

YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY: Heritage and Guidelines for the Future

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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 at this time in history appears above all as a great challenge and a great opportunity. It is a theme that requires us to deal with it with a very specific pastoral attitude – one animated by prophetic dimensions founded on faith in Christ – a pastoral attitude full of hope and nourished and brought forth by love. We are aware, or at least we should be, that we can fall victim to a complaining mentality, which will end in condemning the darkness rather than in moving to light a candle. Our times are times of a joyful and an optimistic missionary spirit.

As Salesian Family, and as part of the experience of 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*, no.57). We are convinced that today, more than ever, we as Salesian Family have a word to share, a plan to propose, and pastoral experience to offer. This perspective explains the second part of the title: *Heritage and Guidelines for the Future*.

For this reason, I wish to start with a simple but central question: Where do we come from – we, members of the Salesian Family? What history do we carry in our backpacks?

Definitely, we are not starting from 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 in various presences and with several different proposals for serving the young, especially the poorest. Let us also recognize that, in recent years, we have made some deep reflections on our ministry and have shared them with the whole Church.

Since this is so, we list here, very briefly, **a few points that summarize our heritage and our proposal**. By beginning with our past, with its rich dimensions - human, Christian, and charismatic - we feel encouraged to continue the journey in these new socio-cultural areas, together with young people, with families, and with the protagonists of our history.

1.1 Identity

We can say that **the Salesian Family is the custodian of a Call that has a precise identity: to evangelize and educate according to a plan of holistic growth**. Since evangelization is a complex and a multi-faceted work, we understand it as an experience animated by a concern for wholeness within educational processes. Through commitment and attention to these processes, we help and accompany young people towards holistic growth.

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

Being Salesian has one goal: every young person is to be accompanied in the building of his or her personality, which has Christ as the fundamental reference point. Our present is true and beautiful to the extent that our identity - evangelizing by educating, educating by evangelizing - continues to grow stronger and be nourished by this profound and inseparable relationship between educative actions and evangelizing ones.¹

1.2 Charism

Our identity is not articulated by off-the-cuff words and phrases. It does not consist of improvised actions plucked from the sky. **Our identity is a charismatic identity.** We educate and evangelize through a life inspired by the Preventive System. **Don Bosco left us a heritage called the "Preventive System"**. It is an educational plan for holistic growth - reason, religion and loving-kindness - that makes evident, at one and the same time, both the humanistic wealth and the essential religious soul of this system within an environment that breathes Gospel charity - *agape*. The Preventive System is for us, the sons and daughters of Don Bosco, a method of action, characterized by the centrality of: reason - reasonableness of demands and of rules and flexibility and persuasiveness of proposals; religion - understood as the cultivation of the sense of God inherent in every person and the effort to bring to it the beauty of the Good News; and love, an 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 it is a gift for the whole Church. It is not for us to hold onto it as private property, but to live it 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 DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ. *New Education*, Letter published in AGC, no. 337, 1991.

² SAINT JOHN PAUL II. Letter *Iuvenum Patris*. January 31, 1988, no. 8.

1.3 Community

Another fundamental aspect - and I would say also a foundational one - of our educative and pastoral heritage 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, ecclesiastics, and bishops from round the world who saw in it a religious renewal and revival. **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 - these words still constitute, even today, a treasure, a heritage, and also a challenge, particularly where future guidelines are concerned. These words help us translate our identity and charism into concrete experiences where the young people we meet – on the street, tossed aside and abandoned, without a “now” and, consequently, without a “tomorrow” – can find acceptance, accompaniment, and a sense of direction. These are words that we need today so as to propose places and environments for parents and families who feel lost and unable to communicate with their own children. This is our road to Jericho - and we are not allowed to look the other way and just walk on by!

1.4 Proposal

This fourth element completes our heritage: the **proposal**. Wherever the Lord sends us, wherever we find ourselves within our presences, wherever we come to the community and create a welcoming environment, **we have a word to offer and an experience to propose**. Ours is a proposal that presupposes the other three elements - identity, charism, community - and translates them into a **journey of holistic growth**. We do our best so that the young people we meet, personally and as a group, discover the beauty of believing and the joy of looking heavenward with the conviction that life is a gift given and a divine space.

³ DON JUAN EDMUNDO VECCHI, *Behold the Favorable Time*, Letter published in ACG, no. 373, 2000.

We are called to help young people grow in their educational potential: the abilities of their minds and their hands. We offer them and their families a place where, not only does one not feel lonely, but every person - young and adult - discovers him- or herself to be a protagonist together with others in the various experiences of both groups and associations. Finally, we seek still today to lead every young person to the point of considering that most beautiful yet challenging question: What is God's plan for my life? What is my calling in life, my vocation?

Encapsulated in these four dimensions - *identity, charism, community, and proposal* - we find the broad strokes of our heritage. We also find the foundation for discovering within the journey of the Church that we have a gift to treasure – deepening, through dialogue, our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that knock on our door. For this reason, the Church's call concerning the family is, for us today, something very serious and profoundly important. It is not a matter of performing “cosmetic surgery”, of making some minor adjustments to our schedules, or of giving a few extra conferences to old or new groups. No – here we are all called to put forth all our pastoral energies and all our ability to dream so that our young people, their family, and all families together feel welcomed, accompanied, and made protagonists of their own lives and of our history.

2 PASTORAL JOURNEY OF THE CHURCH AND THE FAMILY

Having traversed this concise journey concerning our treasure, with all the perspectives that it presents to us, we now turn to reflection on the theme of the family as found along the Church's journey. **It is important to clarify immediately that the theme of the family is neither a publicity spot** nor something that has become fashionable of late; therefore, let me make a short tour of how the Church, beginning with the reflections of the Second Vatican Council, has taken the theme of the family very seriously.

We cannot lose the connection with the journey of the Church if we wish to understand how the unfolding of history is the greatest scenario in which the Lord is calling to us. If we do not do so, we run the risk that, after having pronounced – or will pronounce – so many lovely words about the family, everything will end up like the famous Italian proverb: a lot of smoke, but precious little roast!

2.1. Gaudium et Spes

From the outline of Vatican Council II's Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, we see how the two parts of the document treat of, first, *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 with in 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 note that the first challenge and the first concern that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council identified was that of marriage and the family. Here it is important to mention that **in *Gaudium et Spes* the family is an active subject which has a mission to accomplish** and which should be helped by all

components of society. *Gaudium et Spes* does not speak of the family as if it were a problem or a patient needing care. We must never forget this!

In its dialogue with the world, which is the fulcrum of *Gaudium et Spes*, marriage and family constitute the first concern. Only afterwards are 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*, 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 growing attention given by the Church to the theme of the family. It suffices to note that *after the two synods of the 70's, (one on evangelization with the Apostolic Exhortation **Evangelii Nuntiandi** and the next on catechesis, from which emerged the Apostolic Exhortation **Catechesi Tradendae**)* we find that the Synod on the Family followed immediately and yielded the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation **Familiaris Consortio**.

How the Church developed this journey is a witness to the fact that from the very moment when the Church recognizes itself as the bearer of Good News, it immediately looks to marriage and the family because "the well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked" to it. (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 47) The family is 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[; it] **is the foundation of society.**" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 52) The Church regards the family thus.

In recent years, we see a similar pastoral journey taking place again, within which attention to the family recurs as a priority. Following the Synod on the **New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith**, in 2012, we received the Apostolic Exhortation **Evangelii Gaudium**, as a pastoral program for the Church. It opened 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 trace out our pastoral guidelines for the coming years.

Two brief notes on this journey experienced by the Church over the last 50 years: **the first** is that **the family is always presented as the first pastoral concern of the Church**. This repeated return to the family is a clear indication for us that such a pastoral concern is not a passing theme. This is not a fad. We are faced with an on-going call that as members of the Salesian Family provokes us deeply. **The second: the post-Second Vatican Council journey is characterized by a gradual pastoral process of enrichment:** the family as the protagonist, and the family as an experience of accompaniment. In this unfolding of time and history, the Church makes Herself ever more present with the humble nature of a pilgrim.

The direction of the Second Vatican Council and of how this has matured along the journey of the various synods should serve as a light and as a paradigm. In fact, Pope Francis asked us to

consider the family as an "imperative need" in his letter to the Rector Major in the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco:

Today more than ever, in the face of what Pope Benedict XVI often referred to as an "educational emergency" (cf. *Letter to the diocese and the city of Rome on the urgent task of educating young people*, 21 January 2008), I invite the Salesian Family to promote an effective educational alliance between different religious and secular agencies so as to move forward with the diversity of your charisms at the service of youth in the different continents. **In particular, I remind you of the imperative need to involve the families of young people. There can indeed be no effective youth ministry without a good family ministry.**⁴

3 VALDOCCO – FAMILY AS THE PASTORAL PARADIGM

When revisiting the early years of Don Bosco's pastoral experience in Valdocco, we notice that the family was not considered a true subject of our ministry in the way it is today. We see it, rather, in the broader understanding of what we now call "**the collective pastoral ideal.**" It is this way of understanding the family that serves as the basis for the educative pastoral proposal of Don Bosco. **The pastoral paradigm of the Valdocco experience was the family.**

In commenting on Don Bosco's first choices concerning the formation of young people, Peter Braido says that the formative proposal was closely linked to the educational impact that a particular type of environment could offer. The oratory was that environment. The Valdocco oratory triggered holistic educational processes that were rooted in the paradigm of the "family".

In his community inspired by Christianity, those who did 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**, and the possibility of significant integration in cultural society with **dignified and remunerative work**. They also found a general atmosphere of cheerfulness, guaranteed by the infinite activities that the educative genius knew how to invent: games, theatre, picnics, music, songs. In this, Don Bosco spelled out "the plan of life" as cheerfulness, study, and piety.⁵

⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Like Don Bosco, with the Young and For the Young*, Letter of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to the Reverend Don Angel Fernandez Artime, Rector Major of the Salesians on the Bicentenary of the Birth of St. John Bosco, June 24, 2015.

⁵ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, vol. I, Roma, LAS 2003, p. 233. (*Don Bosco, Priest of the Young in the Century of Liberty*)

Beginning with our origins, it will be most enlightening to make the indispensable connection between his **initial charismatic proposals and the experience Don Bosco had in his own family in Becchi.**⁶

Braido insists on revealing how “the family, the **«schola gremii materni»** (school of the maternal bosom), **is the primary matrix for Don Bosco’s personality.** His was a family life conditioned by the premature absence of his father, who died when he was not even two years old, and by the presence of a step-brother, his elder by seven years, and his semi-invalid paternal grandmother. At the center of all this, he finds the decisive presence of his mother – a woman of great human and spiritual firmness, a true ‘fatherly mother’.”⁷

If we speak about pedagogical elements, the figure of Mamma Margaret turns out to be fundamental for the growth of her son.

Margaret Occhiena was the first one to provide Don Bosco with his education: she was Don Bosco’s first teacher. Writing about her, 60 years after her death, Don Bosco says: Her greatest concern was to teach her children religion, training them to be obedient, and keeping them busy, doing what was appropriate at their age. It is within his family that Don Bosco, thanks to his mother’s guidance, acquired the habit of prayer, of performing his religious duties, of making sacrifices and, in due time, by the time he reached the age of reason, the habit of regularly going to confession. He was also encouraged to read and write.⁸

Along the same lines, Don Egidio Viganò, when speaking on theme of family in one of his letters, delves into the relationship between the growth of Don Bosco’s charism at 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 in Becchi, and he wanted to repro-

⁶ P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, Roma, LAS 1999, pp. 138-139/*Prevention, not Repression*.

⁷ *Prevention, not Repression*, p. 138.

⁸ P. BRAIDO, *Prevention, not Repression*, pp. 95-96. See also P. Braido, *Don Bosco, Priest of the Young*, vol. I, p. 321, especially note 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*.

duce its most significant qualities at the Valdocco Oratory among those poor and abandoned youngsters.⁹

It is helpful to recall one of Don Aldo Giraudo's reflections 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:

The ties between Don Bosco's work and the family emerge clearly on two levels, both as regards the specific mission and the Salesians. First of all, the *Memoirs of the Oratory* make 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 for its relationship style. There was positive mother image but also the traumatic loss of his father, which engraved in Don Bosco a very acute awareness of the importance and the role of the father figure. There was the uniqueness of family relationships, the atmosphere of welcoming and intimate trust, the spirit of adjustment and of belonging that characterize a human family. All these became a resource and inspiration for the educative family of the Oratory (and the inspiring model for every other Salesian). Secondly, Don Bosco's work was born within a specific historical context and in relation to a historically-defined family - 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: affection, human and cultural education, religious education and moral and spiritual development. This is done in order to help them fulfill their personal vocation, prepare them for life, and help them participate in society and in the Church as active and useful members. This bond is not only a fact of life, but it is constitutive and important for the identity and the fecundity of Salesian presence and of its mission in history.

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

⁹ DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ. *In the Year of the Family*, Letter published in ACG no. 349, 1994; see also DON PASCUAL CHÁVEZ. Comment on the Strenna of 2006: *Ensuring that Special Attention Be Given to the Family, the Cradle of Life and Love and Where One First Learns How to Become Human*. Letter published in ACG no. 394, 2006.

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

4 STARTING FROM EVANGELII GAUDIUM

We cannot let ourselves be led by *Amoris Laetitia* if we do not start from *Evangelii Gaudium*. When offering us *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis called us to make a concerted effort, even if demanding, to reach that goal which he calls "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". (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 25)

Beginning with this invitation, let us ask ourselves: What are the choices that we have to consider that support us along our pastoral journey? Where do we begin so that our response not be a poor and weak photocopy of actions that say nothing new or speak to the young in our day? Let us briefly point out two aspects that accompany this journey: history as both a challenge and the model for our pastoral response.

4.1 History as a Challenge

The Lord sends us out to live His Love and to bear witness to the Good News of the Gospel "today", "here" and "now." The times that we are called to encounter and embrace are these and not any another. Ours is an epoch wherein everything that is an institution or is institutional 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" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 66). At this juncture, living **pastoral conversion** means acting so as to make it possible for the very 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 and *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 67)

These two points – the epoch-making change and the invitation to convert oneself pastorally – sum up the challenge that we accept with realism but also with determination and intelligence.

This is not a time for complaining but for pastoral courage. Even if the possibility of falling into 'doleful laments' is always present, still we must avoid it with the dignity and the nobility that characterize those who believe that this present time is God's time. We are bearers of a proposal which is the fruit of missionary creativity and the response to the God's call (see *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 57)

4.2 A pastoral response

Here arises a question in our hearts: How do we face this challenge? How are we to live this vocation in a changing and fluid society?

In the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis offers an extensive reflection on the **social dimension of evangelization**. This chapter is very interesting not so much because it does not ignore the historical events contained in time and in history but, on the contrary, because it is precisely in these human experiences that one finds the division between the past and the future, the old and the new, the known and the unknown, and where we are called to be present with the Gospel that frees us. We, the members of the Salesian Family of this historical time, are present with our holistic educational proposal.

Number 236 of *Evangelii Gaudium* offers us the model of a polyhedron, a prism, through which we look and interpret historical events and offer valid proposals that shed light and yield a future:

The polyhedron (prism) is the place where:

- Something reflects the convergence of all its parts, [while] each of which preserves its distinctiveness.
- Pastoral and political activity alike 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 overlooked.

In the above points, we find the vocabulary we need to help us read *Amoris Laetitia*: **convergence, synergy, poor, and excluded**. These words compel us to come out of our *comfort zone* of “we have always done it this way”.

- i. The persons we meet who are seeking convergence with their history and their wounds, but also with their little or great riches.
- ii. The synergy that we manage to foster among individuals who are committed to the good of the young and the family, where they live and where everyone brings the best of himself or herself.
- iii. The ready welcome to those who are poor together with those who feel alone and abandoned – but which does not mean that they have no dreams or plans;
- iv. The capacity to see the good hidden in the heart of every man and woman, boy and girl, even those who are most difficult and who seem to be outside the social, cultural, and religious frameworks.

Though the guidelines above are not uniform, precise, and well-formulated, still, together they constitute the pastoral polyhedron.

If we look carefully at Don Bosco's proposal at Valdocco, we notice a very similar pastoral structure. Towards 1862, when writing about the oratory youth, he sees them, as he himself says, "in three classes: unruly, dissipated, and good. What is of interest to us today is to see how, when faced with the difficult cases - the unruly, whom we would call today the 'throw aways', the 'outcasts' of society – Don Bosco succeeded in giving them a compassionate glance, offering them a place where they could belong and assuring them the possibility of future. He did all this by fostering an environment where the heart of the Good Shepherd, a heart without prejudices and without exclusions, could make the good hidden in the heart of every human being blossom."¹¹

5 AMORIS LAETITIA

Using these interpretation keys of *Evangelii Gaudium*, let us try to read *Amoris Laetitia* through the lens of the Salesian charism. Here, three guidelines can help us on our pastoral journeys, taking into full consideration the fact that today a number of different Groups comprise the Salesian Family and that they exist in varied socio-cultural situations and have pastoral approaches and methods particular to each.

These three guidelines are like three directions that have as their aim to: 1. examine our **point of departure**, that is our pastoral attitudes; 2. ask us to examine what **criteria and objectives support our pastoral vision**; and 3. study well what **choices we make regarding our actions**. We do this because proper pastoral attitudes, combined with the criteria and objectives we have set, obtain the desired goal: the good of the young and the family.

5.1 Pastoral Attitudes

When confronted by the pastoral challenges that all of us are likely to encounter, it is essential to start with this question: How are we interpreting these 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 **some challenges along our way**. But what impresses even more is 'how' he states these challenges. His intention is to help us see these challenges as doorways to the opportunities that await us.

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.

a. First of all, we must be ready to **read the scenario** that presents itself with its “anthropological-cultural changes” that are leading “individuals, in personal and family life, to receive less and less support from social structures than in the past” (no. 32), together with the “growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds” (n.33). Herein lies the inevitable task for everyone called to assume a pastoral commitment. We need to know and understand the history of the places where we are sent. Listening to the heartbeat of the place is a sign of closeness and of interest and that we would like to be pilgrims together with the young and the family. Its absence in those places where God sends us is already a primary sign of anxiety. Rather, with attitudes of listening, openness, and availability, we make a statement about our oneness with the people.

b. As pastors and educators of young people, we must avoid a **superficial pastoral reading** which risks leading us into the blind dead-end of pessimism. A privileged element of our Salesian education is the ability to facilitate “a personalization that stresses authenticity and not pre-fabricated behaviors.” We bear and live that great proposal which brings young people to noble goals and a personal discipline that allows them to bring to maturity what is best in themselves: “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”. (no. 33) A superficial pastoral reading makes us lose the whole perspective of human fullness.

c. Alongside this pastoral attitude that favors a healthy reading of the situation, the Pope suggests **the courage of witness and words**. He exhorts us not to be quitters. Since we are people who are called, challenges are to be taken on with intelligence and handled 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”. (no. 35) **Finding balance does not mean making compromises**, but paving the way in people's hearts, a heart that is in search of authentic witnesses who live what they believe.

d. In relation to the courage of witness and words, the Pope does not speak of a militant attitude, let alone crusades. While on one side we must declare what is wrong to be wrong, on the other the journey before us does not follow the logic of “imposing rules with the power of authority” (no. 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”. (no. 35) And this is a demanding task that requires a lot of reflection.

e. In paragraph 40, he asks us to increase our capacity to find the **right language to use with the young**. We can boldly call this paragraph **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. In this way, we can invite them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage. (no. 40)

But it is not only a matter of finding the right words; rather, it is a questions of making a pastoral vision mature with processes that “**speak of the young and speak to the young**”. Here, we do not go in search of the vocabulary for them: the vocabulary is already found – in the way we meet the challenges, the way we read them, and the way we respond to them. Here we must learn the vocabulary from within our authenticity and from our humility to put ourselves on their wavelength. If we are “physically” far from the young, we are not only “effectively” far away, but probably also “affectively” distant. Here the discussion about the vocabulary of the young touches the realm of Salesian assistance, which continues to be one of the most genial and most timely of Don Bosco’s secrets.

f. Here, then, is the final challenge that Pope Francis comments on several times in various parts of the exhortation: the challenge to **missionary creativity, without complaining, but built on 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 an “invitation to revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions, and creative forms of charity”. (no. 57)

As Groups within the Salesian Family, before taking any step to formulate a proposal, it is urgent and indispensable for us to find a space for **reflection** and for **prayer** in order to **purify, verify, and strengthen our pastoral attitudes**. With these deep-rooted choices and these pastoral attitudes, we will live and address our vocation in the light of the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3-9), our task being that of cooperating in the sowing: the rest is the work of God. (no. 200)

Only according to this logic, shall we reach, as Church, “families with humility and compassion, with the desire to help each family to discover the best way to overcome any obstacle it encounters””. (no. 200) We reflect and pray to know how to ground ourselves in God’s logic and also in people’s stories. Let us reflect so we may 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”, (no. 200) We will get back to this point 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 with 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 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 generative love

The first pastoral criterion is to start from an understanding of love within the **logic of fruitfulness, in the broadest possible sense**. Love creates; love makes one fruitful wherever one accepts to live it. Let us ask ourselves: In our educational and pastoral processes, what does it mean for us to read our action and our witness in the logic of a love that generates life? What does it mean for us, pastoral workers, to make our own the challenge "to appreciate the purely gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us"? (no. 166) How is the "the primacy of the love of God, who always takes the initiative, for children 'are loved before having done anything to deserve it'" reflected in our pastoral plans? (no. 166) What kind of pastoral imagination do we need to mature in order 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. (no. 166)

These are questions that should be heeded in our various educational and pastoral processes and that we must at least react to when faced with them. Our pastoral criteria need to be nurtured by ideas and strong convictions but must also allow themselves to be challenged by questions that may seem uncomfortable. Otherwise we run the risk of doing many things, without knowing the "why" or "where we are going". The logic of fruitfulness and the understanding of generative love give meaning and direction to our pastoral choices of both short and long term.

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."** Here, we let ourselves be moved by the challenge of the lack of models for which, on the one hand, our young people and children seek in order to overcome their being orphans; while, on the other hand, there is disorientation on the part of many parents who find themselves without a vocabulary with which to connect to the world of their children.

What does it mean for us today to find ourselves standing on these fault lines or in this land shaken by earthquakes and disintegrated? What answers we can offer through processes and educative-pastoral proposals? Here comes into play the need for profound reflection that encounters and interprets this sense of emptiness and of searching, while also being a reflection that proposes paths to take and pastoral choices.

c. The family is the pastoral subject

In getting to the crux of our pastoral experience, and in light of what has been shared thus far, an in-depth study of **Chapter 6 of *Amoris Laetitia*** will help us very much for this third criterion is of paramount importance: **families are the principal subject of 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’. (no. 200)

This call is a pastoral criterion of great importance if we really want our consequent pastoral proposal to be **true, sure, and meaningful**. To the extent that we imagine the family as the protagonist, we overcome the already-mentioned pastoral superficiality. In this way, we can go further in the building of pastoral processes which give witness.

Rightly, then, Pope Francis warns us that "it is not enough to insert a general concern for the family into 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 within the family”**. (no. 200)

At this point, the Apostolic Exhortation, in no. **201**, calls us to "missionary conversion". In this, we understand that "one is not content to proclaim a merely theoretical message without connection to people’s real problems". Here **three very clear directives** are given that can serve as both a personal and a community examination of conscience and as a calm 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 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.” (no. 201)

These three orientations – **Gospel, denunciation, and synergy** – within a very clear pastoral criterion – one that sees the family as the protagonist and that does not stop at pious exhortation and, even less so, at specific events. This is a process that should be thought about, reflected upon, 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 entailed in this.

d. Graduality in pastoral care

Finally, the fourth criterion, **graduality in pastoral care** (no. 293), we find analyzed in **Chapter 8**, according to 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". (no. 293) The question we ask ourselves is the following: within our pastoral proposals how does this criterion enlighten us? What is the meaning of 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 truly give signs of closeness – especially to those families who are on the periphery, not only in the religious and ecclesial spheres but also in the socio-cultural and economic ones. The challenge to 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 place where people, both the young and adults, realize that our work and our presence are a "home" where all the pastoral workers are sisters and brothers ready to share the journey, without prejudice and without any exception;
- ii. **involving (discerning):** proposing opportunities and processes where young people and parents are encouraged to be active members, protagonists, each one according to his or her abilities and possibilities. In other words, "presence" within the educative and pastoral proposal is to be an experience where the boundaries of participation are broadened, according to people's aptitudes. According to the logic of concentric circles, there are no restrictions placed on participation, whether by personal likes or dislikes, or by prejudice, or by any arbitrary self-reference to those who are called to be servants.
- iii. **forming (integrating):** communicating a pastoral vision that does not limit itself to offering a "product" to our young people and our families, but which goes far beyond. This is a vision that enables, forms, makes witnesses, and multiplies those people who are welcomed, accompanied, and involved and who, in due time, become not only disciples but also apostles.

5.3 Practical Choices

We come to the final part of this reflection: that concerning practical choices. Here we return to where we began – *identity, charism, and community* – our roots, the place from which we must start so as to look to the future with hope, joy, and optimism.

a. Community

The Salesian Family discovers Don Bosco’s pastoral heart in the memory of the origins at Valdocco. Under the banner of a pastoral proposal that involves people on an ever-widening scale, especially in relation to the great potential that the Family now affords us, we are called to reflect on how the style and the Community are the paradigms of living the Salesian charism and are the Salesian form of animation in every educational reality.

As we have already commented above, when contemplating the origins of the Salesian charism, **we encounter Don Bosco as someone who builds around him a community-family**, where the experience of healthy and strong leadership was communicated to the boys so they could put it into practice themselves. The Oratory continues to be for us today a point of reference for a proposal with clear objectives, lived in the convergence of well-defined roles for the young. Don Bosco’s charism finds its *humus* in this educative pastoral experience. The Congregation and the Salesian Family were born from this community-family. From this very same source, we continue to nourish ourselves today.

In light of the pastoral opportunities that present themselves, living and fulfilling Don Bosco’s mission today does demand we create new structures in addition to already-existing bodies or to participate in different works or pastoral environments; rather, it calls for a **renewed thinking which leads to a greater communion – one that allows the different gifts and charisms to flourish**, as complementary realities and in mutual reciprocity, at the service of the same mission.

If evangelization is the fruit of a collective journey, a mission of both the consecrated and the lay who unite their strengths in collaboration through the exchange of gifts, despite the differences in 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 to greater coordination of the various initiatives and to the search for understanding and complementarity among all: a search for collaboration and the effort to do 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 towards the education of young people presupposes an educative pastoral plan. Improvisations, doing things “off-the-cuff”, will only result in confusion. The first challenge, as we have already learned and that Pope Francis invites us to take on seriously both in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia*, is that of pastoral conversion. This is **a rebuilding of a mature sense of belonging and a makeover of our mentality**: our way of thinking, evaluating, acting, facing problems, and way of relating to

others: with young people, among educators, with pastoral ministers, and with families.

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

This **planning mentality** is and will be the great challenge as well as the great gift for the whole Salesian Family because with it, the two faces of Don Bosco's heart will grow: "**pastoral charity**" and "**pedagogical intelligence**". The world of youth asks us to make a renewed commitment and to live it in constancy, with continuity, and in concert with and among different educational agents and each other. It is an absolute must for all to recognize and value one other and to commit themselves to this one, unified proposal. Pastoral individualism and fragmented pastoral proposals have no future because they are a counter-witness for today.

Therefore, we need a plan that is capable of continuing "tradition" and, yet, at the same time capable of incorporating what is "new". It is no longer acceptable to start over continuously from scratch with every change of personnel, leadership, or team.

Planning is an attitude of mind and heart which then becomes concrete action. Planning is a process rather than a result. It is one aspect of pastoral ministry and not a temporary action. Planning is a path of involvement and of unification of forces.

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

Within this Plan, we recognize the family as the first and essential educative community, in its truth and in its potential, for it is the cell of society and of the Church. It is the primary subject – not only in the transmission of life but even more so 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 reason, it should not only care for its organization but also for the development of its life. We can identify three levels in relation to taking care of this accompaniment:

i. Accompaniment of the Environment

The place, the environment, where the Salesian educative pastoral experience is lived must be accompanied. Since it is a living reality, **every environment is created**. This is where young people feel at home in an atmosphere of support and of affection and where they can safely express their ideas. If we speak of young people, we must also say the same for all those who take on the education of children and, among these, first and foremost, are the parents.

The environment must be understood and perceived in its potential to be the place where young people and adults feel welcomed, included, and involved. From this perspective, the environment offers to young people and to families places and processes with which they can identify themselves. An environment that is taken care of and accompanied certainly **engenders the process of quality on-going formation** – and at different levels: human, spiritual, Christian and Salesian.

ii. Accompaniment of the 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, by graduality, and differentiated approaches and methods, 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 what they are looking for, of being protagonists, and of knowing they are on a journey with others. Connected to this dimension, the group gives identity, triggers initiatives and processes, and gives rise to signs of vitality that enable young people and families to get in touch with the proposed human and faith values that are, in the end, vitally assimilated.

How many are the young people and families we have met who have rediscovered their faith or even have discovered it by having had an experience in one of our presences – whether participating in some group or some initiative carried out there! The groups in these places, each with its own particular experience, as well as all the groups in communion, must allow themselves to 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 is placed before us: personal accompaniment. This is the most challenging one and, consequently, of crucial importance.

Those who have a pastoral responsibility within a Group of the Salesian Family, 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 how to enlighten and to guide others is not a luxury; rather, it's an emergency!** An atmosphere that is authentically Salesian

reaches the point of proposing journeys 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, in the measure of their abilities. The time needed for these experiences of personal growth is not the same for all. Neither are the situations and the decisions which the young people and families must face. Here, pastoral creativity, together with prudence and respect for persons, has a decisive character.

Among these, there is **spiritual direction**. With this, one strengthens his or her faith as life in Christ and as the radical meaning of his or her existence. It helps one discern his or her personal vocation in the Church and in the world and grow steadily in spiritual life all the way to sanctity.

Here we clearly enter into a sphere that must be well thought-out, reflected upon, and planned. If, on the one hand, we are all convinced that there is an ever more urgent need for people who are ready to listen and to receive confidences with respect, on the other hand, we are also aware that we need people who have the gift of listening and who accept the educational responsibility to assist the young 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?

¹² DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *In the Year of the Family*, Letter Published in AGC no. 349, 1994.

From these questions which rouse us up to a living pastoral vision, Fr Viganò pushes the discourse on to particular 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.

As I arrive at the end of this reflection, I hope and pray that if, in twenty-two years, the theme of the family be brought up again at the Salesian Family Spirituality Days, they will be able to say: “We have come a long way.”

Thank you!