pastoral action is developed in a project (SEPP) which is shared and implemented by an EPC, "a family that educates" should consider families not only as an urgent pastoral front to be cured, rather it should value it in concrete spaces where the educative-pastoral work with young people is planned.

Indeed, there are many structures within the Salesian houses in which the family is called to be protagonists and participants in the processes, starting with the presence in the **EPC Council**. The commitment in this collegiate body aims to incorporate the point of view of families and their experiences in order to plan and lead the journey of the whole EPC.

The EPC Council is not primarily an organization for formation, spirituality or study, but the place where the guidelines of the whole life of the EPC are outlined and then coordinated and verified. The features of a living and co-responsible Salesian Activity are expressed concretely in this Council, which requires a great degree of dialogue and cooperation between the various people that compose it.

A greater involvement of the family in the SEPP is needed in **devising and writing up the local Salesian Educative-Pastoral Plan (SEPP)** to ensure that the family is a beneficiary as the subject and not just the recipient of the planning of the Salesian Youth Ministry.

The EPC seen as the context in which relationships with families and their involvement can be experienced requires a renewal of mentalities and attitudes and a promotion of concrete areas of co-responsibility, participation and collaboration. Parent Associations, Family Groups, School-Family Cooperation Programs and other initiatives can be structured according to a wide range of proposals with different emphases: charitable and of service, formative, spiritual and of prayer, educative-pastoral. However, each action, with its own characteristics, is called to be a sign and stimulus for young people and to introduce a more fraternal style of personal relationships in the formative proposal that may reveal the family dimension of the EPC and the Church.

3 3

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE FAMILY IN THE EPC

This reflection leads us to question the originality of the family within the EPC. The family can occupy a specific place and for this reason we must seek synergies and meeting points; it is important to bring out **the particular contribution of the family within the interweaving of vocations that make up the Educative-Pastoral Community**.

Indeed, spouses, lay people and consecrated persons, are called to enlighten the Educative-Pastoral proposal starting from their specific and complementary vocation. Only this style of intimate communion can generate adults in the faith, capable of being responsible for the lives of others. Therefore, the action of the various components of the EPC cannot be limited to the Educative-Pastoral activities alone, rather it must be centred on the vocational dimension, the original and fundamental aspect of Salesian youth ministry.

Every man is called to build a meaningful life which is oriented towards true happiness. Don Bosco told his boys that he wanted them to be “happy in time and in eternity”. This can be achieved only if we allow ourselves to be enlightened by love, that love which, reinforced by the baptismal robe, calls every man to holiness.

Keeping this in mind, the contribution of family, parents and couples as vocation can be identified in at least three central themes: **love, life and education.**

If the deepest vocation of the family is the love between two people who love each other and decide to plan a journey of life together, life and education will be the specific contributions of the family to enrich the Educative-Pastoral Community and its Salesian Educative-Pastoral Plan. In a nutshell, what we need to do is to *weave together in a wise and prudent way the four pillars of the Salesian charism*, which are summarized in the oratorian criteria – a home that welcomes, a parish that evangelizes, a school that educates for life, and a playground for meeting friends - *with the three dimensions that are proper to family life.*

3 3 1

The uniqueness and beauty of the family: a vocation to love

The strategic contribution of families is embodied firstly in the context of education to love: affective education and mutual self-giving. Educating means teaching young people to understand that the gift of self is the goal of their life, that the true adult is one who recognizes the grace he has received and then tries to give it in turn, giving his life for others. In the first place, it is fundamental to start from the **vocation to love**, “for we cannot encourage a journey of fidelity and mutual self-giving without

encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love” (AL, 89).

Don Bosco had experienced that the formation of his personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary spirit of dedication and goodness (“gift of self”) of his family in Becchi and he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities at the Valdocco Oratory among the poor and the abandoned young people.

Furthermore, the complementarity between the role of being a mother and father (which, we wish to recall once again, Mamma Margaret wonderfully managed to live and compensate in some way with her evangelical wisdom) is certainly necessary for a good education, where maternal accompaniment and paternal transmission are essential.

The family is invited to cherish some time, defend some space, plan a few moments to “celebrate love”. The real protagonist, therefore, is not love in itself, but people, the young and adults, who learn to love, accept and accompany each other. This great work is not “time-limited” but needs time; it does not live on deadlines, but it lives on hope and courage.

In this perspective, **young people need to be educated to abandon themselves to love**, with their family and the Oratorian principle of “a loving home” as their model.



The family: the cradle and sanctuary of life

Secondly, love becomes fruitful. Talking about the family means recalling a fundamental characteristic: **first of all, we are children**. As *Francis* said in a general Audience on 18 March 2015, this always brings us back to the fact that we did not give ourselves life but that we received it. **The great gift of life is the first gift that we received.** Love is always and absolutely a place of fruitfulness and generativity: it is precisely the biological configuration of man and woman that expresses an original predisposition towards giving life.

At the foundation-basis of every family is the covenant of marriage, in a profound conjugal covenant of service to life. Their mutual love is

confirmed by their respective fatherhood and motherhood, which makes them collaborators of God's marvellous creating power. The conjugal covenant involves a full and irrevocable "gift of self" to each other. **This fatherhood and motherhood in the family represents also a spiritual task and responsibility.** God's love is a creating, life-giving love. Throughout his earthly existence, Jesus, the very source of life (cf. Jn 11:25; 14:6.), never gets tired of giving life and regenerating life by calling every man and woman he meets to new life. Through their love, spouses also regenerate each other and together give life to their children and the world.

Love always gives life. For this reason, conjugal love "does not end with the couple [...]. The couple, in giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of their conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and mother" (AL, 165). However, the Church contains in her spiritual motherhood many families who, without necessarily expressing themselves in the procreation of a child, live their perfection or journey of holiness in mutual support and in generous and paternal/maternal openness in order to protect and care for the life of many others besides themselves.

Within the wealth of the Church, which obviously also includes a level of spiritual fruitfulness (cf. 1Cor 4:15), the family is therefore the generative nucleus par excellence, not by limiting its field of action within parental relationships but extending it outwards as a coherent response to its mission. Family witness becomes a precious seed for the vocational discernment of young people, support and hope for other families, dialogue and sharing with people called to consecrated life.



An educative journey outside and inside the home

Living the experience of interdependence between people and discovering the mutual necessity of each other in society means becoming aware of **this educative experience** through being "for each other". "God has given the family the job of "domesticating" the world and helping each person to see fellow human beings as brothers and sisters" (AL, 183). This awareness is the basis that allows society to be built, through the daily life

of relationships. The family is a demanding journey, for it is the bearer of educative values and a culture of solidarity in the different contexts in which children, adolescents and young people live.

The process of growth towards adulthood is less unambiguous and linear today, conditioned by the numerous transformations and frenetic pace that characterize the context in which we are immersed. Within this complexity, children, then teenagers and young people, observe and meet their own role models, in a composite gallery that shows, stages and conveys different contents and dimensions of values. Young people have many models to draw from, reference points that stimulate behaviours, expectations and desires. The real and concrete presence of families in the Educative-Pastoral Community reminds us of **the educative value of the family outside and inside the home**, and that parents are always the primary educators of their children.

- A.** Today, education involves enabling young people to understand who they should be, helping them to find their way in an unknown territory that increasingly gives them anxiety, discomfort, fear. Through a loving communication and the sharing of authentic relationships, *the family is certainly the interpersonal space where values are perceived and above all experienced and where they develop key elements of their personality, increasing their awareness of the meaning of life and trust in the future.*

Within this growth process, the proposal of faith cannot be something foreign, but must be a proposal which is essential for the integral education of the person. It is focused on helping children to overcome their self-centeredness by giving them the ability to make reasonable choices using increasing critical skills when faced with prevailing role models; by inspiring in the young, love for the truth; experiencing and sharing Christian conduct, oriented towards love of God and neighbour.

- B.** However, the educative dimension, the ‘taking care’ of others, therefore broadens one’s horizon of meaning and goes beyond the intra-family sphere, opening up to the extra-family sphere. In this regard, *family education contains a central challenge for the future: educating “honest citizens”, that is, to allow an active citizenship where our young people are active, responsible and*

supportive citizens. The family's daily commitment in forming the young generations to active citizenship passes through the valuing of intercultural education and peace, the respect for differences and the dialogue between cultures, support for the assumption of responsibility as well as solidarity and the care for the common good and the awareness of rights and obligations.

It must not be thought, writes Francis, that “Jesus was a withdrawn adolescent or a self-absorbed youth. His relationships were those of a young person who shared fully in the life of his family and his people». The Pope points out that the adolescent Jesus, “thanks to the trust of his parents ... can move freely and learn to journey with others.” These aspects of Jesus' life should not be overlooked in pastoral work with young people, “lest we create projects that isolate young people from their family and the larger community, or turn them into a select few, protected from all contamination”. Rather, we need “projects that can strengthen them, accompany them and impel them to encounter others, to engage in generous service, in mission” (CV, 26-30).

We cannot overlook the integral education of the family, who become co-responsible for the accompaniment and education of young people who nurture a love for justice, equality and fraternity. The concern for the Common Good and truth are also axes where the future marriage and stable family will direct their care for external love, an aspect that contributes to their stability to the extent that they give themselves freely to others.

This educative coherence on an internal and external level necessarily calls for the presence of mature and reliable adults. In fact, in the face of the great complexity and indefiniteness of adolescence, the adult world seems to be equally disoriented, to the point that, more or less consciously, it is now abdicating its educative role. As the psychotherapist Recalcati says: “adults seem to be lost in the same sea as their children”.

SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY: INVOLVEMENT AND INTEGRATION IN THE SALESIAN EDUCATIVE-PASTORAL PLAN (SEPP)

In the previous chapter we reflected briefly on the “Memoirs of the Oratory”, a document written and published by Don Bosco himself, which has become a fundamental guidance document in the life of our houses.

Now we would like to go more into depth on its importance, since it is in the Memoirs that he directs his attention to the young people he met in Valdocco during the day for various recreational, cultural and religious activities, and who resided there even before the beginning of workshops and boarding schools. With this text, Don Bosco wanted to propose not so much a set of rules, rather *an authentic life plan for both young people and educators*, thus creating, we could even say, the first educative plan; an operational convergence that will be definitively implemented according to his original vision of an oratory; the understanding of what the Preventive System was for St John Bosco and how it could be implemented in Salesian activities.

In other words, the **Salesian Educative-Pastoral Plan, before being a text, is a community process which tends to generate in the EPC a confluence** around common criteria, objectives and lines of action. The SEPP creates and strengthens in the EPC an awareness of the common mission and deepens the educative-pastoral vocation to be constantly shared and verified.

Planning not only helps to guide and continuously monitor pastoral action, but it also becomes a **process of identifying the community** which is increasingly inculturated and aware of the challenges posed by time and the territory. This is why it is essential for the family and therefore families, in their conception and development, to be included both as subjects capable of making their original contribution, and as recipients of special care and attention: **a participatory planning process with and for families.**

It is the task of the Salesian Educative and Pastoral Plan to take into consideration, both locally and at a provincial level, all the possible variations

of the families' participation and integration in the SEPP, where the proposal is structured around activities in which the family is the protagonist in favour of young people. **Below are a few of these interventions to be evaluated in the development of the SEPP.**



A youth ministry which generates adults in the faith and in life

By retracing the story of each couple and each family, we can find information and ideas for an understanding of the meaning of a conjugal spirituality that is not abstract but embodied in everyday experience. A tangible sign of this dimension is highlighted in **family prayer as an expression and nourishment** of the intimate communion of life and love that defines the conjugal covenant and animates the family community.

Pedagogy teaches us that the experience of faith, children received from their parents, catechists and educators often plays a decisive role in the subsequent development of their religious dimension. We must bear in mind that **the spread of early Christianity took place through a network of families**, and that even today the integration between faith and life is the most authentic way towards a person's maturity. We must point out that in many Christian parents, the awareness of being responsible for the Christian education of their children matures through the Word, narration, witness and prayer.

Conjugal and family life, lived according to God's plan, is in itself a "Gospel", in which children can "read" the face of God, his love for humanity and his patient and gratuitous love

Through the gestures of love, forgiveness, welcoming and solidarity of couples and the family, the "domestic church", the Lord himself speaks, welcomes, forgives and loves the people of today and shows solidarity with them. The educative commitment of parents is able to persuasively bear witness to a religious image of existence, only to the extent that they live it out. *Christian spouses are mutual witnesses of the faith*, as well as towards their children and all family members. They are and become witnesses through a life that is consistent with what they profess, with a style marked by the light of daily life. The family is the embodiment of God's unique love for the Church.

While it is essential to expect explicitly Christian parents to accompany the development of their experience of faith, we cannot ignore the numerous unmarried couples, marriages in which there has been no inheritance of faith or in which faith has left institutional spaces, which live in situations where the Seeds of the Word are not foreign to them, but hope and live the values of Jesus' Gospel. For these families who may have lost their vitality and which the Church asks not to neglect, it is also possible to build a journey of faith for themselves. and for their children through them and with them (cf. AL 78-79).

In this sense we can ask ourselves how our educative-pastoral Plans, which intend to evangelize young people **through various educative mediations**, can motivate, accompany and help families to make their specific contribution in the growth of the religious demands of their children.



A youth ministry with integral vocational dynamics

As it is now clear that the vocational sphere cannot be separated from family relationships and, from an ecclesial point of view, **cannot be detached from the processes of youth ministry**, we would like to highlight two risks we can still run in our pastoral action.

- A.** The first is to conceive youth ministry as an endless journey, which recycles people within it without a clear and conscious prospect of transition towards adulthood, also neglecting to deal with serious vocational discernment.

The Synod of Bishops on “Young people, the faith and vocational discernment”, in all its official documents, asked to **qualify all youth ministry from a vocational perspective** and to broaden the pastoral spaces of vocational animation, embracing the family vocation as well.

- B.** The second one concerns a narrow-minded vocational animation that does not take into account a comprehensive vocational proposal, but focuses only on the so-called vocations of “special consecration”, in other words, to religious life and the priesthood. Certainly, these life choices have their own characteristics, requiring special care and attention, which however should not be seen in an exclusive

and excluding way, but within an integral and integrated vocational dynamic whose underlying element is the call to love.

In the encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* it is written that **marriage is an authentic and original vocation**, in particular it is the call for spouses to be bearers of the gift of love that Christ crucified gives to his Church. It is therefore a true call from God, “the fruit of a process of vocational discernment” (cf. AL 72).

In this context, the great challenge we have before us is to create a **vocational culture** in every environment, according to the family spirit, so that young people can discover life as a call, a gift, a vocation to love and that all Salesian pastoral activity may become truly vocational (cf. CV, 254).

The Salesian Youth Ministry works to cooperate in the maturing of faith and life, and it is for this reason that it helps young people to dialogue with people who have reached a vocational maturity in the various states of Christian life.

Therefore, the youth ministry is called to **redesign itself in a vocational sense**, by also strengthening its bonds with the family, both by starting pastoral work with children and adolescents, and by completing their incoming and outgoing paths. Incoming, because the youth ministry receives its subjects from the stages of life preceding youth, that is, from infancy, childhood and adolescence. Infancy and childhood see the family and primary relationships as almost absolute protagonists, and adolescence generally marks the time of individual challenges and disputes with family life. Outgoing, because individuals who are completing the stage between youth and young adults, in the vast majority of cases, are called to live their Christian vocation through the creation of their own family. It is therefore normal to think that one of the fundamental tasks of youth ministry is to encourage young people to take on the responsibility of adult life which is specified in a privileged way in the assumption of family responsibility.



A youth ministry that takes care of youth with “family poverties”

At the origin of the charism is the care St. John Bosco had for young people without families in Turin. Don Bosco was able to create an “adoptive

family” around them, that was capable of giving them back the love and education necessary to rehabilitate them to full and mature growth.

Even today, in many parts of the world, Salesian youth ministry deals with young people who do not or can no longer maintain ties with their family of origin and, moreover, more and more efforts are being made to guarantee an educative intervention that takes into account the youth’s family as a possible ally and partner.

The Salesian tradition affirms that from the beginning, Don Bosco, having fully understood the importance of the family in educating the young, established his educative work as a **family for young people without a family and “a parish for young people without a parish”**.

In the memos that Don Bosco sent to the Holy See to obtain the approval of the Salesian Congregation, he always emphasized: “In 1841 the Congregation had its beginning in a simple catechism lesson, a festive courtyard, to which a house for poor craftsmen was added in 1846, forming a private institution like a big family “ (FS, pp. 80-81).

From a charismatic point of view, there is still a need for a specific focus on the family, because **material, cultural, moral and spiritual poverties, sometimes even “family poverty”**, are often closely related to family issues.

The social reality we live today takes into account these poverties, as there is a segment of society that has to face *the reality of living without a family and/or in more disadvantaged homes*. Everything seems to indicate that this tendency is well known: children who are left without parents at a very young age; only children who, due to unresolved affective immaturity, will not form a family of their own, thus reaching old age alone; scattered families, whose members live thousands of miles away; families who have separated as a result of episodes of violence.

Because “the **feeling of orphanhood** that so many young people live with is more profound than we think - Francis said in the Audience of 28 January 2015 - They are orphaned in the family, because their fathers are often absent, also physically, from the home, but above all because, when they are present, they do not behave like fathers. They do not converse

with their children. They do not fulfil their role as educators. They do not set their children a good example with their words, principles, values, those rules of life which they need like bread”, and they are also orphaned “in the civil community. Young people are thus deprived of safe paths to follow, of teachers to trust in, of ideals to warm their hearts, of values and of hopes to sustain them daily. They become filled perhaps with idols but their hearts are robbed; they are obliged to dream of amusement and pleasure but they are not given work; they become deluded by the god of money, and they are denied true wealth”. Jesus made a promise to his disciples: “I will not leave you orphans” (Jn 14:18) »; we are asked not to leave young people orphans and to give them a family; to give them a community in which there are authoritative adults that can help them grow with “a true generative strength”.

Salesian youth ministry, therefore, is called to take care of those young people who are most in need, but also of their “distant” or “needy” families with a **faithful approach which is true to the charism, and therefore preventive and missionary**. An approach that is capable of increasing the affective and educative solidity of families, protecting against breakdowns and abuse, and missionary because it is capable of reaching out to the family realities of young people in their present situation and condition, seeking to accompany them with patience, prudence and love.

We must initiate a **pastoral ministry**, which called theologically is “**adoptive**” (expression of the American Chap Clark, a well-known teacher and consultant); a pastoral ministry aimed at creating communities capable of accepting every child, every young person, and every adult, so that they all know they have a home ... a place where they can find out who they are and how they are able to make their contribution. In other words, a family; a community in which we breathe an ethos of family mutual aid and we learn “closeness, care and respect for others”, and recognize that we live alongside others “who are worthy of our concern, our kindness, and our affection” (AL 276).

The pastoral charity of Don Bosco’s Preventive System, applied to the care for the family, is not a feeling or simply an impulse of the soul, rather it is a precise attitude, which involves decision and maturity. A steadfast and durable charity, which can maintain and restrain, support and caress.



A youth ministry which accompanies the love of young couples/families

Specific attention should be paid to young couples/families, starting from the accompaniment of engaged couples, newlyweds and parents, who in the early years of their children's life need to be particularly assisted in assuming this gift and educative task in a responsible way, not to mention those young people who are creating a family and are not bound by the sacrament of marriage. All these cases include delicate phases of personal life and life as a couple, in which it is appropriate to guarantee specific accompaniment by the whole community, both by couples and single adults, as well as consecrated persons.

It is obviously advisable to interact and connect with traditional initiatives, with regard to the many concrete proposals initiated in the area, for example marriage preparation courses.

Young couples are not only the objects of pastoral care, but also the subjects of pastoral care in general and youth ministry in particular. These couples – at least, the more solid, mature and committed ones – can be a unique resource for preparation courses for marriage and family life, even within the “youth ministry courses”. In fact, since they too are young, they can be **witnesses of an experience capable of eliciting identification and imitation** for other young people.

At the two Synods on the family, there was talk about *remote preparation, proximate preparation and immediate preparation for marriage*. This breakdown, already indicated by the magisterium of John Paul II, has a strictly practical-explanatory purpose aimed at emphasizing the complexity of the stages of maturation of people's emotional life and the importance of specific and suitable accompaniment for each of them. It goes without saying that it would be a grave error to delegate to individual pastoral sectors the care of such a decisive path for building the history of each person. Therefore, the youth and family ministry, enlightened by the vocational perspective, must cooperate to encourage mature and conscious life choices.

This path can be represented with the image of a funnel and therefore an increasingly stringent and clearly addressed progression. It begins

with remote preparation, which from an early age helps us to enter, first of all with an ever-growing awareness, the affective-relational sphere through family life experiences and subsequently supplemented by other relationships with educationally significant figures. Subsequently, immediate preparation focuses on the theme of choice, and here the intersection with the vocational sphere becomes ever more intimate and binding. For the effectiveness of this delicate passage, the paths of engagement and the verification of one's own vocational choice must absolutely be encouraged. Finally, in immediate preparation, all issues related to marriage and building a family are explored.

In this context, **sacramental pastoral care** is of particular importance. Whenever possible, this preparation should include specific itineraries that include both moments of personal and community encounters, in which several married couples are involved together, with the aim of allowing all participants to experience a reawakening, verification and deepening of their faith and their vocation. Particular attention should be paid to the many families who approach the sacrament of marriage after many years of cohabitation and who are often accompanied by the presence of children. In the latter case, the presence of children and the awareness of living a responsible motherhood and fatherhood can be a great help as the culmination of their response to a vocation of love and acceptance in faith of the gift that God is entrusting to their responsibility.

Not only are these passages connected to each other and nourish each other, but they also need to be embraced by an educative and pastoral community that takes charge of the person in the complex relationship of each of its dimensions, in every stage of growth, including the delicate transition, particularly dear to the Salesian charism, from youth to adulthood. All this must be seriously taken into account: it is a call to create in every EPC an environment of family, acceptance and faith and adequate space for vocational discovery and orientation, all within the implementation of the SEPP.

For many young couples, **the first years of marriage**, in addition to being decisive for the entire conjugal and family journey, are a time of initiation and adjustment as regards both the experience of conjugal love and the encounter with the new life of children. Moreover, they are often marked by problems and difficulties concerning employment and housing and the difficulty in having children. These years are full of

resources because they are years of enthusiasm, of the first steps of a life together, of serenity, of a desired intimacy lived in equilibrium, of the response to the desire to accomplish long-cherished projects and dreams, of the opening up of new perspectives also in relation to growth in the faith, of the joy and responsibility related to the procreation of a new life, of the perception of the gift of a child and of the religious dimension engraved in his generation.



A youth ministry that teaches affections and relationships

The world of affections needs to be molded and “refined”, so to speak, by an educative task that does not so much involve concepts to be instilled, rather experiences to be shared. A good and constant formation in love is essential for the development of every vocation. **To accompany young people towards affective maturity, an entire community is necessary.**

In particular, spouses with their own journey of life and faith, laid out within the Salesian charism, are called to bear witness to love as self-giving to others; to witness this affective context in which the first experience of love and relational commitment is lived, and the first foundations are built in affective development in relation to oneself and to others, therefore, affective education, education to love and sexuality and the mutual gift of self begin within the family environment. The first and fundamental sexual education that is offered to young people ordinarily takes place on the basis of the witness of people who establish relationships with them, in other words, what they convey with their lives.

Therefore, our task is to help young people understand that love transcends romanticism and can rise to various relational levels, such as friendship, and can also be evident in altruistic actions and behaviour. Therefore, it does not thrive on perfection, rather it needs a lengthy and patient procedure, which requires enthusiasm and the desire to move forward, to get to know each other and accept each other, to grow, to forgive each other, to start over again, to constantly take on new challenges, to let oneself be accompanied and accepted by others.

We cannot forget to make reference to the cross. The cross is the bed of perfect Love. In the Angelus of 20 June 2020, *Francis* reminds us that “There is no true love without the cross, that is,

without a personal price to pay. Many mothers, many fathers who sacrifice a great deal for their children, and bear true sacrifices, crosses, because they love them, say this". "He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me". (Mt 10,38).

Today we are immersed in a cultural horizon which, in the name of a misleading concept of freedom, pushes us to consider the various dimensions of the person separately. The great challenge is to propose the vocation to love in its relational complexity of body, soul and spirit. In particular, the bodily aspect constantly risks being understood according to demeaning models of efficiency, linked to image and performance, thus completely losing sight of the identity function that reveals how every woman and every man, in their difference and complementarity, have been made for communion and self-giving. The perspective for classifying sexuality correctly, therefore, can only be that of chastity, understood not so much as a sterile and meaningless renunciation, rather as the *acquisition of the ability of self-giving and responsibility, passing from a perspective of selfishness and possession to one of openness to others and altruism.*

The last necessary step is a reference to **adolescence, a very delicate and transitional phase**. Whereas when we talk about puberty, we have rather precise bio-physiological "limits", which approximately identify the period between 11 and 13 years old as the apex, subsequently we enter a world that becomes more and more difficult to define: adolescence. Certainly, it continues to be an age in which youth show an ambivalence of feelings: desire for personal autonomy and authenticity, intellectual curiosity in which the deep need for truth is expressed. It is a period of life characterized by the coexistence of strong emotions and strong conflict which, in order to be experienced like any other "transition" process, needs authoritative adults, who are aware of their role, even when they have to say "no".



A youth ministry which encourages the family as a "field hospital"

Salesian youth ministry is called to promote **mutual support among families**, through the structures and networks of solidarity that the Educative-Pastoral Community creates and encounters in the area.

“In order for the family to be ever more a true community of love, it is necessary that all its members should be assisted and trained in their responsibilities as they face the new problems that arise, in mutual service, and in active sharing in family life” (FC, no. 69a).

The family, as the core foundation of society, can and must play a precious and, in many ways, irreplaceable role in solidarity with others. In addition to the task of helping and supporting its members who are unemployed or in precarious situations, the commitment that the family is called to put into practice in relation to the numerous situations of poverty and hardship that involve an increasing number of people is fundamental. Within the EPC, families, through a sober lifestyle based on consumption models that respect the dignity of every man, are the most suitable to testify to this *specific capacity for service and attention to the needy*.

Particular attention will be given to **migrant families**, to respect for their culture, to their integration in our society, to encouraging, as far as possible, their reunification with all family members, to the religious and school education of their children. EPCs must be open to their acceptance and integration, both through concrete and simple gestures, and by soliciting institutional interventions, also cooperating with the appropriate associative forms. In this regard we must not forget Francis' words: “the deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of every human person regardless of origin, race or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love” (FT, 39).

In the Christian community, the number of the **so-called farthest away** is greatly increasing, mainly those people who, still moved by a vague ‘traditional’ religiosity, knock on the doors of our Salesian parishes to ask for baptisms, first communions and confirmations, weddings and funerals. These are precious occasions to motivate and provoke a journey to re-encounter the God who saves through the Word, the appropriate message and the fraternal relationship we offer as a Church.

Families as well need to be involved in a rethinking of sacramental pastoral care, with the aim of using these opportunities for contact to witness the beauty of Christian life through proposals for the first evangelization.

Some EPCs are experimenting and reflecting on how **the presence of wounded, but faithful, families in the EPC** has a very high educative

potential for young people. In various communities, some women, who have separated from their husbands but are faithful to their marriage, have been included in the educative processes of young people, thus becoming witnesses of how the sacrament of marriage has nevertheless been a cornerstone of their lives.

In any case, the goal to be pursued is to think of families who “take care” of the most vulnerable, who weave bonds of proximity and reciprocity, going beyond the close circle of family and friends, in order to open up to each other, to all others, to everyone, the other “neighbour”, as well as the “distant and unknown” other, whom they can feel connected to by new forms of solidarity and belonging, capable of crossing boundaries, overcoming distances and differences. This “other” may be a family with a past inhabited by fragility or problems, as well as a vulnerable family experiencing a moment of unexpected crisis with repercussions on various levels of existence.

In this sense, the presence of **families who are welcoming towards children, adolescents and young people is fundamental**. The possible implementations of this option include centres for minors, “family homes”, networks of foster and adoptive families, missionary and solidarity family groups and associations.

Francis says that “our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us” (FT, 89) and families can be a prophetic sign of a new welcoming and inclusive world.

In short, it is essential to welcome every family, whatever their condition may be. Youth ministry aims to be a good Samaritan for all families. **Welcoming, accompanying and loving are the three foundations of youth ministry for families today.**



A youth ministry which offers formation and support paths

All that has been said regarding the Salesian Youth Ministry and Family can be achieved through **the initiation of formation processes for each and every** member of the EPC: both for consecrated Salesians and for lay people who support the development of SEPP and the Salesian Family.

In the face of the whirl of change in socio-educational conditions, today formation is a continuing necessity that involves continuous updating and permanent learning skills for constant updating that is appropriate for the various situations. Moreover, in the Youth Ministry and Family in particular, a further effort is required because, even if we are not talking about something completely unknown, for many it is certainly an awareness to be rediscovered or further investigated.

Therefore, we are talking about a formation that first and foremost allows us to work together, developing the grace of being a vast movement with many gifts to share. Some specific formative needs certainly arise, such as the need to strengthen continuously the abilities of personal and community discernment and accompaniment. It is also appropriate to identify suitable tools that allow us to understand the complexity and differences of both young people and families, both locally, as in the EPCs, but also at a provincial level.

The Salesian Youth Ministry is invited to recognize the specific needs and resources of today's family, to interpret them according to the illumination of the Word and the Spirit, in order to choose the best forms and methods to accompany young people and families. All this requires *specific formation, with special regard, according to a charismatic criterion, to personal formation which is always enlightened by accompaniment in vocational discernment.*

As we have seen in Chapter 2, there is certainly also the need for further formation on the Preventive System, the heart of the Salesian charism, to be understood both as a proposal for spirituality and as an educative practice. The trinomial "reason, religion and loving kindness", indeed, is not only an educative plan of integral formation or a practical method that education must use, but it also reveals the fundamental traits of a Salesian Youth Spirituality to be discovered, lived, revived, and renewed continuously. The operators of the Salesian Youth Ministry involved with and for families are also called to systematic formation and constant updating on the various areas of the Salesian mission, so that this commitment may be coherently incardinated in the charism.

Therefore, according to the perspective of the youth ministry and family, in the light of the tools offered by the Congregation, such as the "Frame of Reference for the Salesian Youth Ministry", and from the synodal journey

of the Church in recent years, with the documents connected to the two synods on the family and the one on young people, the faith and vocational discernment, **new formative itineraries in the youth ministry** must be devised in close collaboration between the local and provincial levels.

SYNTHESIS

- ▶ In this chapter we began by emphasizing how the EPC is connected to the family spirit, to our way of living the Church and to the community dimension of mission. In it, the Preventive System becomes operational in a community project where the family spirit is embodied. So today, one of the most urgent and primary tasks of the EPC is to nurture the family and support it by planning together with it in a mutual dialogue. This requires a renewed alliance between the family and the 'educative places'.
- ▶ The education of young people is the primary task of parents, connected to the transmission of life, and a primary duty with respect to the educative task of other subjects; the role of the EPC is therefore proposed as a complement, not a substitute for the educative role of youngsters' parents.
- ▶ Pastoral theology, in this process of accountability, affirms that the family is the recipient, context and subject of pastoral action. This reflection leads us to question the originality of the family within the EPC, which can occupy a specific place. The contribution of vocation as family, parents and couples can be identified in at least three central themes: love, life and education.
- ▶ For this reason, both locally and at a provincial level, it is necessary to start planning formative courses for operators/educators, integrating families into the SEPP, where the educative and pastoral proposal is structured around activities in which the family is the protagonist in favour of young people. These paths must include dialogue, the methodology of family pedagogy and the Salesian Spirituality as their central core.

- ▶ For this reason, it is essential for the youth ministry to redesign itself together in a vocational sense; at the same time, it is necessary to enter into the daily life of families, speak their language, remain next to the fragility of relationships and recognize the hardships present in the lives of many of them, taking care of young people without families, young families, the most fragile family situations (from poverty, inequality and vulnerability) by promoting solidarity among families. It is then essential to accompany the love of young couples/families by taking care of them and planning a good and constant formation in love for the development of every vocation.
- ▶ All that has been said regarding the Salesian Youth Ministry and Family, in order to be realised, the launching of formation processes for all the members of the EPC: for consecrated Salesians and for lay people who support the development of SEPP and the Salesian Family.

Concluding remarks

Therefore, more than being a sector in which we can bring together our efforts, families are a *privileged angle from which youth ministry can be rethought and planned in a more realistic manner*. This leads us to embrace the family diversity that is present in the works and to recognize its great value through which our young people will be able to experience the joy of love and giving. Young people come from a family that becomes a mark, a school, an environment of faith and a privileged place for lifelong formation; they continuously access the EPC where they feel welcome, at home, appreciated. Subsequently, they build their own family, or a new family; this suggests that in our life path we have several “family appointments” and we want to accompany them.

