

“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10)

‘GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS’

INTRODUCTION

When I was thinking about the Strenna for this year, with some other Salesian confreres, I clearly saw how important and fascinating this subject was. A very simple title but something broad and complex to be developed. After the work of the last few weeks I saw this even more clearly. It appears to me to be a subject fascinating, useful and complex.

I really believe that in our Salesian Family, in each one of our groups, in the different countries in which we find ourselves, and with the most varied works, we need to examine those aspects which are concerned with the formation of the Christian and the citizen..

→ We need to make ever more explicit the message that our mission is one of Evangelizing and Catechizing. Without this we are not the Salesian Family. We might be ‘providers of social services’, but not apostles of boys and girls, of teenagers and of young people.

→ At the same time, it is more than clear that in our mission as educators we cannot ‘live in a vacuum’ as though it had nothing to do with life, with justice, with equality of opportunity, the defence of the weak, the promotion of a life that is civilized and decent. This aspect nowadays is more urgent than ever, at a time when the society in which we are living does not believe very much in these values. When we are educating, what side are we on? Precisely because of the importance of this question, reflection on this year’s Strenna is so relevant and necessary.

→ Added to this there is a new obstacle. Can that twofold educational expression of Don Bosco, that twofold aim that guided him in nineteenth century Italy be considered still valid in a “Salesian world” in which the Family of Don Bosco can find a home in countries with different religions or with a non-Christian majority, or in post-Christian societies, or even in countries that are officially secular or anti-religious?

As far as this last aspect is concerned, a Strenna speaking about being Christians in non-Christian societies, some questions have been sent to me from some of these Regions in which this is the case. I present them to you, since they certainly contain some very pastorally sensitive issues. Here are some of them.

In the Provinces with a large non-Christian majority (other religions, agnostics or those indifferent to religion), this Strenna will be well received to the extent that it succeeds in offering some opportunity for reflection and some ideas for educational activity in settings that are ‘non-Christian’ or ‘post-Christian’. How might it be possible to present this educational expression of Don Bosco **in such a way that our non-Christian laity and young people can accept it, understand it, follow it and put it into practice?**

In Don Bosco's times, in the context of a society with a Christian majority, being socially useful was a sign of a genuine religious spirit.

On the other hand, nowadays in the 134 countries in the world in which the charism has spread we feel the need to maintain a balance in an attitude of openness and inclusion in the educational process 'for and with' non-Christian young people and laity, starting from the first **proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by means of the Preventive System that creates relationships, a family atmosphere in which education takes place and the faith is transmitted by osmosis.**

It is necessary to take into account the **pluri-cultural and the multi-religious settings** of the 40 Salesian Provinces which are living in minority Churches among the great religions of the world, especially in Asia and in Africa.

It is not enough to repeat what Don Bosco did in the nineteenth century. **We have to learn from the experiences of the Salesians who today are living the Preventive System in countries that have a non-Christian majority.** They certainly have a wealth of life experience in which they have learned how to interpret the thinking of Don Bosco in multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts which our Father could never even have imagined.

Good Christians and upright citizens in contexts with a non-Christian or post-Christian majority.

We can ask ourselves some specific questions:

- How do you put Don Bosco's expression into practice with non-Christian youngsters and lay co-workers?
- How do you keep a balance between openness to non-Christians and the first proclamation of the Gospel?
- How do you translate the concept of the 'good Christian' for a majority of lay co-workers who are non-Christians?
- How do you put into practice the pillar of 'Religion' in the multi-religious contexts in which we find ourselves?
- How do you educate the young and the lay people in the three pillars of the Spirituality of the Preventive System of Don Bosco: Reason –Religion–Loving Kindness?
- How do you translate into daily life the 'good Christians' of Don Bosco in the mission shared with so many non-Christians?
- Does the Rector Major believe that the Preventive System of Don Bosco can be fully lived out and put into practice also with lay co-workers of other religions?
- How do you include non-Christians in the Educative Pastoral Community (EPC)?
- What do these non-Christians who are involved in the Salesian educative mission themselves say?
- What are the most attractive elements/expressions of the practice of the Preventive System of Don Bosco?

I think that during my development of the Strenna you will find some suggestions that respond in one way or another to these questions that have been sent to me, and that are obviously more than legitimate.

1. GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS in Don Bosco¹

Some people will ask whether this educational expression was used and put forward by Don Bosco himself. Well, this is one of the issues dealt with by Fr Braidò with academic rigour. He it was who made people understand that Don Bosco had always followed this particular educational path or process, expressed in these precise words or very similar ones, making slight changes on the basis of the people he was speaking with. However, the subject of the relationship between the education of the young and the good of society as well as that of eternal salvation could be considered a constant. In fact this two-fold expression was used in the course of the years in the following different versions.

→ *Making them upright citizens and good Christians (1857)*

→ *Making themselves good Christians and upright workers (1857)*

→ *So that they might all become good citizens and good Christians (1862)*

→ *Making them all good Christians and upright citizens (1872)*

→ *Educating youth to the dignity of the Christian and to the sense of duty of the good citizen (1873)*

→ *They become good Christians and upright citizens (1875)*

→ *Doing what little good I can for abandoned youngsters, making use of all my efforts so that they might become good Christians as far as religion is concerned and upright citizens in civil society (1876)*

→ *Preparing good Christians for the Church, upright citizens for civil society (1877)*

In many of his writings, especially in his letters, Don Bosco has left behind, clearly defined, the two-fold educative-pastoral expression, using the following formulas (always according to Don Braidò, as the scientific-historical source):

**Making them good citizens and good Christians is the purpose we are giving ourselves;*

**Making them good Christians and upright citizens;*

**They are ... useful citizens and good Christians;*

**They become good Christians upright citizens;*

¹ The commentary which I am presenting and which will refer to the two-fold expression 'Good Christians and Upright Citizens' that is so specifically Salesian because it is according to the heart of Don Bosco, has been studied at depth and amply described by Pietro Braidò, *Buoni cristiani ed onesti cittadini*, RSS, vol. 24, 1994 (p. 36-42)

**When entering this Oratory a young person needs to persuade himself that this is a place of religion, in which the intention is to make good Christians and upright citizens;*
**Restoring them to civil society good Christians and good citizens;*
**Educated in Christian and civil virtues (...) making them good Christians and upright citizens;*
**It is a question of making them into upright citizens and good Christians;*
**Always living as good Christians and as wise citizens;*
**The hope that they become good Christians, upright and useful citizens;*
**Now they are good Christians and upright citizens;*
**I am delighted to know that you (...) are living as good Christians as honoured citizens;*
**Wherever you find yourselves show that you are always good Christians and honest men;*
**The purpose of our colleges is to form good Christians and upright citizens;*
**Then to be returned to civil Society good Christians, upright citizens;*
**They leave good Christians and fine citizens;*
**Returning them to Society good Christians and upright citizens;*
**Educating them in such a way as to make them good citizens and real Christians.*
**Good Christian and upright citizen;*
**Learning how to live as good Christians and as wise citizens;*
**Taught to live as good Christians and wise citizens;*
**They become good Christians, wise citizens;*
**Making them good Christians and useful citizens;*
**Continue therefore to be good Christians and wise citizens;*
**Giving to civil society useful members, to the Church virtuous Catholics, to Heaven fortunate inhabitants;*
**Making them good citizens and good Christians;*
**Restoring them ... to civil society good Christians, upright citizens;*
**They make the world see how you can ... be Christians and at the same time upright and hardworking citizens;*
**Teach them, educate them and so make them good Christians and upright citizens;*
**How many good sons, how many Christian and upright fathers, how many more better citizens might we not give to families, to the Church to society;*
**Making themselves good Christians and upright citizens;*
**Returning them to their families, to society, to the Church good sons, wise citizens, exemplary Christians;*

As we can see, as though it were a piece of music, the melody is always the same but there are different variations. Fr Braidò has presented it in an unequivocal manner in a study that enables us to understand that Don Bosco is not a theorist. He is a man of action. However, he is a man of action who ‘reflects’ on the significance of his pastoral activities. Therefore, while it is not surprising that the words he uses and the ideas expressed are simple and repetitive, it is obvious that the way he operates is along very specific lines with a very clear ‘theoretical’ awareness, both on the level of a knowledge of the situations and of the problems, and with regard to the practical solutions to be put into effect. These two aspects come to the fore with particular clarity in one of the expressions most dear to him and frequently repeated: ‘good Christian and upright citizen’.

1.1 GOOD CHRISTIANS Living with Faith in the Lord and under the guidance of the Spirit ...

If we go back to our beginnings when it was Don Bosco at the end of December who was giving the Strenna for the new year with personalised messages for each of the boys and the first Salesians, we can see how ‘living the faith’ was something that was the most precious and the most natural the first Oratory had to offer to someone living there, both to the boys

and to their teachers. It reflected a way of life in which the first Salesians, the Mammams of the Oratory, the lay people who helped and the youngsters were creating a real family in the same house.

Quite impressive is the number of Saints and Blesseds who were living in those poor places during Don Bosco's lifetime. It was a school of mutual holiness, a growing together in the faith.. If it is true, for example, that Don Bosco helped Dominic Savio to grow in the love of God, no less great is the influence of Savio and his companions on Don Bosco, on his 'ongoing formation' as a man of God. 'Faith is strengthened when it is given to others.'² From the reciprocal gift of a deeply lived faith comes the school of holiness that continues to nourish the spiritual journey of the Salesian Family throughout the world.

The harmony between faith and life is at the heart of the charism of Don Bosco on whose face and in whose life can be contemplated 'a splendid blending of nature and grace. He was deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth; and he was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and living as seeing him who is invisible'.³

'Living the faith' is nowadays the most precious gift we can share together, whatever might be our state of life, our age, our vocation and also our religion. In the ecclesiology of communion that nourishes and transforms the progress of the Church and which is being so greatly practised and encouraged by Pope Francis, the identity of each group and person is lived out and revealed *in becoming a gift for others*, as likewise in knowing how to welcome the gift of someone who is called to be a disciple of the Lord in whatever state of life and vocation.

For those of us who are consecrated persons in the Salesian Family, is not 'living the faith' at the centre and the heart of what we are called to be and to offer, incarnated in the specific nature of each particular vocation and of each person?

If we consecrated persons are not living symbols of the 'blending of nature and of grace,' of that fruitful encounter between the call and the love of God and the generous daily response freely given, on what other 'treasure hidden in the field' could one ever rely so that life might have meaning, indeed full meaning so as to become salt and light capable of giving taste and enlightening the lives of those who are living with us?

The Synod on Young People demonstrated with disarming clarity that what the younger generations are looking for from those who have dedicated their lives entirely to the Lord is to find 'shining and consistent witnesses.'⁴

2 *Redemptoris Missio*, 2

3 *SDB Constitutions and Regulations*, n. 21

4 Synod of Bishops, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*. Instrumentum Laboris, 175

But we need to say the same for the laity, the parents, the young people: if the faith is a gift, so too the life of faith is a gift. It is not the result of great personal skills and an iron like strength of will. Whatever our contribution, that may also form part of the dialogue between grace and freedom, it is never found outside the anticipatory love of God, of the discrete but effective presence of the Spirit, in each one, in the community, in the Salesian Family, in the Church, in the world, in history, in the whole universe. The Spirit is the creative force, and is the energy that brings to fruition, that from the grain of mustard seed makes the great tree of the Kingdom grow.

1.2. GOOD CHRISTIANS *living attentive to the God who speaks.*

‘There is no greater gift you can offer to another person than your total attention.’ This was the conclusion a wise missionary came to after many years of service in the feverish outskirts of a large city.

In many ways we are trying to rediscover the ability to listen, also an indispensable art for personal accompaniment. Learning to listen has been a strong incentive that the Synod on the Young offered to the whole Church.

And there is a kind of listening that has even deeper roots, and on it depends a large part of the quality of our listening to each other. This listening has its roots that set their sights on high. It is the ABC of every vocation, which is the coming together of a call and a response which is renewed at every new awakening.

Listening to God is a mystery that cannot be reduced to any simple exercise or particular moment. It happens ‘through the work of the Holy Spirit’ and usually it does not happen suddenly, but by a progressive maturing process that takes place through a series of long patient stages, like those the Scriptures speak about and which can be found in the lives of our saints.

There is a predisposition for listening to God, the more precious as it is more difficult in most of the social contexts in which we are living, marked by a constant superabundance of social media stimuli and by ever more intense rhythms of activities. The precious predisposition is that of ‘having a little silence’.

Silence is the grammar through which the language between God and man is expressed. There is a word that has always been different from all the others, the word with which He speaks to us: Sacred Scripture. This is never imposed, it always depends on our listening, on being in harmony with our heart, and on its familiarity with our being in silence with God. While listening to this Word, affections and thoughts begin to model themselves on what the Gospel reveals each day. Listening to God in the people around us and in the events that happen to us makes us more attentive and we see things at greater depth.

Along this path the consistency develops between what is heard and proclaimed and what is lived. Listening to God who speaks to us needs to be practised every day, as an artist or an athlete does in their area of specialized excellence.

1.3. GOOD CHRISTIANS with the need to *Evangelize and to offer the first proclamation and catechesis* ‘This Society’s origins are found in the simple catechetical instructions’ (BM IX, 35).

“He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young ... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls.”⁵ This testimony from the one who more than any other knew Don Bosco and ‘who went halves with him in everything,’ enables us to appreciate almost in a tangible manner the intensity of the pastoral love of our father. He never drew back in the face of the harshest challenges of poverty starting in the Turin prisons, where Cafasso has encouraged him to go ‘to learn how to become a priest’. At the same time he never held back from proposing the highest goals of spiritual growth to everyone, as much to Magone as to Savio, adapting the path to each one. In the language of today: ‘Imitating God’s patience we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom.’⁶

The modern tone of this pastoral approach is surprising, as it knows how to walk beside each young person, even those most tried and tested (we can think of the presence of the Salesian Family in refugee camps or among migrants), and to find precisely there the good soil for the seed of the Gospel, *without proselytism and without fear*, because faith and life have never ‘been divorced’ wherever there is fidelity to the charism that the Spirit has given to the Church with our family saints.

Pope Francis reminds us that we must never neglect the first proclamation nor postpone it in the hope of more suitable situations or of better times. He tells us:

‘This was something I emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and I consider it worth repeating here. It would be a serious mistake to think that in youth ministry “the kerygma should give way to a supposedly more ‘solid’ formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma” and incarnating it ever more fully in our lives. Consequently, youth ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ. It can do this in a variety of ways: testimonies, songs, moments of adoration, times of spiritual reflection on the sacred Scriptures, and even an intelligent use of social networks. Yet this joyful experience of encounter with the Lord should never be replaced by a kind of “indoctrination”’.⁷

Do we really believe in the importance of the first proclamation? Let us look at the world of youth in its totality: the extraordinary velocity of the constant changes travelling at digital-age speed that are creating a formidable diversity of cultures, of approaches to life, with a generation-gap far broader than in former times. Perhaps the world of someone born after 2000 is a territory still to be evangelized? The social network generations, already well beyond the young people of this millennium, born in the times of the internet, are waiting for someone who is capable of bringing them, for the first time, the light and the strength of the Gospel, speaking their language and being on their wavelength.

5 SDB Constitutions no. 21, quoting Don Rua on 24.8.1894

6 SDB Constitutions no. 38

7 Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 214.

‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ (Is 6:8). These ancient words of Isaiah could not be more modern if we think of them on the lips of the whole Church community addressed to us the Salesian Family, as to those who, because of their charism, by the gift of the Spirit, are born to be specialists in contacting young people, and ready to be with them as they are and where they are, even with a difference in religious belief. Drawing back in the face of this challenge is like withdrawing from the Salesian Family, from the spirit that Don Bosco has handed on to us.

We must be careful, however, not to confuse the first proclamation with something minimal, limited, so ‘innocuous’ as to leave no trace of itself behind.

Don Bosco often recalled that it all began with ‘simple catechetical instructions’. His life story, inseparable from that of the young people with whom he lived, shows with absolute clarity that ‘simple’ in no way means ‘superficial’.

When it comes to ‘personal experience of the love of God and of the living Jesus Christ’, often it is the young people themselves who become missionaries and evangelizers of those who accompany them because they are asking for a witness and a sharing of the life of faith that is authentic and profound.

In this lies the genius of Don Bosco: he remains accessible to everyone and with his boys is not afraid to focus directly on holiness; nothing less.

In this process a fascinating and demanding field opens up: making ‘catechism’ not just a series of necessary meetings for children and youngsters before they make their First Communion or are Confirmed; making ‘theology’ not just a series of examinations to be taken in order to be ordained priests. Catechesis is growing in the understanding of life enlightened by faith; theology is entering with mind and heart into the beauty of the mystery of God as it is revealed in Jesus. If, as members of the Salesian Family we can let ourselves become attracted by this ‘kindly light’ so as to fall in love with it and we again nourish our hearts and minds with these treasures, our way of being educators-pastors will also be enlightened. And what is more, I say that with this heart we will know how to be and to remain among the young and the families who practise other religions or who claim to be agnostics or atheists. Our attitude will be that of a real sharing and a simple witness to respect for different faiths.

As in the beginnings of the Oratory of Valdocco, growth in the faith can only happen in company: the more intense the spiritual journey of the one who is accompanying so too will be that of the youngsters and the people who, ‘*more by osmosis than by logical processes*’ will tend to follow in their footsteps. In its turn it will be the progress of his people that will urge the one who acts as pastor to grow more, and to take himself closer to the spring in order to respond to the thirst of the one who, often without words, asks for his help to meet the Lord.

1.4. GOOD CHRISTIANS living a true Salesian spirituality

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit initiated the time of the Church and of the mission. Thanks to the Spirit

spirituality and the mission go hand in hand. It is not possible to separate the mission from spirituality nor spirituality from the mission. For this reason when we do not succeed in living the mission and spirituality in an integrated manner most probably knocking at our door will come weariness and confusion and our being satisfied with “entertaining” the others with our activities, *without, however, managing to ‘touch’ the life of each one at any depth.*

Returning to the first love

Nowadays many sociologists talk about a society of weariness. Pope Francis says that we pastoral workers can also live tired out. Why do we become so weary? Someone might say we have an agenda full of occupations ... however ‘... The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable.’⁸ Evidently we should not seek the cause of our weariness in our agenda but in ourselves, in the lack of motivation and in the disconnection between the way we live the mission and spirituality.

In order to cure this weariness we need to understand the causes. Returning to one’s first love gives new life. We remember how Don Bosco too, in the last years of his life, saw that the Oratory of Valdocco had lost its first love, Therefore from Rome he wrote a letter to the boys and to the Salesians of the Oratory in which he compared the life and the joy of the first years to the present crisis. In the Oratory the joy, the life, the trust had been lost. The conclusion was that it was necessary to return to the first love.

A. Spirituality

It is true that the word spirituality is in fashion, however, it is equally true that this word is very ambiguous. We can see a reawakening of the desire for spirituality in places and contexts that are very diverse, even though many of the spirituality projects that are nowadays fashionable have nothing to do with Jesus and his Gospel.

In spite of this ambiguity, it needs to be recognised that the desire for spirituality can be the gateway to the Christian life for those searching for it. ‘In some young people, we can see a desire for God, albeit still vague and far from knowledge of the God of revelation. In others, we can glimpse an ideal of human fraternity, which is no small thing. Many have a genuine desire to develop their talents in order to offer something to our world. In some, we see a special artistic sensitivity, or a yearning for harmony with nature. In others, perhaps, a great need to communicate. In many of them, we encounter a deep desire to live life differently. In all of this, we can find real starting points, inner resources open to a word of incentive, wisdom and encouragement.’⁹

This attitude of openness leads us to ask ourselves what we as the Salesian Family are doing on behalf of these young people and adults who are “searching”. What we can offer is a little light and encouragement. This is an urgent concern especially in those contexts in which religious signs and symbols have lost their force and significance, even though these places are now to be found almost everywhere. Knowing how to communicate with those who are searching means building bridges of relationships. Perhaps this is what the Holy Father is asking for when he says: ‘Anyone called to be a parent, pastor or guide to young people must have the farsightedness to appreciate the little flame that

8 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 81.

9 Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 84

continues to burn, the fragile reed that is shaken but not broken (cf. *Is* 42:3). The ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father sees things; he knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young. Each young person's heart should thus be considered "holy ground", a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must "take off our shoes" in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the Mystery.'¹⁰

And we recognize very well in this approach the style and the way in which our beloved Father Don Bosco used to draw near and accompany his boys.

B. Christian Spirituality

In the vast field of spirituality, we have our place within Christian spirituality. There is a fundamental Christian spirituality the fruit of the essential message of the Gospel marked by the values most characteristic of each moment in the history of the Church. We cannot forget that Christianity is incarnated in history and aims to transform real people in their own cultural context. Therefore Christian spirituality ought to respond to the needs of each period of time, and must express itself in the categories of the present moment. And there can be no doubt that these values that flow from the Gospel in all contexts, in all cultures and at all times are very precious bridges of communication, dialogue and meeting with other religions.

The decisive point in the spiritual life is to discover the mystery of God in the world and in our life because 'God is at work in the history of the world, in the events of life, in the people I meet and who speak to me.'¹¹ Here we find the foundation of discernment. Because God is not found in idleness but is active, and the mission of the Church is to make sure that every man and every woman meets the Lord who is already Presence and is acting in their lives and in their hearts. Understanding the mission in this way, *the aim of youth ministry is to help every young person to come into contact with the mystery of God who is acting in history, in their lives and in their heart.*

Don Bosco always knew how to interpret the events of life from God's perspective. In order to live according to God's perspective a spiritual core is necessary which gives unity to a person, since a spiritual person is a person who, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, is a sound, unified, well-balanced person. In this way a spiritual person is conscious of being a child of God, has knowledge of the faith that makes it possible to perceive the mystery of God, the meaning of the world and of history, and to live the faith in a community of brothers and sisters at the service of the Kingdom of God.

What has been said helps us to appreciate and understand the extraordinary importance that Pope Francis gives in his Magisterium to spirituality. He deals with it in all his major documents:

→ The spirituality of the missionary disciple.¹²

→ Ecological spirituality.¹³

→ Matrimonial and family spirituality.¹⁴

10 *Ibid*, 67

11 Francis, *Angelus* on 28 October 2019

12 Cf. Francis, *EG*, 239-288

13 Cf. Francis, *LS*, 181-213

→ Holiness as the origin and goal of the spiritual life.¹⁵

Pope Francis says: ‘I hope that you will be serious enough about yourselves to make an effort to grow spiritually’.¹⁶ Because undoubtedly spirituality affects life. A life made up of dreams, experiences, relationships, plans and choices. We have to be able to help our young people to take the risk of dreaming and choosing; to live intensely and to experiment; to taste the experience of friendship with Jesus; to grow and mature; to live an experience of fraternity; to become committed; to be courageous missionaries.

C. Salesian Spirituality

We are speaking about a Salesian spirituality, as a charismatic expression within the ‘great river’ of *Christian spirituality*. The noun is Christian spirituality and the adjective is the concrete charismatic style.

Salesian Spirituality cannot be understood without appreciating the spiritual experience of Don Bosco. Our father was a priest who dedicated himself to the education and to the evangelization of the young, the founder of a variety of apostolic movements on behalf of youth and father of a charismatic family with a clear and strong apostolic spirituality.

For this reason Salesian Spirituality has its roots in the spiritual experience Don Bosco lived, that the first Salesians lived, that the first Salesian sisters, the lay co-workers and the boys at the Oratory lived. In this spiritual tradition we can see a particular way of understanding the Christian life, educational, pastoral and social action; the pedagogical and spiritual project that we call the Preventive System. Our Spirituality has some characteristics that are quite proper to it. It is a spirituality of everyday life, an Easter spirituality of joy and optimism; a spirituality of friendship and of a personal relationship with Jesus, a spirituality of communion with the Church, a Marian spirituality; a spirituality of responsible service that proposes, as Don Bosco always did, the goal of being ‘*good Christians and upright citizens*.’ We try to promote the dignity of every individual and their rights; making the effort to live with generosity in the family and promoting solidarity especially with the poorest; undertaking one’s own work with uprightness and competence; promoting justice, peace and the common good in politics; respecting creation and fostering access to culture. All of this is part of our spirituality, of our being the Salesian Family and a Gospel message according to the charism of Don Bosco in the different parts of the world.

1.5. GOOD CHRISTIANS in the face of the challenge of environments that are non-Christian, post-believing or post-Christian.

On the other hand we are living in a world where we come across not only young believers but also young people who are drifting away from the faith, young people who profess other religious beliefs and those who profess none.

14 Cf. Francis, *AL*, 278-289

15 Cf. Francis, *GE* for most of its contents.

16 Francis, *ChV*, 159

This plurality of situations enables us to remember the missionary mandate received at Pentecost. Where is Jesus sending us? There are no frontiers, there are no boundaries: he is sending us to everyone, since for the Gospel there are no boundaries or frontiers. The Lord is sending us to everyone and the Salesian mission takes us to everyone. 'Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away and most indifferent. The Lord seeks all; he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love. He invites us to be fearless missionaries wherever we are and in whatever company we find ourselves: in our neighbourhoods, in school or sports or social life, in volunteer service or in the workplace. Wherever we are, we always have an opportunity to share the joy of the Gospel.'¹⁷

It is for this reason that the mission is as stimulating as it is demanding. *What do we need to be thinking about in order to be able to draw close, at the pastoral level, also to those young people who distance themselves from the faith and to those who profess other religions or to those who profess none?* In other words in non-Christian or post-Christian contexts.

Some dangers that threaten us

In Christian contexts as well as in those non-Christian or post-Christian, we need to avoid both fundamentalism and relativism, and likewise exclusivism and syncretism.

Fundamentalism, believing to have the truth in one's pocket, is closed to dialogue, it stands firm and is intransigent in its convictions, but in a reactionary and intolerant manner. On its part relativism starts from the conviction that there are no certainties, no cognitive truths, no absolute norms. The postmodern cultural climate finds in relativism its own natural habitat and sees as an unacceptable attack any kind of claim of truth. Neither fundamentalism nor relativism are any help in our pastoral projects.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the last Synod on Youth has an interesting point. 'It is not a matter of giving up the most precious hallmark of Christianity to conform to the spirit of the world, nor is this what young people are asking for, but we do need to find a way to convey the Christian message in changed cultural circumstances. In line with biblical tradition, the recognition that truth has a relational basis is a good thing: human beings discover truth once they experience it from God, the only one who is truly reliable and trustworthy.'¹⁸ The *Instrumentum Laboris* suggests that the path of relationships is the one to be pursued. It seems to be suggesting that the way in will be found in relationships.. We know very well that the Preventive System of Don Bosco has always been a practical example of this principle of relationships.

Two other dangers are exclusivism and syncretism. The first exclusivism has two faces. One concerns the offering of a proposal addressed only to an elite, those young people and adults most prepared. The other regards the young people and adults most ready. The second refers to the rejection of any pastoral proposition, with the excuse of respecting the sensitivities of each individual. In conclusion, it would be a pastoral project only for a few or even a total absence of any pastoral project. None of these routes is good. If our pastoral approach is not concerned with those at a distance, we are showing that we have little confidence in the Gospel project, and perhaps also how elitist our ideas of pastoral work are. And if we chose censorship, then our confidence in the evangelization project is very slight. Censorship will be the best way of concerning ourselves pastorally with no one.

17 *Ibid*, 177

18 Synod of Bishops, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, o.c., 55

The other side of the coin is syncretism. A syncretist pastoral project is characterized by a mixing together of proposals taken piecemeal from various world views. The syncretist proposal is always seeking novelty without the application of any criterion of discernment.

We therefore come to ask ourselves whether any projects are possible? Yes, there are:

→ **Taking care of the seeds of the Word**

The first proposal is that of *seeking out and taking care of the seeds of the Word*. The Second Vatican Council gave encouragement to this teaching which, in fact is based on a centuries old tradition, already formulated in the Second Century by the Father of the Church Saint Justin.

Recalling this doctrine, the Council proposed to recognise the different levels of truth that there are in various religious and cultural traditions, In these seeds the Word is already present if only in embryonic form and they are moving in the direction of the Word. This is a great help in our pastoral work in non-Christian or post-Christian contexts that require us to try to find suitable opportunities for mutual understanding and collaboration. We can find these 'meeting places' in contexts such as human values and human dignity, the search for peace, the acquiring of virtues such as compassion and respect for others, the stranger, the one who is different; care for Creation, ecology ...

All of these are very relevant and issues of worldwide social sensitivity nowadays and this certainly suggests to us that we can begin with the simpler things.

→ **Dialogue**

The second pastoral proposal in non-Christian and post-Christian contexts needs to be *dialogue*, and with this we return to our reflection on the subject of relationships.

I am emphasising the importance of dialogue which needs other skills, such as that of knowing how to listen, to speak in a way that can be understood, being able to propose experiences of communion. Dialogue does not consist only in offering opinions. When we enter into dialogue we need to make a great effort to understand the experience that the other person is living and his thoughts. It is therefore important always to foster an atmosphere of respect in the face of undeniable differences, and also to recognize that dialogue requires the humility to admit one's own limitations, and confidence to appreciate one's own good points.

The pastoral dialogue we are speaking about is above all a conversation about human life, with an attitude of openness towards the young, sharing their joys and their sorrows, their desires and hopes, their religious values; we are dealing with an exercise in personal and community encounter that enriches us enormously: 'In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle in all our exchanges.'¹⁹

→ **The value of Witness**

Another no less important perspective is that concerned with Witness: the value of witness based on consistency, commitment and credibility. Young people will forgive us for many mistakes, but they want us to be consistent, credible and committed to working for others, They are the witnesses of our

19 Francis, *EG*, 250

times.

→ Proclamation

Pope Francis recalls with insistence the importance of proclaiming the Gospel. “there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord and without the primacy of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in all evangelizing work”²⁰. Proclamation should never be proselytism, and in each context will have a different expression; for example it will not be the same proclamation of the Gospel in non-Christian contexts or in post-Christian contexts.

This proclamation includes essentially the three great truths for the Christian: *That God loves us, that Christ saves us, and that the Spirit gives life and accompanies us in life.*

How should we make this proclamation? Above all with the certainty of knowing that the proclamation is presented and remains open so that through the Grace of the Spirit it may give rise to faith. In addition the proclamation ought to be carried out in a style characterized by nearness and closeness, and ought to be personalized even within a group or community, that is to say, it needs to reach each individual. No resource or pastoral strategy can ever take its place.

‘But in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord, Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence, and keep your conscience clear.’ (1Pt 3:15-16a).

1.6. GOOD CHRISTIANS detached from themselves

The mission is a characteristic of the disciples of the Lord. We recall that when Pope Francis describes, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the characteristics of the spirituality of the missionary disciple, he places the missionary mandate in the very depths of the human being. ‘My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off, it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here.’²¹ The Holy Father places the mission at the centre of existence.

a. Your life for others

The meeting with God draws me out of myself in order to go towards others. It is called by some ‘the anthropology of the gift’, that can be summed up with the expression ‘your life for others’. On this account a person attentive to others is a person capable of an attentive and compassionate gaze rather than one of an indifference that is found deep in the hearts of many people these days, making us incapable of experiencing compassion faced with the cries of others.

A person open to others is also capable of recognising the gift he has received, putting his talents at the service of others. Dedication to others, especially those most in need, becomes a real act of faith and is the foundation of every Christian life.

20 *Ibid*, 110

21 *Ibid*, 273

‘When an encounter with God is called an “ecstasy”, it is because it takes us out of ourselves, lifts us up and overwhelms us with God’s love and beauty. Yet we can also experience ecstasy when we recognize in others their hidden beauty, their dignity and their grandeur as images of God and children of the Father. The Holy Spirit wants to make us come out of ourselves, to embrace others with love and to seek their good.’²²

b. From ‘I’ to ‘here I am’

This way of understanding life open to others invites us to change from ‘I’ to ‘Here I am’. The I culture explains the world in which we are living very well. This culture offers great possibilities (personal growth, autonomy, development of the individual), but it also conceals great weaknesses (people who keep at a distance and are little open to others, narcissism).

Biblical anthropology presents the believer as someone who is capable of saying ‘Here I am’. In Scripture we see that these words were said at significant moments in the lives of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Mary of Nazareth, by Jesus himself who according to the Letter to the Hebrews, coming into the world said: ‘God, here I am, I am coming to obey your will’. (Heb 10: 7).

Giving importance to the value of the ‘I’, and it could not be otherwise, we can understand Christian life as a journey from ‘I’ to ‘Here I am’. Making this journey enables us to open ourselves to a mystery that transcends. When we say with faith, ‘Here I am’ an attitude and a disposition is being created in us that opens our life to the Holy Spirit who is guiding and accompanying us in order to find the way of being and of living that most identifies us as human beings. It is the essence of every *vocation*, with the believer’s gaze fixed on Jesus Christ, and ‘the life that Jesus gives us is a love story, a *life history* that wants to blend with ours and sink roots in the soil of our own lives.’²³

2. UPRIGHT CITIZENS

2.1. Young people are waiting for us in the ‘house of life’^{*}

One of the best and most relevant interpretations we can give of our Salesian mission is that of continuing to ensure our choice of meeting young people where they are to be found and in the circumstances in which they are living. The young people are waiting for us, and it is their daily life, the present that is the place where we need to meet them. There would be no human development, nor social commitment nor even evangelization and a faith journey were it not recognized that *the starting point is the place where the young and the families and everyone find themselves*.

The ability to go out and meet them learned from Don Bosco, is a sign of our being concerned about their lives, of taking their situation seriously and above all of the real desire to be on their side and to make their concerns our concerns. It is for this reason that we cannot forget our founding charism as the Salesian Family of meeting the young where they are, and with them, precisely there to work with commitment to improve and transform a situation that is always a challenge. Consequently every process of human development ought to be seen as a part, and not an end in itself, of a more profound and broad process of promotion that leads the person to make of their own lives a meeting place with

22 Francis, *ChV*, 164

23 *Ibid*, 252.

others, for the sharing of gifts, to build a more just and worthy society for everyone, as an anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven that is already being built on this earth, if within us there are the principles of the Good News of Jesus.

I don't think there is any need to accept that social commitment, 'militancy' in associations that promote the good of young people and of society are incompatible with gospel teaching. In the Our Father we can find the 'politics' of fraternity and of justice, solidarity, reconciliation, respect, equality and the protection of the weakest. It cannot be said that the different ways of doing good are incompatible. It is sufficient that this good concerns the full person and every person, avoiding any discrimination and partiality.

When Jesus was presented with the situations of those who were 'not ours' he at once responded making his own those who were not directly opposed to him. Who is not against us is with us.

2.2. UPRIGHT CITIZENS educating our young people for Citizenship and social commitment.

Perhaps we are dealing with one of the 'clichés' to which we sometimes retreat so as to avoid uncomfortable questions such as when it is said that Don Bosco did not get involved in politics, since his politics were those of the 'Our Father'. Certainly we have to clarify what politics we are talking about.

It is worth reflecting on this subject and to discover that bringing into the field of politics the ideas of the Our Father simply confirms human and evangelical commitment to what causes people concern or to the conditions in which they are living. And rather than giving the Our Father a different meaning reducing it to an empty spiritualism, uninterested in 'the things of this world' it ought rather to give an idea of the God who seeks the good and the happiness of human beings, of all his sons and daughters.

For our young people today, used as they are to practical things, to easy results, to the immediate effect of their actions, and with the difficulties they encounter in trying to undertake programmes or processes or to accept the burden of sowing the seed or the long wait before they see the fruits, it is indispensable to educate them to social commitment as a way that can introduce many of them to the path of the Christian life.

There is no genuine Christian life, one might say, without social commitment, or in other words without justice and charity, without the service of others, and above all of those most in need, the weakest, those 'without a voice' the abandoned and those cast aside, just as there is no good Samaritan without a man in need, or Don Bosco without young people who are poor, abandoned or in danger.

And on the other hand, there cannot be genuine political or social action without human development. Social and political action ought to be the expression of the priority that people and human development have within society.

It may be that the dichotomy to which some people give great emphasis, between the path of holiness (the spiritual life) and social commitment (life of the citizen) can become a reality when the goals are the dignity of labour and Christian development through it, faith from the works, the commitment to the poor and to social justice as an experience consistent with the Gospel.

The social dimension is not extrinsic to the experience of faith. It is precisely in social commitment that one ought to make more profound the transcendent dimension of every human activity. Pope

Francis in 'Christus Vivit' gives an interesting interpretation of the ability that young people have of committing themselves in society, and attributes this dedication to a full life to friendship with Christ. All of this is a pastoral project for us educators and evangelizers of the young.

'I want to encourage all of you in this effort, because I know that "your young hearts want to build a better world. I have been following news reports of the many young people throughout the world who have taken to the streets to express the desire for a more just and fraternal society. Young people taking to the streets! The young want to be protagonists of change. Please, do not leave it to others to be protagonists of change. You are the ones who hold the future! Through you, the future enters into the world. I ask you also to be protagonists of this transformation. You are the ones who hold the key to the future! Continue to fight apathy and to offer a Christian response to the social and political troubles emerging in different parts of the world. I ask you to build the future, to work for a better world. Dear young people, please, do not be bystanders in life. Get involved! Jesus was not a bystander. He got involved. Don't stand aloof, but immerse yourselves in the reality of life, as Jesus did. Above all, in one way or another, fight for the common good, serve the poor, be protagonists of the revolution of charity and service, capable of resisting the pathologies of consumerism and superficial individualism.'²⁴

2.3. UPRIGHT CITIZENS educating our young people to commitment in political service.

'The society that Don Bosco had in mind was a Christian society built on the foundations of morality and religion. Nowadays the view of society has changed: we are living in a secular society built on the principles of equality, of freedom, of participation, but the Salesian educative proposal preserves its capacity to form a citizen aware of his responsibilities, social, professional, political, capable of committing himself to justice the promotion of the common good, with a special sensitivity and concern for the most weak and marginalised groups. There is need therefore to work for a change in the criteria and in the vision of life, for the promotion of a culture of the other person, of a way of life that is moderate, a constant attitude of generous self-giving, of a fight for justice and for the dignity of every human being,'²⁵

It is a matter of fact that safeguarded by the 'rules of the game' many contemporary socio-political systems control their citizens or keep them subdued far more that we could or would like to believe. Our educational centres need to prepare the young to react to such situations with a responsible political attitude and one of civic participation. I ask myself:

→How can we help the young to acquire the knowledge, the ability, the skills and essential attitudes needed to be able to exercise their citizens' rights in an effective, free and consistent manner?

→As the Salesian Family, how can we be citizens, co-responsible in a Salesian way, at this time?

24 Francis, *ChV*, 174

25 P. Chávez, *Acts of the International Congress on the Preventive System and Human rights*, p. 82

In the present time fragile and fragmented, when the political dimension of life is very often thought of as conniving with corruption and a lack of morality, where there is anaemia regarding attitudes that focus especially on individualism, we ought to be setting ourselves the task of educating our young people to a commitment to the service of an 'upright citizenship' in the political-social field.

Among the many political theories (economic, social, educational, health, international...) we can choose as the Salesian Family that of the 'Our Father', that of our 'daily bread', that of the 'bare feet' that of 'always of the poorest (Mk 14:7), in need of a sound political policy of justice and charity. We want to be and to continue to be on the side of the 'politically incorrect' because we choose to be on the side of those who have no voice. Archbishop Romero said: 'The political dimension of the faith has to be discovered and it is rightly discovered through the practical service of the poor ... that is incarnated in their world, proclaims good news, gives hope, encourages processes of liberation, defends their cause and takes a part in their fate.'²⁶

Therefore as educators and as Christians, as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco today, we are aiming at a form of political activity that is social: activity that contributes to solidarity, to human brotherhood, to a real coming together that accepts and respects the other person in the establishment of the 'Kingdom of God' here and now.

Educating our young people with this vision and this criterion of political participation, directed towards the common good, the reason for life and the aim of political life, implies that we educate with a firm conviction for:

- ✓ the dignity and the rights of men always seeking the greater good of the community and of the individual;
- ✓ the safeguarding and the protection of the transcendental dignity of people made in the image of God;
- ✓ the promotion of development that is complete, sustainable and involving the whole of man and of all human beings;
- ✓ the globalization of charity, and of solidarity especially with the poor, the weak and excluded and against the enormous weight of indifference, exclusion and egotism;
- ✓ the achievement of fraternity as the driving force of economic order and of the development of all the potential that peoples have;
- ✓ the extension of the principle of subsidiarity as free and responsible participation as the basis of a democratic society in which all have a voice and can participate;
- ✓ the shared availability of the goods of the earth, and the fostering of the idea of coming together and of sharing; including care of the common home, with a natural and human ecology of living together, of harmony, peace and wellbeing in the present and in the future.

This requires from us a work of education that re-awakens and cultivates the sense of humanity within each man and woman; that makes this grow in self-awareness of its vocation, dignity and destiny; a work of education that includes 'the new political generations' so that they do not withdraw from participation in public life, full of zeal for the good, charismatically present where decisions about the future are made.

26 Arch. O. Romero, *Address given on the occasion of the Honorary Doctorate conferred on him by Louvain University on 2 February 1980.*

As Pope Francis tells us: ‘The future of humanity is not only in the hands of politicians, the great leaders, big businesses. Yes, their responsibility is tremendous. But, the future is above all in the hands of people who recognise in the other an individual and themselves as part of an “us”’.²⁷ This we want to go beyond silence, beyond indifference, so that all us citizens in these times can carry out our mission in the community.

This way of looking at things is not very different in essence from what we identify as the Salesian charism. An example would be what is found in the Constitutions and the Regulations of the SDB when it says that: “the social dimension of charity belongs to the education of the individual socially and politically engaged in the cause of justice, in the construction of a society more just and more human, finding in it an inspiration that is fully evangelical”²⁸, and in the same way in many documents of the various groups that are part of our large family.

Blessed Alberto Marvelli, an oratorian from Rimini, was an example in all of this. He saw and lived an engagement in politics as a service and as a way of expressing his faith in the world, in the ‘polis’, trying to incarnate in his life the ideals of solidarity and of justice that the Church in his day preached and that he knew thanks to his reading of the social encyclicals. For him politics was love, it was the ultimate consequence of social charity and an instrument of truth. This is how Saint John Paul II described him in the homily at his Beatification: ‘In prayer he sought inspiration also for his political activity, convinced of the need to live life fully as children of God in history in order to transform it into salvation history.’ A young man who allowed himself to be educated in the school of socio-political commitment as a synthesis of faith and life for the transformation of the world. Albert understood very well in his life what the service of others as a citizen means.

For this reason it continues to be indispensable “to move forward in the direction of an updated re-affirmation of the socio-political and educational choice of Don Bosco. This means the forming of a social and political conscience that then leads to the making of one’s life a mission for the common good with a constant reference to the inalienable human and Christian rights and values’.²⁹

This is a challenge in our socio-political education of the younger generations in which we need to grow even more. ‘For a young person today, being an upright citizen entails promoting the dignity and rights of the individual in all contexts, living with generosity in the family and preparing for family life on the basis of mutual self-giving, that fosters solidarity, especially with the poorest. It means developing work skills with honesty and professional competence, promoting justice, peace and the common good in politics, respecting creation and promoting culture.’³⁰

27 Francis, Video message sent to TED 2017

28 SDB Constitutions and Regulations 32 e 22 rispettivamente.

29 P. Chávez, *ACG 415. Like Don Bosco the educator*, 15

30 Salesian Youth Ministry Department, *Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference*, p. 107, referring to GC23, n. 178

Education in itself has a political dimension: educational activity is a way of making an impact in the world. This implies paying more attention to the political dimension of education, of citizenship, of a commitment to society, to the families of our young people and to themselves.

This is today and always will be a great challenge to us as educators to make possible a reality that promotes new moral standards. Therefore we cannot be satisfied if our educational centres produce graduates but not citizens committed to change, critical of certain situations, skilled not only because of the “formation” received but capable of the ‘transformation’ of these situations, as agents of change and of improvement, of hope and of renewal in the world of finance, politics, education, work, social commitment, the mass media ... and for a new world of active citizenship, protagonists of the common good. As educators in the Salesian Family, consecrated and lay, we need to continue, with conviction, along this path so that having planted the seed, this may grow in time and become a approach to life and a way of life.

2.4. UPRIGHT CITIZENS educating our young people to integrity and legality.

There are questions, it seems to me, that we cannot avoid asking ourselves when we are thinking about educating and accompanying our young people in their formation as upright citizens capable of overcoming the temptations to take the easy way, making money without working or using one’s professional expertise.

→ How can we help the teenagers and young people that we meet every day to make decisions and to solve the problems in the lives with honesty and integrity?

→ How can we offer them experiences that help them to build confidence in themselves and at the same time recognise the rightness of their behaviour?

We shall need to be able to educate in the truth that makes free, in the beauty of transparency, without double lives or self-deception, without falling into forms of slavery that are overwhelming, or immoral reactions that weaken a person's inner self. Jesus himself lived with the integrity and transparency of his preaching, restoring liberty to captives, light to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and proclaiming the Lord’s year of favour (cf. Lk 4:18-19); washing the feet of his disciples as an example of service to others, living the “unfathomable riches” of love and truth that cost him his life on the cross in front of everyone. He suffered in his own flesh the institutional injustice that corrupts on account of egotism, self-centredness, the pursuit of one’s own interests and the lies that repeated so many times become “truth” as far as a murder.

As educators we must put into practice and encourage uprightness and legality. How? Through prevention. It often happens nowadays that we hear ‘siren voices’ suggesting as the most natural thing

to follow the easy paths that corrupt the inner conscience and damage a person's integrity, the strength and truth of what we are. 'Society as a whole is called to commit itself concretely to combating the cancer of corruption in its various forms. ... Corruption is one of the most lacerating wounds of the social fabric, as it gravely harms both from an ethical and an economic point of view; with the illusion of quick and easy gains, in reality it impoverishes everyone, removing trust, transparency and reliability from the whole system.'³¹

→ As educators what are we doing in a preventative style to re-inforce in the lives of our youngsters the conviction of the need to be upright people ?

→ What examples, what ideas, what kind of behaviour are we handing on so that young people and their families do not come to accept as normal what is unjust, untruthful, deceitful and one's own advantage at any price?

→ What are we creating with education and evangelical values in areas essentially human such as conscience, a critical sense, standing up for the truth, authenticity and justice?

Corruption is 'a process of death' that had become normal in so many societies, and is certainly a real evil and a grave sin (that isn't spoken about), even though nonetheless, the hope brought by the Lord Jesus cannot be mistaken. A hope that we have to really sow in each of our young people . Knowing that schools and youth associations are always a means of civic education, it is vitally important that whoever is involved in education and society *asks themselves what kind of citizen our educational programmes have in mind*. Educators nowadays are under enormous pressure to reduce education to teaching and learning subject matter and to preparation for the examinations.

I should like to think that the majority of educators, at least the educators in the Salesian Family centres around the world believe that schools, in addition to teaching children to read and write, to do sums and know about science and history are also being a marvellous influence in seeing the world, and therefore are an important and powerful instrument in shaping our society, changing it for the better. It is important to teach young people to ask themselves questions, to look at themselves and to query what is being proposed to them as ideals in life; to express their own points of view and the way they see things; to give due consideration to their own environment and to the particular circumstances of their lives, their past and their dreams for the future; to think of themselves as active citizens, ready and capable of making sound judgements and well prepared to have an influence on public life.

Educating means all this. 'To educate means helping individuals to rediscover themselves, and to patiently accompany them on their journey of recovering values and self-confidence. It means reconstructing reasons for living through discovery of the beauty of life. Educating also means a renewed capacity for dialogue, but is also a proposal full of interests, firmly anchored in what is the most fundamental of approaches involving young people in experiences that help them grasp the meaning of daily effort, offering them the basic tools for earning a living, making them capable of

31 Francis, *Audience to the Officials of the Court of Auditors* Vatican City, 18 March 2019

acting responsibly in every circumstance. Educating requires that we understand the juvenile social problems of our times.³²

2.5. UPRIGHT CITIZENS sensitive and co-responsible in a world on the move and migration

Allow me by way of illustrating what I want to propose, to refer to my own experience in the various visitations in these years. I have been greatly impressed by the enormous creativity and commitment of my confreres and of the Salesian Family, who have known how to respond to the staggering phenomenon of our days that human migration is. I came across it in Kakuma, a refugee camp in the north of Kenya containing about 190,000 people. My SDB confreres are the only institution authorized to live within the camp itself, taking care of all the needs of the youngsters coming from various parts of Africa, above all from South Sudan and Somalia, by providing technical training, an oratory and youth centre, and educational-pastoral activities. I also saw it in the significant presence in Tijuana, in Mexico. In that frontier between the economic north and south of the world, with food provision, and a network of oratories, they are responding to the needs of hundreds of youngsters in search of a future. They are accompanying them, forestalling the danger of violence and drugs and offering educational opportunities. Also in our 'Sacred Heart' community in Rome we have a small but very active youth centre attended by young university students and volunteers, who in the setting of an oratory welcome young migrants and refugees from various parts of the world. In this way we could travel round the whole World of our Salesian Family and find everywhere creative responses to the needs of young migrants, since this awareness is part of our Salesian DNA. I think I can say without fear of being mistaken that **we are sons and daughters of an emigrant, who welcomed emigrants and who sent his sons as missionaries to take care of emigrants.**

The phenomenon

The phenomenon of migration nowadays effects **more than 1000 million people**; it is the greatest movement of people of all time and has become an institutional feature of contemporary society that is becoming more and more complex in social, cultural and religious terms, exacerbated by the existence of illegal migration. The causes are varied: the world wide social and economic inequalities, political and social crises that are transformed into armed conflicts and ethnic and religious persecutions, as well as migrations produced by climate change and the desertification of various parts of the planet and also the enormous ease and possibility of communication and mobility that exist today.

According to United Nations' statistics, **international migrants today number 271,6 millions**, about 3.5% of the world population. Of these, 39 millions are minors under 18 years of age. Internal migration (that which takes place within a country) was estimated according to 2009 figures, at 790 million people.

One particular and very tragic feature is that of the **70.8 million people forced to migrate**: 41,3 million migrants, especially people who because of wars have had to migrate within their own

32 Salesian Youth Ministry Department, *o.c.*, 93

country. Those leaving their own country are 25.9 million refugees, plus 3.5 million seeking refuge. These are the official statistics of UNO, while it is known the actual numbers could be higher. Half of these forced migrants are minors under 18 years of age, It has been calculated that there are 111.000 unaccompanied minors without any family. More frequently the refugees are living in cities (61%), being more invisible.

Don Bosco

For our Religious Family the phenomenon of migration is nothing new to our charism.

Don Bosco himself emigrated from the serenity and the austerity of the countryside – to the Becchi at Chieri, and afterwards to the city of Turin. From the beginning Don Bosco faced this situation. The first boys he took into his Oratory were seasonal or permanent migrants coming from the countryside to look for work in the Piedmontese capital; young foreigners who spoke neither Italian nor Piedmontese. In a discussion with some parish priests of Turin who thought Don Boco was keeping the boys away from their parishes, the saint said that they were all foreigners:

‘Because almost all of them are visitors, who have been abandoned by their relatives in this city; or they have come here looking for work and failed to get it. Boys from Savoy, Switzerland, the Val d’Aosta, Biella, Novara, Lombardy are the ones who most frequently who come to my activities. [...] They’re far from home, they speak diverse dialects, they have no fixed places to stay. These considerations make it difficult if not impossible for them to belong to any parishes ...’³³

The Salesian Missionary Enterprise began with care being offered to Italian emigrants in Argentina. Don Bosco exhorted the first missionary expedition in 1875 as follows:

‘Search out these brothers who were driven to a strange land by poverty or misfortune; teach them how great is the mercy of God, who for the good of their souls is sending you to help them.’³⁴

The Salesian Congregation in the times of Don Rua and of Don Albera consolidated the attention being given to Italian emigrants, and also Polish and German. One only has to think of the enormous work undertaken among the emigrants; already in 1904, in America alone, there were 450,000

33 BOSCO J., *Memoirs of the Oratory*, ISS, *Salesian Sources. Don Bosco and his work*. LAS, Roma, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2017, 1413.

34 CERIA E., *Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco*, Vol. XI, New Rochelle 1964, 360.

emigrants being helped by the Salesians.³⁵ With Don Rua a ‘**Salesian Commission for Emigration**’ was set up which operated for several years. The service provided for emigrants was enormous, on behalf both of the European emigrants in America, Africa, the Middle East or Europe itself and of emigrants who escaped from Eastern Europe to Western Europe at the time of the Communist regime.

Therefore the phenomenon of migration, in one way or another had always been present in our Salesian history. The challenge of the migration of young people is today much more widespread and complicated because of its cultural, social, religious dimension, and because of its great demographic impact, as well as the features linked to information technology, globalization, the ease of transport. In the face of this situation a **pastoral approach of communion** (more inclusive and integrating) is more necessary compared to the traditional, ethnic-national of looking after one’s co-nationals. We too find ourselves facing new and tragic phenomena such as that of refugees, unaccompanied children and people trafficking. All of this presents great challenges to our Salesian Family faced with this new ‘youth continent’ of the 21st century.

Vision for the future

To the question: which young people are we turning to in the world today, certainly these millions of youngsters forced to migrate are presenting us with a challenge. This is a situation in which, in addition to being a presence on the frontiers, in emergency situations, the larger part of the Works of the Family of Don Bosco **are welcoming into their premises** hundreds of thousands of children, teenagers, young migrants of the first or second generation, who are being happily integrated into our educative communities. This valuable service, generally conducted very quietly and with discretion provides an important help for the young people who migrate, offering them a shelter and helping them to effectively and naturally integrate into civil Society and sometimes into the Church.

We have to carry out this action of ours in this demanding world of human mobility starting from our charismatic identity:

→ Focusing first of all on the children, the teenagers, the young people, offering them educative-pastoral courses of a certain calibre.

→ Maintaining our educative-evangelizing approach, avoiding being reduced to an NGO. The mission is entrusted to an educative community in communion of life between consecrated and lay persons with the necessary skills for this delicate mission.

→ Supporting an ‘educative presence’ with which we make ourselves as much as possible an essential part of the physical and existential world of those we are working with and for..

→ Being educators and friends who are with them not simply as humanitarian agents, as providers of services for their benefit, but as educators and pastors.

35 MOTTO F., *Bosco (Don) Giovanni e la missione dei Salesiani per i migranti*, in, BATTISTELLA G. (a cura di). *Migrazioni. Dizionario Socio-Pastorale*, Cinisello Bal, abuse of power, abuse of conscience, sexual or financial abuse (Milano) 2010, 62.

→ Focusing on ‘prevention’, trying to offer the young the possibility of developing skills in their own cultural context, so as to be able to take their place there with dignity, without the need to have to emigrate. Every young person has the right not to have to emigrate.

→ With a presence ever more coordinated, more formalised, more visible and professional. It is a great opportunity for the Salesian Family to do something, where each group can make available to the mission its own gifts. The Salesian Missionary Volunteering Service and the Salesian Youth Movement have an immense opening for engagement with this Youth on the move.

This continent on the move raises very serious issues for us in the 21st century, suggesting that its very existence could be a motive for all of us, the opportunity for a very real pastoral, charismatic and vocational renewal.

2.6. UPRIGHT CITIZENS who take care of our common home as young people ask us to

Commitment to the common home (the view of ecology proposed by *Laudato Si'*) is not an extra commitment: it is a viewpoint that entirely calls into question our culture, faith, way of life, mission, education and evangelization. In addition, ecology can be a integral educational proposal (in its human and spiritual values).

When we talk about caring for the common home, or the care of Creation, we are not faced with an optional choice, but rather with a essential question of justice, since the Earth that we have received belongs also to those who will come after us. The environment is a loan that every generation receives and that has to be handed on to successive generations.

Some pastoral proposals

→ *Ecological conversion*

The first proposal is very much connected to a change of mentality and of the way of looking at reality. Pope Francis invites us to ‘become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering.’³⁶ For this reason we have to adopt a radically new spirituality, a spirituality in which our commitment to care for the Earth is serious and effective to the extent that it is rooted in an effective ecological conversion.

We are being called to get to the moral and spiritual roots of environmental problems, which are inviting us to look for solutions not only using technology but also changing as human beings. Everyone has to move on from consumption to sacrifice, from avarice to generosity, from waste to the ability to share, from “what I want” to “what God’s world needs.”

36 Francis, *LS*, 19

→ *Accompanying youth involvement in the commitment to our common home*

Very probably something that no one could ever have imagined, and much less the ‘great and powerful ones of this world’ is that the biggest reaction and protest could come from young people and in a movement on an almost worldwide scale. There are young people in the world very well informed in ecological issues, and they are exercising an active citizenship for the safeguarding of our common home.

- Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish 16 year old activist told the world leaders gathered in New York for the UNO Summit on the climate in 2019: ‘You have robbed my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. We are at the start of a mass extinction all you can talk about is money and the fantasy of unending economic growth. How dare you! You are deceiving us. But young people are beginning to recognize your betrayal.’³⁷
- These strong words are a challenge for the leaders and they are changing the perspectives of adults and leading a vast movement of young people to save our common home. The ‘*Laudato Si*’ Generation’ is a practical example of this. This is the “Youth Sector” of the Catholic World Movement for the climate, an international network of over 800 Catholic organizations. They are working for climate justice and are pleading for the Church and the world to act. As active members of this international network, ‘Don Bosco Green Alliance’ and the ‘Salesian Youth Movement’ are representing the Salesian Family.
- As educators of the young we accompany not only those already geared up but also those who are reclining on their sofas in front of the window or the screen. At the same time, we also remember that young people are excellent at encouraging their own companions to get down to work.³⁸

→ *Towards a human ecology*

Environmental ecology intrinsically urges us to reflect on integral ecology. From the 1970s, from Pope Saint Paul VI to the various Popes who followed him, all have always insisted on this point. ‘Human ecology’ is a term introduced by Pope Saint John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*.³⁹ Taking up this idea again, Pope Francis says that ‘the destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement.’⁴⁰

37 See #FridaysForFuture e #Climatestrike.

38 Pope Francis, *Address to young people on the* occasion of his apostolic journey in Chile, 17 January 2018.

39 Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *I dieci comandamenti verdi*. Torino: Elledici, 2016, 142.

40 Francis, *LS*, 5

→ *The educational and cultural approach*

- Saint John Paul II, in the face of the ecological crisis, spoke about the urgent need for a great educational and cultural effort ⁴¹.
- Our educational proposals to care for our common home are based on the three phases of Informing, Educating, Creating a Culture.⁴²
- In the face of the phenomenon of consumerism, it is necessary to remind the young of our three main ideas (3R : reduce, re-use and recycle).
- We know very well that ecological issues are the result of unjust structures. To deal with them we need virtuous structures of grace, of reconciliation, of healing and of environmental ecology human, social and integral.⁴³ These are the structures that we as educators need to propose to the young.
- To start processes that lead to an ecological citizenship there are some fundamental reflections very close to our Salesian approach. For example our confrere Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam is working in the Church Department dealing with this issue. In his book *I Dieci Comandamenti Verdi* we find many ideas to continue to develop in our young people a great sensitivity towards Creation, to dream and to turn into reality what our leaders do not want to take seriously on account of economic motives and various other interests.

2.7 In the defence of human rights and especially of the rights of minors

I feel an urgent need to make a strong appeal to our Family so that now and in the future we may be distinguished by our defence of every minor. The essence of the message I want to pass on is precisely this:

→ The purpose for which we have been raised up by the Holy Spirit in Don Bosco as the Salesian Family is that of giving our whole lives to minors, to youngsters, to the boys and girls of the world, giving priority above all to the most defenceless, to the most needy, to the weakest, to the poorest.

→ For this reason we have to be experts in the field of the defence of all human rights, especially those of minors, *and asking forgiveness even with tears should anyone not have acted in this way*. We cannot be complicit in any form of abuse, intending by this the abuse of 'power, of conscience, sexual, financial abuse' - as it was described on the occasion of the Synod on *The Young, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*.⁴⁴

As Don Bosco's Family we are part of all the efforts that the whole Church is making on behalf of human rights. As we all know, the language of rights has come into the life of the Church with the development of its social doctrine. In force of the Gospel entrusted to her, the Church proclaims

41 *Centesimus Annus*, 36

42 Aldo Coda Negozio, Guglielmo Aldo Ellena, *Gestire il pianeta terra*, Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1995, P. XI.

43 Tebaldo Vinciguerra, 'Ecologia', *Note di pastorale giovanile*, p.74.

44 Synod of Bishops, *o.c.* Final Document 30.

human rights, recognizes and greatly appreciates the dynamism with which in our days these rights are everywhere being promoted.

While civil society operates in a variety of ways in the defence of human rights, we, the Family of Don Bosco, as likewise the Church, are being called today to recover the objective dimension of human rights based on the recognition of the “*inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [which] is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.*”⁴⁵ Without such a vision, there would be a short circuiting of the rights and the encouragement of ‘that globalization of indifference born of selfishness, the result of a conception of man incapable of embracing the truth and living an authentic social dimension.’⁴⁶ The temptation nowadays is to greatly emphasise the word ‘rights’, neglecting the more important: ‘human’. If rights lose their connection with humanity, they become simply the expressions of interest groups.

- For Don Bosco the marginalised boy was not a passive beneficiary, a simple recipient to whom assistance was given or services offered. Don Bosco was hoping and working for a new view of the marginalized boy: an educational relationship between taught and teacher, which anticipates the view of the boy as a subject of rights which the New York Convention confirmed for the first time thirty years ago, on 20 November 1989, as an instrument of international law, today legally binding in 193 States.
- The rights of minors and the Preventive System have some basic principles in common. Both have the same aim, that is the integral development and the total wellbeing of children. Both Childrens’ Rights and the Preventive System have some work to do in order to achieve their objectives on behalf of children. This includes the overall care of individuals, the formation of the personnel responsible, the creation of a safe environment, the provision of guidelines for sound discipline and the formulation of protocols for the protection of minors.

In defence of the rights of minors

- 1. Between 21 and 24 February 2019 the ‘summit’ of the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of the World was held on ‘The protection of minors in the Church’. Taking part were 190 Church Leaders and the Presidents of 140 Bishops’ Conferences. At the meeting Pope Francis said that *docile to the Holy Spirit we must hear the cry of the little ones seeking justice*. We know very well that every scandal can make the light of the Gospel invisible⁴⁷ and the abuse of power and of conscience do great harm and are extremely dangerous.
- 2. We cannot speak about the rights of minors without referring to the ‘*Convention on the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence*’ of the United Nations that defines a child as every human being under the age of eighteen and provides a standard for care and protection, the identification and management of cases, their reporting and deferment. It identifies four aspects of children’s rights: the participation of the children in the decisions that regard them;

45 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1943, introduction

46 Francis, *Address at the Council of Europe*, Strasburg, 25 November 2014

47 Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father to the Catholics of Ireland*, (March 2010)

the protection of children from discrimination and all forms of neglect and exploitation; the prevention of harm and the assistance of children in their basic needs.

- 3. In our Educative Pastoral Plan, listening to minors is important and vital, as is often affirmed by the Synod.⁴⁸ This opens the way to full participation. And participation contributes to personal development, leads to better decisions and results, serves to protect minors, contributes to the preparation and to the development of civil society, to tolerance and respect for others and strengthens a sense of responsibility.
- 4. *A more profound knowledge and reflection on the rights of minors*:: it is a question of the many documents and declarations constantly being published on human rights and above all on the rights of minors. Some are at the level of the Church and international, others are at the level of a region or of a specific subject.⁴⁹ Ignorance of these documents will certainly prevent us from being effective educators. Therefore we need to study them in depth and communicate them in our centres.
- 5. *Networking with other agencies*: in the mission of the protection and the promotion of the rights of minors, we need to network with many other agencies that are working with an ‘approach based on law’. There are indeed very many of them, governmental and non-governmental. In some Provinces of the world, some Salesians form part of the ‘Juvenile Justice Board’, through which they are able to defend and protect minors’ rights. There are other Salesians who are lawyers and who defend the rights of minors in the civil courts and obtain justice for them. This is an excellent forum in which to spread gospel values in secular sectors.
- 6. The ‘System of child protection’, is described by UNICEF as ‘the combination of the laws, policies, regulations and services necessary in all social sectors to maintain prevention and the response to the risks connected to protection’. Many of the places where we are present are entirely dedicated to social services and to centres for young people at risk. This ought to continue to be our ‘small but great’ contribution as the Salesian Family.
- 7. It is essential that in every Work of our Family in the world there should be a ‘Moral Code’ that very clearly defines what is expected from everyone, from the consecrated persons men and women, from lay educators, and that also clearly determines what constitutes a grave violation of the Moral Code itself.
- 8. Finally, but it is a question of a fundamental aspect as far as consecrated persons are concerned, what needs to be re-enforced is our personal and community relationship with Christ. His companionship ought to inspire us to work harder to protect the children and the minors that He loves so much, and that He has pointed out as models of discipleship.

48 Synod of Bishops *The Young...*, o.c., 6

49 Motu Proprio, *On the protection of minors and Vulnerable Persons*, issued on 29, March, 2019 - Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat, *Guidelines: promoting the human rights and the best interests of the child in transnational child protection cases*, Sweden: 2015. - Rachel Hodgkin and Peter Newell, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UNICEF, 2007.

- *The preventive system and human rights: Two proposals*
 - Together we are doing many good and fine things to promote human rights. To be more effective in this ministry, however, we need to change our strategy in the way we think and act. We need to become a Family of Don Bosco that supports the social dimension of charity⁵⁰ and promotes human rights through the creative use of the Preventive System. This is the necessary change of model.
 1. *Moving on from seeing the Preventive System merely as an alternative to the Repressive System, to seeing it as an excellent means of promoting human rights;* Until now, many times we have been accustomed to considering the Preventive System simply as a system of education different from the Repressive System. We have not given sufficient attention to its potential in the area of human rights. We need to study and explain its intrinsic potential in the promotion of human rights and make use of it in this area.
 2. *Moving on from making laws that refer to the citizens, to rights to which the citizens lay claim:* We have always said that one of the aims of education is the formation of upright citizens and we have understood that to mean forming citizens who respect the law. This will not be sufficient in the future in an ever more complex world. We have to educate the young to lay claim to their rights; in fact if rights are not claimed it is very probable that they will be ignored.⁵¹

THE FINAL WORD... LISTENING TO DON BOSCO HIMSELF SPEAK ABOUT POLITICS

I finish this very long account in which I have made many references to the many aspects that in my judgement are very important and extremely relevant, by allowing Don Bosco to speak to us himself. Among the very many possible quotations, I have chosen the address that he gave to the Past Pupils, who on 15 July 1883 had returned to the Oratory to celebrate Don Bosco's feast day. Incredibly a large part of Don Bosco's talk referred to politics. I think it is very enlightening and very much in tune with what I have been saying thus far. This is what he says:

'Other than Heaven's help, what helps us and what will help us to do good is the very nature of our work. What we aim to do is looked upon well by everyone including those who do not share our idea of religion. If there is someone who creates obstacles for us we need to say that they either don't know us or they do not know what is being done. Civil instruction, moral education

50 GC XXIII, nos. 204, 209, 212

51 Jose Kuttianimattathil, 'Don Bosco's Educative Method and the tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights'; in: Charles Maria, Pallithanam Thomas, Dörrich Hans-Jürgen, Reifeld Helmut; *In Defence of the Young*; New Delhi 2010.

of youth who are either abandoned, or at risk, removing them from idleness, wrongdoing, disgrace, and maybe even prison –this is what our work aims at. So what wise man what civil authority could possibly stop us?

Recently as you know, I went to Paris, and I spoke in various churches to plead the cause of our works, and let us put it in frank terms, to find money to give bread and soup to our boys who never lose their appetite. Now amongst the audience there were some who came only to get to know Don Bosco's political thinking. Some even thought that I had gone to Paris to stir up a revolution, others thought I was there to find people for a political party, and so on. There were some benevolent people who feared that someone would play some silly prank on me; but from the moment I began speaking all these weird ideas ceased along with their fears and Don Bosco was left free to go from one end of France to the other. No, truly, we do not engage in politics with our work, We respect constituted authority, we observe the laws that have to be observed, we pay our taxes and keep on going, asking only that they let us do good for poor youth and save souls. If you want, we also play politics but in an entirely innocent way, indeed to the advantage of any government. Politics can be defined as the art and science of governing the State well. Now the work of the Oratory in Italy, France, Spain, America, in every country where it has been established, working especially to offer relief of those most needy young people, tends to lessen the number of vagabonds and unruly types. It tends to decrease the number of young wrongdoers and thieves. It tends to empty out the prisons. In a word it tends to form upright citizens who, far from causing grief to public authorities help them to keep order, calm and peace in society. This is our politics. This is the only thing we have been concerned about till now and which will be our concern in the future.⁵²

With the maternal intercession of our Mother the Immaculate Help of Christians let us ask God the Father to grant us his Spirit so that we may continue to carry out the real politics of the Our Father for the young people of today, in a society that is calling out to us in the face of so much inequality not to remain silent or passive, and in a world always in need of God that we might ever more become Witnesses-Disciples-Missionaries of the God who while scrupulously respecting human freedom is every day ready for the Encounter with his sons and daughters.

So let us pray:

Lord Jesus,

You know how much it costs us to put your Gospel into practice;

help us to contemplate you in Don Bosco,

to see your love in his gestures,

to discern your path in his actions,

to learn your mercy in his affection.

Give us the light to make our own the style

52 Salesian Historical Institute, *Salesian Sources. Don Bosco and his work*. LAS, Rome, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2017, 120

with which Don Bosco was your disciple,
shape our heart like yours of the Good Shepherd,
and give us the strength to transform your words into life and works.⁵³

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, SDB

Rector Major

53 Xabier Matoses, *Spirito Salesiano*, en J. José Bartolomé (ed), *Luce sui miei passi*. Elledici, 2016,