

YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY

Heritage and Guidelines for the Future

FABIO ATTARD SDB

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1.IDENTITY**
- 1.2.CHARISM**
- 1.3.COMUNITY**
- 1.4.PROPOSAL**

2. PASTORAL JOURNEY OF THE CHURCH AND THE FAMILY

- 2.1.GAUDIUM ET SPES**
- 2.2.THE JOURNEY OF THE SYNOD**

3. VALDOCCO – FAMILY AS THE PASTORAL PARADIGM

4. STARTING FROM 'EVANGELII GAUDIUM''

- 4.1 THE HISTORY AS A CHALLENGE**
- 4.2 A PASTORAL RESPONSE**

5. AMORIS LAETITIA

5.1.PASTORAL ATTITUDES

5.2.PASTORAL CRITERIA

- A. THE FRUITFULNESS OF LOVE THAT GENERATES**
- B. RESPONDING TO THE ABSENCE OF FATHERHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD**
- C. THE FAMILY IS THE PASTORAL SUBJECT**
- D. THE GRADUALNESS IN PASTORAL CARE**

5.3 PRACTICAL CHOICES

- a. COMMUNITY**
- b. PLAN**
- c. ACCOMPANIMENT**
 - a. ACCOMPANIMENT OF ENVIRONMENT**
 - b. ACCOMPANIMENT OF A GROUP**
 - c. PERSONAL ACCOMPANIMENT**

CONCLUSION

YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY

Heritage and Guidelines for the Future

Fabio Attard sdb

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme that was assigned to me - *Youth Ministry and Salesian Family* - is for us members of the Salesian Family a clarion call that in these moments of history appears above all as a great challenge and a great opportunity. It is a theme that requires us to deal with a very specific pastoral attitude, enlivened by the prophetic dimensions founded on faith in Christ, a pastoral attitude full of hope nourished and brought forward by love. We are aware or at least we should be, that we can fall victim to the mentality of the lamentation, which will end in condemning the darkness rather than committing to light a candle. Our times are times of a joyful and a optimistic missionary spirit.

As the Salesian Family, in the experience the Church, we take the Pope's invitation to feel "the need to offer a word of truth and hope. (We believe that) the great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence" (*Amoris Laetitia* n.57). We are convinced that today, more than ever, we as the Salesian Family have a word to share, a plan to propose and a pastoral experience to offer. This perspective explains the second part of the title: *heredity and the guidelines for the future*.

For this, I wish to start from a simple but central question: From where do we start we, members of the Salesian Family? What do we carry in the haversack of our history?

Definitely we are not starting from the scratch. We have a history, therefore we are heirs of a journey: we are involved in a pastoral experience which is now spread all over the world with its various presences, with several proposals serving the young, especially the poorest. Let us also recognize that in recent years we have made a very rich pastoral reflections and we have shared them with the whole Church.

For this reason, we list very briefly **some points that condense the framework of our heritage and of our proposal**, because starting from our past, with its rich dimensions - human, Christian, charismatic - we feel encouraged to continue the journey in this new social and cultural domains, with the young people, with families and with the protagonists of the history.

1.1 Identity

We can say that **the Salesian Family is the custodian of a Call with a precise identity: to evangelize and educate according to a plan of integral growth**. Since evangelization is a

complex and a multifaceted work, we understand it as an animated experience from an integral concern within the educational processes. Through the commitment and attention in these processes we help and accompany the young people towards an integral growth.

For the Salesian Family, education is the human setting where the Gospel is present and where it acquires a typical physiognomy. We have some areas for action that put us in the pleasant situations marked on the one hand by a healthy and integral humanism and on the other by the transcendent dimension.

The Salesian identity has a goal: every young person is accompanied towards the building of their personality, which has Christ as the fundamental reference. Our present is true and beautiful to the extent that our identity - evangelizing by educating, educating by evangelizing - continues to get stronger and nourished on this deep and inseparable relationship of educative actions with the evangelizing actions.¹

1.2 Charism

Our identity does not articulate itself through the words and phrases of situations. It does not know improvisation suspended in the air. **Our identity is a charismatic identity.** We educate and evangelize through a life inspired by the Preventive System. **Don Bosco has left us a heredity called preventive system.** It is an educational plan for integral growth - reason, religion and loving kindness - that highlights the humanistic wealth together with essential religious soul of the system within an environment that breathes charity - *agape* - *Evangelical*. The Preventive System is for us sons and daughters of Don Bosco a method for action, characterized by the centrality of reason, reasonableness of demands and rules, flexibility and persuasiveness of the proposals; of the centrality of religion understood as developing the sense of God inherent in every person and the power to bring the beauty of the good news; the centrality of loving, educative love that enables growth and brings mutual understanding.

St. John Paul II, in the year 1988, the centenary of the death of our Father and Teacher, in the letter *Iuvenum Patris* captures the essence of the charism reminding us that this is a gift for the whole Church. Ours is not a responsibility for preserving it as a private property, but for the universal Church. So he writes:

For St John Bosco, founder of a great spiritual Family, one may say that the peculiar trait of his brilliance is linked with the educational method which he himself called the "Preventive System". In a certain sense this represents the quintessence of his pedagogical wisdom and constitutes the prophetic message which he has left to his followers and to the Church, and which has received attention and recognition from numerous educators and students of pedagogy,²

1.3 Community

¹ DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *New Education*, Letter published in AGC n. 337, 1991

² SAN GIOVANNI PAOLO II, Lettera *Iuvenum Patris*, 31 gennaio 1988, n. 8

Another fundamental aspect and I would say also a founding aspect of our educative and pastoral heredity is the **community**. Don Bosco is not a solitary pastoral adventurer. From the beginning he tried and managed to build around him a **community of educators and pastors**. This is a theme that is present in various forms and at various times during this discussion. Don Juan Edmundo Vecchi very clearly summarizes its importance:

When we think of the origin of our Congregation and Family, from which salesian expansion began, we find first of all a **community**, which was not only visible, but indeed quite unique, almost like a lantern in the darkness of night: **Valdocco, the home of a novel community and a pastoral setting that was widely known, extensive and open**. Among those making their way there through interest or curiosity were eminent persons of the civic and political world, fervent Christians and ecclesiastics who saw in it a religious revival and bishops from round the world.

Such a community gave rise to a new culture, not in an academic sense but in that of a new style of relationship between youngsters and educators, between laity and priests, between artisans and students, a relationship which had its effect on the area and on the city itself. And if we can believe what was written at the time, it was a culture that caused raised eyebrows which eventually caused doubts to arise about Don Bosco's mental health.³

Community, home, culture - are words that constitute even today as a treasure, a heritage and also a challenge particularly for the future guidelines. These words help us to translate our identity and charism in the concrete experiences where the young people we meet on the street, thrown and abandoned, without the present, and consequently without the future, can find acceptance, accompaniment and sense of direction. They are words that we need today to propose spaces and environments for the parents and families who feel lost and without capacity to communicate with their own children. This is our road to Jericho. And we are not allowed to look the other way, and move on!

1.4 Proposal

The fourth element that completes our heritage is the **proposal**. Where the Lord sends us, wherever we find ourselves with our presences, where we come to the community and create welcoming environments, **we have a word to offer and an experience to propose**. That is our proposal that supposes the previous three elements - identity, charism, community - and translates them into a **journey of integral growth**. We do our best so that young people we meet, personally and as a group, discover the beauty of believing, the joy of looking up with the conviction that life is a gift given, a divine space.

We are called to help young people to grow in their educational potentials, the ability of mind and hands. We offer them and their families a place wherein, apart from someone not feeling lonely, every person, young and adult, discovers to be the protagonist with others in the various experiences of groups and associations. Finally, today we seek to lead every young person to the point of that beautiful but challenging question: what is my life plan?

³ DON JUAN EDMUNDO VECCHI, *Ecco il tempo favorevole*, Lettera pubblicata in ACG 373, 2000

What is my calling in life, my vocation?

Enclosed in these four dimensions - *identity, charism, community, proposal* - we find our heritage in its great lines. We also find the foundation to discover, how in the journey of the Church we have a gift to treasure which is also a gift to deepen in dialogue with the challenges and opportunities that knock on our door. For this reason, the call of the Church on the family for us today is something very serious and profoundly important. This is not to make cosmetic operations, some adjustments to our times, a few conferences to new or old groups. Here we are all called to put all our ability to dream, all our pastoral energies so that our young people and the family together feel welcomed, accompanied and formed protagonists.

2 PASTORAL JOURNEY OF THE CHURCH AND THE FAMILY

Having trekked this concise journey of our treasure with all the perspectives that are presented to us, we come to reflect on the theme of the family starting with the journey of the Church. **It is important to clarify immediately that the theme of the family is neither a commercial advertisement** nor something that has lately become fashionable. For this reason, let me make a short trip on how the Church in the reflection of the Second Vatican Council has taken seriously the theme of the family.

We can not lose the connection with the journey of the Church in order to understand how the history unfolds and where the Lord is calling us. Otherwise we run the risk that, after so many fine words we say and we say about the family, everything will be like the famous Italian proverb, a lot of smoke, but little roast!

2.1. *Gaudium et Spes*

In the framework of the Council's Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) we see how the two parts of the document treat in the first place, *The Church and the vocation of the human person* (Part I), and then *some urgent problems* (Part II). It is significant to note that the first topic dealt within Part II has the following title: **Fostering the Dignity of Marriage and the Family**

Without going into the various points that develop the theme, we highlight the first challenge and the first concern that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have identified, is that of marriage and the family. And here it is important to mention that **in GS the family is an active subject which has a mission to accomplish** and which should be helped by all components of the society. GS does not speak of the family as if it were a problem or a patient who needs care. We must never forget this aspect.

In its dialogue with the world, which is the fulcrum of the GS, marriage and family are the first challenge. Only after this, other topics such as *the promotion of culture, economic and social life, the life of the political community and the promotion of peace and the community of nations* are discussed.

2.2 The Journey of the Synod

If we look at the developments that have occurred in the years that followed the Second Vatican Council, there is a growing attention to the theme of the family given by the Church. Just to note that after the two synods of the 70's, one on evangelization with the apostolic exhortation **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, and the next one on catechesis, from which emerged the apostolic exhortation **Catechesi Tradendae**, we find that immediately followed the synod on the family, which was followed by the publication of the apostolic exhortation **Familiaris Consortio**.

This development of the Church's journey is a witness to the fact that from the time when the Church recognizes itself as the bearer of good news, it immediately looks to marriage and family. Because with it " the well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked"(GS, n. 47). The Church considers the family as the privileged place where " the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, **is the foundation of society**" (GS n. 52).

In recent years, again, we see a similar pastoral journey, within which recurs as a priority attention to the family. Following the Synod of the **New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith**, 2012, we received the Apostolic Exhortation **Evangelii Gaudium**, as a pastoral program for the Church which opens the way to the **two synods on the family**: *The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization* (October 2014), and *the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world* (October 2015). The Apostolic Exhortation **Amoris Laetitia** is the map that helps us to trace the pastoral guidelines in the coming years.

Two short notes on this journey experienced by the Church in the last 50 years: **the first** is that **the family is always presented as the first pastoral challenge of the Church**. This repeated return to the family is a clear indication for us that such a pastoral challenge is not a passing theme. This is not a fad. We are faced with a permanent call that as members of the Salesian Family ask ourselves deeply. **The second** note: **the post-Second Vatican journey is characterized by a gradual pastoral enrichment process**: the family as the protagonist, the family as an accompanying experience. In this unfolding of time and history, the Church becomes ever more present with the humility of pilgrims.

The line of Second Vatican Council and of how this has matured in the journey of the various synods should serve as light and as a paradigm. In fact, Pope Francis asked us to consider the family as "absolute necessity" in his letter to the Rector Major in the bi-centenary of the birth of Don Bosco:

Today more than ever, in the face of what the Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly referred to as "educational emergency" (*cf. Letter to the diocese and the city of Rome on the urgent task, January 21, 2008*), I invite the Salesian Family to facilitate effective educational alliance between different religious and secular agencies to walk with diversity of charisms for youth in the different continents. **Particularly I repeat that it is an absolute necessity to involve the families of young people.**

There can not be an effective youth ministry without a valid family ministry.⁴

3 VALDOCCO –FAMILY AS THE PASTORAL PARADIGM

Revisiting the early years of pastoral experience of Don Bosco at Valdocco, we notice that the family was not considered as a real pastoral subject as we consider it today. We see, rather in the wider understanding of what we now call "**the collective pastoral ideal.**" And it is this way of understanding the family that serves as the base for the educative pastoral proposal of Don Bosco. **The experience of Valdocco had the family as a pastoral paradigm.**

Commenting on the first choices of Don Bosco about the formation of young people, Peter Braido says that the formative proposal was closely linked to the impact of education that a particular type of environment could offer. The oratory was an environment. The Valdocco oratory triggered the integral education processes that were rooted in the paradigm of the "family".

In his community inspired by Christianity, those who do not have families found the sweetness of a **home**, the security of **fatherhood** and **brotherhood** in the person of the director and of the educators, the joy of **friendship**, the perspectives of significant integration in the society with a culture and with a **dignified and remunerative work**; together with a general style of cheerfulness guaranteed by infinite expressions that the educative genius knew how to invent: games, theatre, picnics, music, songs. For this Don Bosco spelled out "the plan of life" in cheerfulness, study and piety.⁵

Starting from our origins, it will be more enlightening to do the necessary bond between the **charismatic proposal in their origins and the experience of Don Bosco in his family at Becchi.**⁶

Braido insists on revealing how "the family, **«schola gremii materni»** (school of the maternal bosom), **is the primary matrix of the personality of Don Bosco.** His life in the family was conditioned by premature absence of his father, died when he was not even two years old, by the presence of a step elder brother by seven years and paternal grand mother. In the midst of all this, he finds the presence of a determinant mother of enormous human and spiritual firmness, a true 'fatherly mother'.⁷

⁴ PAPA FRANCESCO, *Come Don Bosco, con i giovani e per i giovani*, Lettera del Santo Padre Francesco, al Reverendo Don Angel Fernandez Artime, Rettor Maggiore dei Salesiani nel Bicentenario della Nascita di San Giovanni Bosco, 24 giugno 2015.

⁵ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, vol. I, Roma, LAS 2003, p. 233. (D'ora in poi *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*)

⁶ P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, Roma, LAS 1999, pp. 138-139. (D'ora in poi *Prevenire non reprimere*).

⁷ *Id*, p. 138.

If we speak about the pedagogical elements, the person of Mamma Margaret remains as fundamental in the growth of her son.

Margaret Occhiena is the first educator and teacher of 'pedagogy'. After almost 60 years he wrote about her, that "her greatest care was in instructing religion to her sons, making them busy with obedience and things befitting to their age." In the family, he learned first of all, the habit of prayer, duties, sacrifice; at the same time, led by the mother, the practice of the sacrament of confession at the age of reason. Side by side he also started to read and write.⁸

In a similar way, Don Egidio Viganò, in one of his letters expresses the theme of family when he delves on the relationship between the growth of the charisma of Don Bosco in Valdocco and the experience of family.

This genial 'family' style has its origins in the life of the Founder himself, in his experience in his own family under the guidance of Mamma Margaret. Her heroic move to Valdocco served to permeate the environment of those poor boys with the same family style, from which has sprung the substance of the preventive system and so many of our traditions that go with it. Don Bosco knew by personal experience that the formation of his own personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and kindness ("self-giving") of his family at the Becchi, and he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities at the Valdocco Oratory among those poor and abandoned youngsters.⁹

It is helpful to recall a reflection of Aldo Giraudo in his article "The model of family in the vision and experience of Don Bosco"¹⁰, because, he brings out more the relationship between the experience of Valdocco and his original family. He writes:

It emerges clearly the bond between the work of Don Bosco and the family, including the specific mission and the Salesians on two levels. First of all the *Memoirs of the Oratory* makes us realize that the educational experience and relationships experienced by John Bosco became a resource and inspiration for the work of the Oratory, for its method and its relationship style: positive mother image, but also the traumatic loss of his father, which engraved in Don Bosco a more acute awareness of the importance and the role of the father figure; and uniqueness of family relationships, the atmosphere of welcoming and intimate trust, the spirit of adjustments and belonging that characterize a human family became a resource and

⁸ P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, p. 139. Vedi anche P. Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*, vol. I, p. 321, specialmente nota 75: P. Cavaglià – M. Borsi, *Solidale nell'educazione. La presenza e l'immagine della donna in don Bosco*. Roma, LAS 1992, pp. 91-103, *Realtà e simbolo di una madre. Margherita Occhiena nelle Memorie dell'Oratorio*.

⁹ DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *Nell'Anno della Famiglia*, Lettera pubblicata in ACG n. 349, 1994; c'è anche da ricordare la riflessione offerta da DON PASCUAL CHÁVEZ nella Lettera pubblicata in ACG 394, 2006, che porta il commento della STRENNNA del 2006: *Assicurare una speciale attenzione alla famiglia, che è culla della vita e dell'amore e luogo primario di umanizzazione*

¹⁰ A. GIRAUDDO, *Il modello familiare nella visione e nell'esperienza di don Bosco*, in <http://www.donboscoland.it/articoli/articolo.php?id=2140>

inspiration for the educative family of the Oratory (inspiring model of every other Salesian).

Secondly, the work of Don Bosco was born in a specific historical context and in relation to a historically connoted family type to compensate the absence of a family or to support and complement the role of the family in the care of the basic needs of young people, in their need for affection, human and cultural education, religious education and moral and spiritual development in order to help them achieve their personal vocation and prepare them for life and to participate in society and in the church as active and useful members. This bond is not only a fact of life, but it is a constitutive and important for the identity, the fruitfulness of the Salesian presence and its mission in history.

This reference to the understanding of the family in life, in the mind and heart of Don Bosco gives us a starting point to discover the inspirations that enlighten us today as we live the new challenges in these new pastoral areas.

4 *STARTING FROM 'EVANGELII GAUDIUM'*

We can not let ourselves be led by Amoris Laetitia if we do not start from Evangelii Gaudium. Offering us the *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis Pope has called us for a clear effort, although challenging, towards that goal which he calls the "pastoral conversion":

I am aware that nowadays documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and that they are quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences. I hope that all communities will **devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are.** "Mere administration" can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be "permanently in a state of mission". (EG n. 25)

Starting with this invitation, we ask ourselves: what are the choices that we have to consider that support us in our pastoral journey? Where do we start that our response is not a poor and weak photocopy of action that does not say anything new in our day? Briefly we point out two aspects that accompany this journey: the history as a challenge, and the model of our pastoral response.

4.1 **The History as a Challenge**

The Lord sends us to live his love and to witness to the good news of the gospel "today", "here" and "now." The history that we are called to encounter and embrace is this and not another. Ours is an epoch where everything is an institution or institutional and is going through **major and rapid changes** never seen before; "the family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds" (EG n. 66). At this juncture living the **pastoral conversion** means acting in order to make it possible for so many people we meet to taste "a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds... we

Christians remain steadfast in our intention to respect others, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6,2) (EG n. 67).

In these two points, the epoch-making change and the invitation to convert oneself pastorally, we have a synthesis of the challenge that we accept with realism but also with determination and intelligence.

It is not the time of lamentation but of pastoral courage. The trap of ‘doleful laments’, being always there, but we must avoid it with dignity and nobility that characterize those who believe that this present time is the time of God, of which we are bearers of a proposal which is the fruit of a missionary creativity and the response to the call of God (cfr. AL 57)

4.2 A pastoral response

Here arises a question in our hearts: how to face this challenge? How to live this vocation in a changing and liquid society?

In the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis offers an extensive reflection on the **social dimension of evangelization**. The chapter is very interesting not so much for not ignoring the historical events that the time and history contain but on the contrary, it is precisely in the human experiences where one can find the division between the past and the future, the old and the new, known and unknown, where we are called to be present with the Gospel that is liberative. We the members of the Salesian Family in this historical phase are present with the proposal of integral education.

***Evangelii Gaudium* in number 236** offers us the model of polyhedron through which we look and interpret the historical events and offer the valid proposals that shed light and offer future:

The polyhedron (prism) is the model

- Which reflects **the convergence of all its parts**, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.
- Pastoral and political activities seek to gather in this polyhedron **the best of each**.
- There is a place for **the poor** and their **culture**, their **aspirations** and their **potential**.
- Even **people** who can be **considered dubious on account of their errors** have something to offer which must not be over-looked. (EG n.236)

In the above points, we have the vocabulary that helps us and accompanies us for the reading of *Amoris Laetitia*: **convergence, synergy, poor, excluded**. These words compel us to come out of our *comfort zones* where “we are made always like this”.

- i. The persons we meet in search of convergence with all their history and wounds, but also their small or large riches

- ii. The synergy that we can favour between individuals who are involved in the place for the good of the young and family, where everyone carries the best of himself or herself.
- iii. The welcoming door for those who are poor, for those who feel alone and abandoned, but it does not mean that they have no dreams and plans;
- iv. The capacity to see the good hidden in the heart of every man and woman, boy and girl, also people who are hard, people who seem to be outside the social, cultural and religious framework.

Though they are not uniform, precise and well formulated, yet these lines build together the pastoral polyhedron.

If we look carefully at the proposal of Don Bosco at Valdocco, we notice a similar pastoral preparation. Towards 1862, writing of the oratory youth, he sees as he himself says, “in three classes: unruly, dissipated and good. What appeals to us is to see how in front of difficult cases, towards the unruly, today we call them ‘discarded’ of the society, Don Bosco succeed in giving a compassionate look, offering an inclusive space and assuring a possibility of future. In everything he facilitates an environment where the heart of a good shepherd, a heart without prejudices and without exclusions, can blossom the good hidden in the heart of every human being.”¹¹

5 AMORIS LAETITIA

With interpretations of *Evangelii Gaudium*, let us try to read the *Amoris Laetitia* through the filter of the Salesian charism. Here there are three features that can help our pastoral journeys, considering fully the presence of various groups of the Salesian Family in different social and cultural situations, with typical pastoral approaches and methods of each group.

The three features are like three directions that aim: first, to examine the **points of departure**, that is our pastoral attitudes; second, asking us to examine what are the **criteria and objectives that support our pastoral vision**; Third, to study well what are the **choices we make in our actions** because our right pastoral attitudes along with the criteria and objectives we have set, obtain the desired goal: the good of the young and the family.

¹¹ The good ones stay that way and make marvellous progress in goodness. The restless type, those already accustomed to wandering around not doing much work achieve some success through a trade, with assistance, instruction and by being kept busy. The undisciplined ones mean we have a lot to do. If we can get them to gain some taste for work we can mostly win them over. By the means already indicated we can obtain some results which could be explained thus: 1. That they do not get worse. 2. Many improve in common sense, so can earn their bread in an upright manner. 3. Those who seemed to be insensitive under vigilance over time become more pliant if not completely, at least to some extent. We leave it to time to profit from the good principles and know how to put them into practice.” in “Cenni storici intorno all’Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales”, in *Fonti Salesiane*, Roma, LAS 2014, p. 40.

5.1 Pastoral Attitudes

In front of the pastoral challenges that all of us are likely to encounter, it is essential to start with the question: How are we interpreting the challenges? What is our basic attitude in this scenario: closeness or distance? Listening or judgment? Empathy or rejection? Compassion or sense of superiority? Readiness to serve or readiness to be served?

In **the second Chapter of *Amoris Laetitia***, Pope Francis indicates **few challenges of our journey**. But what impresses more is ‘how’ he offers these challenges. His intention is to help us to see the challenges as windows towards opportunities that await us.

a. First of all, we must be ready to **read the panorama** that it presents us “the principal tendencies in anthropological-cultural changes” are leading “individuals, in personal and family life, to receive less and less support from social structures than in the past”.(n 32), together with the “growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds” (n.33). Here lies an inevitable task of every one called to assume pastoral commitment. We need to read the history of places where we are sent. Listening to the pulses of the place is a sign of affinity and interest that we would like to be pilgrims with the young and the family. The absence of this reading where God sends us, is already a primary sign of anxiety. Instead, through our attitudes of listening, openness and availability, we manifest a strong sign.

b. As pastors and educators of young people, we must avoid a **superficial pastoral reading** which is likely to lead us into a blind dead-end of pessimism. An important element of our Salesian education is the ability to facilitate "a personalization that points out authenticity rather than reproducing already set behaviors." We bear and live the great proposal that brings young people to noble goals, a personal discipline that allows them to mature the best in themselves: “the freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others” (n. 33). A superficial pastoral reading makes us to lose the whole perspective of human fullness.

c. Beside this pastoral attitude that favours a healthy reading of the situation, the Pope suggests **the courage of witness and words**. It exhorts us to not be disclaimers. As people who are called, the challenges are to be taken with intelligence and management with pastoral creativity: “as Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer”(n.35). **Finding the balance does not mean making compromises**, but paving the way in people's hearts, a heart that is in search of authentic witnesses of who live what they believe.

d. In relation to the courage of witness and words, the Pope does not speak of a militant attitude, least of crusades. While it is right to condemn on one side, on the other the journey before us does not follow the logic of "imposing rules with the power of authority" (35). In this historical moment "we are asked for a more responsible and generous effort that consist in **presenting the reasons and motivations for opting in favor of marriage and the family**, so that people are more willing to respond to the grace that God

offers them" (n. 35). And this is a demanding task that requires a lot of reflection.

e. The paragraph 40, asks us to increase our capacity to find the **right language for the young**. We can boldly call this paragraph as **the 'salesian paragraph'**, because it pushes us to recognize the need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage (n 40).

Apart from the words said in the paragraph, it is making a pastoral vision mature with the process that **"speaks of the young and speaks to the young"**. Here, we do not go to search for the vocabulary for them. Here the vocabulary is already found in the way we meet the challenges, the way we read and the way we respond. Here the vocabulary we must learn within our authenticity and also from our humility to put ourselves on their wavelength. If we are physically far from the young, we are not only "effectively" far, but probably also "affectively" far. Here the discussion on the vocabulary of the young touches the realm of salesian assistance that continues to be a genial secret and much more a concrete secret of Don Bosco.

f. Here then is the final challenge that Pope Francis comments several times in various parts of the exhortation: the challenge for a **missionary creativity, with no laments, but hope and prophecy**:

The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in self-defensive lamentations, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, "the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope... The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence".

With this healthy optimism rooted in the call, the difficulties that we find are "invitation to revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions and creative forms of charity" (n 57)

For all of us as groups of the Salesian Family, before taking any step to formulate a proposal, it is an urgent and indispensable to find a space of **reflection** and of **prayers** in order to **purify, verify and strengthen our pastoral attitudes**. with these deep rooted choices, these pastoral attitudes, we live and address our vocation in the light of the parable of sower (Mt 13,3-9), (being) our task of cooperating in sowing: the rest is the work of God (n 200)

Only with this logic, as Church we shall reach "the families with humility and compassion, with the desire to help each family to discover the best way to overcome any obstacle it encounters" (n 200). Prayer and reflections are for knowing how to embed the logic of God but also in the history of the people. Reflecting to respond in a way that overcomes a certain common and dangerous pastoral superficiality, because " It is not enough to show generic concern for the family in pastoral planning (n. 200). On this, however, we'll be back later.

5.2 Pastoral Criteria

Such attitudes lead to a series of criteria which in turn give rise to pastoral proposals. In this part we offer some pastoral criteria dealt in **Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 of *Amoris Laetitia***. As the Pope suggests at the beginning of the Apostolic Exhortation, it is desirable that this document will be considered as a **tool for study and reflection as it is not a manual of answers, but rather an invitation to dedicate ourselves to listening and service.**

a. The fruitfulness of love that generates

The first pastoral criterion is to start from the understanding of love in the **logic of fruitfulness in the broadest possible sense**. Love creates, love makes fruitful wherever one accepts to live it. Let us ask ourselves: In our educational and pastoral processes what it means for us to interpret our action and witnessing in the logic of love that generates life? What does it mean for us, pastoral workers, make our own challenge to "to appreciate the purely gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us" (n. 166)? How do we reflect in our pastoral plans "the primacy of the love of God, who always takes the initiative, for children "are loved before having done anything to deserve it? (N. 166) What kind of pastoral imagination needs to mature to meet "many children who are rejected, abandoned, and robbed of their childhood and future from the first moments of their lives. There are those who dare to say, as if to justify themselves, that it was a mistake to bring these children into the world.(n.166).

These are questions that should be heeded within the various educational and pastoral processes and towards which we must at least respond. Our pastoral criteria need to be nurtured with ideas and strong convictions and allow themselves to be challenged by questions that may seem uncomfortable. Otherwise we run the risk of doing many things, without knowing neither "why" nor "where". The logic of fruitfulness and the understanding of love that is generative give meaning and direction to our pastoral choices of both short and long terms.

b. Responding to the absence of fatherhood and motherhood

A second criterion that must enlighten our pastoral reflection is the following: **to understand and respond to the "absence of fatherhood and motherhood."** And here we let ourselves be questioned by the challenge of the lack of models for which, on the one hand, our young people and children are seeking to overcome their being orphans, while on the other, we find the disorientation of many parents who find themselves without a vocabulary with which to connect with the world of their children.

What does it mean for us today to find ourselves in these defective directions, in this land of convulsion and disintegration? What are the answers that we can offer through processes and educative pastoral proposals? Here comes the need of a profound reflection that while encountering and interpreting this sense of emptiness and research, will also be a reflection that offers paths and pastoral decisions.

c. The family is the pastoral subject

Getting to the crux of our pastoral experience, in light of what is shared so far, in-depth study of **Chapter 6 of the Amoris Laetitia**, will help us more to start from the third criterion of paramount importance: **the families are the main subjects of the family ministry**:

The Synod Fathers emphasized that Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate, above all through “their joy-filled witness as domestic churches”. Consequently, it is important that people experience the Gospel of the family as a joy that ‘fills hearts and lives’, because in Christ we have been ‘set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness’ (n. 200).

This call is a pastoral criterion of importance, if we really want that our consistent pastoral proposal is **true, certain and meaningful**. To the extent that we imagine the family as the protagonist, then we overcome the already mentioned pastoral superficiality, in order to go further, in building and witnessing of pastoral processes.

Rightly, then, Pope Francis warns us that "it is not enough to insert a general concern for the family in the big pastoral projects. **Enabling families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for “an effort at evangelization and catechesis inside the family”**(n. 200).

And here the Apostolic Exhortation, no. **201**, calls us to the "missionary conversion" in which we understand that "one is not content to proclaim a merely theoretical message without connection to people’s real problems". Here **three orientations** are very clear that can serve both as personal and community examination of conscience and as serene and sincere evaluation of our pastoral proposals:

- i. **Pastoral care for families “needs to make it clear that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person**: a response to each one’s dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness
- ii. It is also “highlighted the fact **that evangelization needs unambiguously to denounce** cultural, social, political and economic factors
- iii. **Dialogue and cooperation need to be fostered** with societal structures and encouragement given to lay people who are involved, as Christians, in the cultural and socio-political fields (n. 201).

These three orientations - **Gospel, denunciation and synergy** - in a clear pastoral criterion see the family as the protagonist and are not drained in pious exhortations, even less in the specific events. Here it is a process that should be thought about, reflected and shared among all those who are part of the presence or pastoral experience: young people, animators, teachers, catechists, parents and all those who are involved in the educative pastoral plan. We will comment further on the implications that this entails with it.

d. The gradualness in pastoral care

Finally, the fourth criterion, **the gradualness in pastoral care** (n. 293), we find it analyzed in **Chapter 8** through the trinomial "accompanying", "discerning" and "integrating." The chapter begins by presenting this pastoral criterion with the following words: "as members of the Church, they too need pastoral care that is merciful and helpful"(n. 293). The question we ask ourselves is the following: within our pastoral proposals how does this criterion enlighten us? What is the meaning and how is the trinomial "accompanying", "discerning" and "integrating" translated?

And here we are called to reflect carefully on how our proposals and our structures really give signs of closeness especially to those families who are in the periphery not only in religious and ecclesial dimension but also social, cultural and economic dimensions. The challenge for us is to translate the trinomial "accompanying", "discerning" and "integrating" into an educative and pastoral vocabulary which can take the following forms: "welcoming", "involving" and "forming."

- i. **welcoming (accompanying):** to provide a listening space where people, young and adults realize that the work and the presence is a "home" where all the pastoral agents are sisters and brothers ready to share the journey, without prejudices and without exclusions;
- ii. **involving (discerning):** proposing opportunities and processes where young people and parents are encouraged to be active members, protagonists, everyone according to his or her abilities and possibilities. In other words, that the presence with the educative and pastoral proposal is an experience where the frontiers of participation are widened according to the aptitudes of people. In the logic of concentric circles, there are no restrictions placed by pleasure, by prejudice or arbitrary self-referential to those who are called to be servants.
- iii. **forming (integrating):** communicating a pastoral vision that does not limit in offering a product to our young people and our families, but it goes beyond. A vision that enables, forms, make witnesses and multipliers of very people who are welcomed and involved, and when due time comes they become not only disciples, but also apostles.

5.3 Practical Choices

We come to the last part of this reflection: the practical choices. And here we get back to the first part - *identity, charism, community* -, that is we start from our roots to look at the future with hope, joy and optimism.

a. Community

The Salesian Family finds the pastoral heart of Don Bosco in the memory of the beginning of Valdocco. The sign of a participative pastoral proposal, especially in relation to the great potentials that the family now gives us, we are called to reflect on how the style and the paradigm of the Community of living the Salesian charism is the Salesian form of animation in each educational reality.

As we have already commented before, contemplating the origin of the Salesian charism, **we meet Don Bosco as one who builds around him a community-family**, where a experience of healthy and valid protoagonism was communicated to the young and was announced for a healthy experience and valuable leadership. The Oratory continues to be for us today a reference point for a proposal with clear objectives, lived in the convergence of roles well defined for the young. The charism of Don Bosco finds its *humus* in this educative pastoral experience. The Congregation and the Salesian Family were born from this community-family. From this same source we continue to nourish ourselves.

In light of the pastoral opportunities that emerge, living and fulfilling the mission of Don Bosco today do not ask us to create new structures in addition to other existing bodies and participation in the different works or pastoral environments, but rather a **renewed thinking towards a greater communion that keeps alive the different gifts and charisms** as complementary realities, in mutual reciprocity, at the service of the same mission.

If evangelization is the fruit of a collective journey, a mission of the consecrated and the lay, who unite their strength in collaboration by the exchange of gifts, despite the differences in the formation, tasks, charisms and degrees of participation in this mission, then the Salesian Family today must work to ensure that our pastoral actions move from actions of individuals towards greater coordination of the various interventions, a search of understanding and complementarity between all, a search for collaboration, an effort of organic planning.

Our presences and our proposals are to be a continuation of what our Father and Teacher lived in the beginning: **a community of people, oriented to the education of young people**, who can become for them an experience of Church and open them to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

b. Plan

A community of educators oriented to the education of young people propose an educative pastoral plan. Improvisation is only to bring confusions. A first challenge that we have already learned and that Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*, as well as in *Amoris Laetitia*, invites us to take seriously, is that of a pastoral conversion: **a reconstruction of a mature sense of belonging and also a renewal of attitudes** in our way of thinking, to evaluate and to act, to face the problems and the style of relationships: with young people, among educators, the pastoral ministers and families.

We must make our own a profound conviction that the **initiatives and the most significant pastoral proposals are organized as a network**. All the protagonists, educators, youth, families collaborate at different levels in the development of the proposals and pastoral journeys. The experience of a community or group that proposes is the center of convergence where they concretize: a) **the communion of criteria** (attitudes); b) **the convergence of intentions** (goals) and, c) **the organic unity of interventions** (shared responsibility, discussion, research, evaluation).

This **planning attitude** is and will be a great challenge as well as a gift for the whole Salesian Family. Because within this planning attitude two sides of the heart of Don Bosco will grow:

the "**pastoral charity**" and "**pedagogical intelligence**". The world of youth asks us for a renewed commitment lived in constancy with continuity and concerted nature of the different educational agents and to each other. It is a requirement that all recognize each other and committ ourselves around the unified proposal. The pastoral individualism and fragmented pastoral proposal have no future because they are a counter-witness for today.

Therefore we need a plan that is capable of continuing the "tradition" and at the same time to incorporate the "new". It is no longer acceptable to start over continuously from the scratch with every change of the responsible persons and of the team.

Planning is an attitude of mind and heart, which becomes a concrete action. Planning is a process rather than a result. Planning is of a pastoral aspect than one of passenger's act. Planning is a path of involvement and unification of forces.

And this is where lies the heart and at the same time proof of the response that we as the Salesian Family will give to the Church and to the world in relation to the family. If we engage around the **creation of a community that is present with young people and for young people with the heart of the Good Shepherd**, if we as a community, together, carry out an educative pastoral project that is credible for and with the family

Within the Plan we recognize the family as the first and essential educative community, we recognize it in its truth, in its potentials: the cell of a society and of the Church, the first person, not only in the transmission of life, but even more in the educative mission, an irreplaceable and inalienable subject.

c. Accompaniment

A community that lives and proposes a plan feels the need not only to accompany, but also to be accompanied. **The community that lives a plan is a living organism which exists to the extent that it grows and develops.** For this, it should not only take care of its organization but also to develop his life. We can identify three levels in relation to which we have to take care of this accompaniment:

i. Accompaniment of Environment

The environment is where the Salesian educative pastoral experience is accompanied. As it is a living reality, **every environment is built.** It is in it where young people feel at home in an atmosphere of support, flow of ideas and affections. And if we speak of young people, the same must be said for all those who take the education of children, primarily the parents

The environment must be understood and perceived in its potential where young people and adults feel welcomed and involved. In this perspective, the environment offers young people and families, spaces and processes with which they can identify themselves. An environment that is taken care and accompanied certainly **engender the process of permanent formation of quality** and at different levels: human, spiritual, Christian and Salesian.

ii. Accompaniment of a group

To all those who come into contact with a proposal of life and of Salesian spirituality we must think of offering the **experience of a journey**. Marked by respect, of gradualness and contrast, these itineraries recognize and respond to two major dimensions: the dimension of **belonging** and that of **identity**. The experience of the group has to meet the desire of research, being protagonists, to feel oneself in the journey with others. In connection with this dimension, the group gives identity, trigger initiatives and processes, gives rise to signs of vitality that enable young people and families to get in touch with proposals of human values and of faith that in the end are vitally assimilated.

How many of young people and families we met have rediscovered their faith or even have discovered, by having an experience in one of our presences, participating in some group or experience carried out in our presences! The groups in these environments, each with its own particular experience and all the groups connected, must let themselves be attracted by this climate of shared belonging and of mutual support. In this way the Salesian family can be a promoter of a real experience of community, namely the Church.

iii. Personal accompaniment

A third task that is present before us: personal accompaniment. It is the most challenging, and consequently, has a crucial importance.

Those who have a pastoral responsibility within the Salesian Family groups, can never forget that " if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14). **Growing in human and Christian maturity and then knowing to enlighten and to guide others, is not a luxury, rather it's an emergency!** An atmosphere that is authentically Salesian comes to propose to walk where the person is given the opportunity to be reached in his individuality, "face to face."

Salesian activities want to wake up in the young, but also in families, an active and critical collaboration, measured on their abilities. The time needed for these experiences of personal growth are not the same in all and the situations and decisions before which the young people and families find themselves are not the same. Here the pastoral creativity together with prudence and respect for persons have a decisive character.

Among these, there is **the spiritual direction**, during which one consolidates the faith as life in Christ and as a radical meaning of existence. It helps to discern the personal vocation of each one in the Church and in the world, and to grow steadily in the spiritual life till holiness

Here we enter a sphere clearly that is well thought out, reflected and programmed. If, on the one hand, we are all convinced of the urgent need of people ready to listen and to accept in confidence with respect, on the other hand, we are also aware that we need people who have the gift of listening and accept the educational responsibility to assist the youth and families in their efforts to grow.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with a quote written twenty-two years ago in 1994. In that year, dedicated to the family, Fr Egidio Viganò wrote a letter¹² that in light of what we are experiencing today has a very strong prophetic character:

The matter of the family is too important for us to allow it to finish with the ending of this particular Year. We must rather consider 1994 as a window opening onto vast horizons which touch on the relevance of our charism and suggest many new and urgent aspects of our mission of New Evangelization.

It is opportune therefore that we consider seriously how this theme of the family impinges **deeply on our process of renewal**. It will help us to **feel ourselves more deeply "at the heart of the Church" and more solidly united "with the world and its history"**. The Holy Spirit has raised us up among the People of God with a specific task of pastoral work for the young. We know very well, and we have said it on several occasions, that **no authentic pastoral work for the young is possible without a practical and interrelated pastoral work for the family**.

We have to ask ourselves: can an educator at the present day form the person of his youngsters without deepening, clarifying and reliving family values? Is a new evangelization possible in the Church without taking up in depth 'and in new ways the themes of sexuality, marriage and conjugal life?

To this question that wakes us up to a living pastoral vision, Fr Viganò pushes the discourse on the side of pertaining pastoral proposals:

It is my sincere impression that we are all convinced of this evangelical relationship with the families. The problem lies at the present day in the demands of the New Evangelization which gives the family pride of place among the objectives of our pastoral care. We need to give special attention to a revision of this sector of our commitment which touches vitally on our educative activities, the care of lay people in our associations and our collaboration in the pastoral priorities of the local Church.

Arriving at the end of this reflection, i wish and pray that if, in 22 years, it might bring back the theme of the family to the Day of Salesian Spirituality, one can say that we have walked a long way.

Thank you!

¹² DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *In the Year of the Family*, Letter Published in AGC n. 349, 1994