

## ***STRENNA 2020***

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

# **“GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS”**

## **INTRODUCTION**

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

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

→ We need to make ever more explicit the message that our mission is one of evangelizing and catechizing. Without this we're not the Salesian Family. We might be “providers of social services,” but not apostles of boys and girls, of teenagers and young people.

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

→ Added to this is a new obstacle. Can that twofold educational expression of Don Bosco, that twofold aim that guided him in 19th-century Italy, be considered still valid in a “Salesian world” in which the family of Don Bosco can find a home in countries with different religions or with a non-Christian majority, or in post-Christian societies, or even in countries that are officially secular or anti-religious?

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

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

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

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

It's necessary to take into account the **pluricultural and multireligious settings** of the 40 Salesian provinces which are living in minority Churches among the great religions of the world, especially in Asia and Africa.

It's not enough to repeat what Don Bosco did in the 19th century. **We have to learn from the experiences of the Salesians who today are living the Preventive System in countries that have a non-Christian majority.** They certainly have a wealth of life experience in which they have learned how to interpret the thinking of Don Bosco in multireligious and multicultural contexts that our father could never even have imagined.

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

We can ask ourselves some specific questions:

- How do you put Don Bosco's expression into practice with non-Christian youngsters and lay co-workers?
- How do you keep a balance between openness to non-Christians and the first proclamation of the Gospel?
- How do you translate the concept of the "good Christian" for a majority of lay co-workers who are not Christian?
- How do you put into practice the pillar of "religion" in the multireligious contexts in which we find ourselves?
- How do you educate the young and lay people in the three pillars of the spirituality of the Preventive System of Don Bosco: reason, religion, loving kindness?
- How do you translate into daily life the "good Christians" of Don Bosco in the mission shared with so many non-Christians?
- Does the Rector Major believe that Don Bosco's Preventive System can be fully lived out and put into practice also with lay co-workers of other religions?
- How do you include non-Christians in the educational-pastoral community (EPC)?
- What do these non-Christians who are involved in the Salesian educational mission themselves say?
- What are the most attractive elements/expressions of the practice of the Preventive System of Don Bosco?

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

## **1. GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS in Don Bosco<sup>1</sup>**

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

- *making them upright citizens and good Christians (1857)*
- *making themselves good Christians and upright workers (1857)*
- *so that they might all become good citizens and good Christians (1862)*

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<sup>1</sup> The commentary I'm presenting, which will refer to the two-fold expression "good Christians and upright citizens" that is so specifically Salesian because it's according to the heart of Don Bosco, has been studied at depth and amply described by Pietro Braido, "Buoni cristiani ed onesti cittadini," *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*, 24 (1994), 36-42.

- *making them all good Christians and upright citizens (1872)*
- *educating youth to the dignity of the Christian and to the sense of duty of the good citizen (1873)*
- *they become good Christians and upright citizens (1875)*
- *doing what little good I can for abandoned youngsters, making use of all my efforts so that they might become good Christians as far as religion is concerned and upright citizens in civil society (1876)*
- *preparing good Christians for the Church, upright citizens for civil society (1877).*

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

- \* *Making them good citizens and good Christians is the purpose we're giving ourselves;*
- \* *Making them good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *They are ... useful citizens and good Christians;*
- \* *They become good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *When entering this Oratory a young person needs to persuade himself that this is a place of religion, in which the intention is to make good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *Restoring them to civil society as good Christians and good citizens;*
- \* *Educated in Christian and civil virtues ... making them good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *It's a question of making them into upright citizens and good Christians;*
- \* *Always living as good Christians and wise citizens;*
- \* *The hope that they become good Christians, upright and useful citizens;*
- \* *Now they're good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *I'm delighted to know that you ... are living as good Christians, as honorable citizens;*
- \* *Wherever you find yourselves, show that you are always good Christians and honest men;*
- \* *The purpose of our schools is to form good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *Then to be returned to civil society as good Christians, upright citizens;*
- \* *They leave good Christians and fine citizens;*
- \* *Returning them to society good Christians and upright citizens;*
- \* *Educating them in such a way as to make them good citizens and real Christians;*
- \* *Good Christian and upright citizen;*
- \* *Learning how to live as good Christians and wise citizens;*
- \* *Taught to live as good Christians and wise citizens;*
- \* *They become good Christians, wise citizens;*
- \* *Making them good Christians and useful citizens;*
- \* *Continue therefore to be good Christians and wise citizens;*
- \* *Giving to civil society useful members, to the Church virtuous Catholics, to Heaven fortunate inhabitants;*
- \* *Making them good citizens and good Christians;*
- \* *Restoring them ... to civil society as good Christians, upright citizens;*
- \* *They make the world see how you can ... be Christians and at the same time upright and hardworking citizens;*
- \* *Teach them, educate them, and so make them good Christians and upright citizens;*

\* *How many good sons, how many Christian and upright fathers, how many better citizens might we not give to families, to the Church, to society;*

\* *Making themselves good Christians and upright citizens;*

\* *Returning them to their families, to society, to the Church good sons, wise citizens, exemplary Christians.*

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

### **1.1 GOOD CHRISTIANS living with faith in the Lord and under the guidance of the Spirit**

If we go back to our beginnings, when Don Bosco was giving the strenna for the new year at the end of December, with personalized messages for each of the boys and the first Salesians, we can see how "living the faith" was the most precious and most natural gift that the first Oratory had to offer to someone living there, both the boys and their teachers. It reflected a way of life in which the first Salesians, the mamas of the Oratory, the lay people who helped, and the youngsters were creating a real family in the same house.

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

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

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

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

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

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2 *Redemptoris Missio*, 2

3 SDB Constitutions, art. 21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Along this path, the consistency develops between what’s heard and proclaimed and what’s lived. Listening to God as he speaks to us needs to be practiced every day, as artists or athletes do in their areas of specialized excellence.

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

“He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young.... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls.”<sup>5</sup> This testimony from the one who more than any other knew Don

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4 Synod of Bishops, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*. Working Document, 175

5 SDB Constitutions, art. 21, quoting Fr. Rua on Aug. 24, 1894

Bosco and “who went halves with him in everything” enables us to appreciate almost in a tangible manner the intensity of the pastoral love of our father. He never drew back in the face of the harshest challenges of poverty, starting in Turin’s prisons, where Father Cafasso had encouraged him to go “to learn how to become a priest.” At the same time, he never held back from proposing the highest goals of spiritual growth to everyone, as much to Magone as to Savio, adapting the path to each one. In the language of today: “Imitating God’s patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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6 SDB Constitutions, art. 38

7 *Christus vivit*, 214.

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

*In this lies the genius of Don Bosco: he remains accessible to everyone, and with his boys isn’t afraid to focus directly on holiness; nothing less.*

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

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

#### **1.4. GOOD CHRISTIANS living a true Salesian spirituality**

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit initiated the time of the Church and of the mission. Thanks to the Spirit, spirituality and mission go hand in hand. It’s impossible to separate mission from spirituality or spirituality from mission. Hence, when we fail to integrate mission and spirituality in our lives, weariness and confusion most probably will come knocking at our door and we’ll be satisfied with “entertaining” others with our activities, *but without managing to “touch” anyone’s life at any depth.*

#### **Returning to the first love**

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

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

#### **A. Spirituality**

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

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<sup>8</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, 81.

In spite of this ambiguity, we need to recognize that the desire for spirituality can be the gateway to the Christian life for those searching for it.

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

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

Anyone called to be a parent, pastor, or guide to young people must have the farsightedness to appreciate the little flame that continues to burn, the fragile reed that is shaken but not broken (cf. Is 42:3). The ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father see things; he knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young. Each young person’s heart should thus be considered “holy ground,” a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must “take off our shoes” in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the Mystery.<sup>10</sup>

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

## **B. Christian spirituality**

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

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

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<sup>9</sup> *Christus vivit*, 84

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>11</sup> Francis, *Angelus* on October 28, 2019.



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

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

- The spirituality of the missionary disciple,<sup>12</sup>
- Ecological spirituality,<sup>13</sup>
- Matrimonial and family spirituality,<sup>14</sup>
- Holiness as the origin and goal of the spiritual life.<sup>15</sup>

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

### **C. Salesian spirituality**

We're speaking about a Salesian spirituality as a charismatic expression within the "great river" of *Christian spirituality*. The noun *spirituality* refers to Christian spirituality, and *Salesian* to the concrete charismatic style.

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

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

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12 Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 239-288.

13 Cf. *Laudato si'*, 181-213.

14 Cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 278-289.

15 Cf. *Gaudete et exsultate* for most of its contents.

16 *Christus vivit*, 159.

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

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

This plurality of situations enables us to remember the missionary mandate received at Pentecost. Where is Jesus sending us? There are no frontiers, no boundaries: he's sending us to everyone, since for the Gospel there are no boundaries or frontiers. The Lord is sending us to everyone, and the Salesian mission takes us to everyone.

Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away and most indifferent. The Lord seeks all; he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love. He invites us to be fearless missionaries wherever we are and in whatever company we find ourselves: in our neighborhoods, in school or sports or social life, in volunteer service or in the workplace. Wherever we are, we always have an opportunity to share the joy of the Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

That's why our mission is as stimulating as it's demanding. *What do we need to be thinking about in order to be able to draw close at the pastoral level also to those young people who distance themselves from the faith and those who profess other religions or those who profess none?* – i.e., in non-Christian or post-Christian contexts.

### **Some dangers that threaten us**

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

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

The Working Document of the last Synod on Youth has an interesting point:

It's not a matter of giving up the most precious hallmark of Christianity to conform to the spirit of the world, nor is this what young people are asking for, but we do need to find a way to convey the Christian message in changed cultural circumstances. In line with biblical tradition, the recognition that truth has a relational basis is a good thing: human beings discover truth once they experience it from God, the only one who is truly reliable and trustworthy.<sup>18</sup>

The Working Document suggests that the path of relationships is the one to be pursued. It seems to be suggesting that the way in will be found in relationships. We know very well that the Preventive System of Don Bosco has always been a practical example of this principle of relationships.

Two other dangers are exclusivism and syncretism. The first, exclusivism, has two faces. One concerns the offering of a proposal addressed only to an elite, those young people and adults most prepared. The other face regards the young people and adults most ready. The second refers to the rejection of any pastoral proposition, with

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>18</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, 55.

the excuse of respecting the sensitivities of each individual. In conclusion, it would be a pastoral project only for a few or even a total absence of any pastoral project. None of these routes is good. If our pastoral approach isn't concerned with those at a distance, we're showing that we have little confidence in the Gospel project, and perhaps also how elitist our ideas of pastoral work are. And if we choose censorship, then our confidence in the evangelization project is very slight. Censorship will be the best way of concerning ourselves pastorally with no one.

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

*So we come to ask ourselves whether any projects are possible? Yes, there are:*

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

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

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

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

→ **Dialogue**

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

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

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

→ **The value of witness**

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

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<sup>19</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, 250.

## → Proclamation

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

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

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

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

### 1.6. GOOD CHRISTIANS detached from themselves

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

#### a. Your life for others

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

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

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

#### b. From “I” to “Here I am”

This way of understanding life open to others invites us to change from “I” to “Here I am.” The “I culture” explains very well the world in which we’re living. This culture offers great possibilities (personal growth,

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20 Ibid., 110.

21 Ibid., 273.

22 *Christus vivit*, 164.

autonomy, development of the individual), but it also conceals great weaknesses (people who keep their distance and are little open to others, narcissism).

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

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

## **2. UPRIGHT CITIZENS**

### **2.1. Young people are waiting for us in the “house of life”**

One of the best and most relevant interpretations we can give of our Salesian mission is that of continuing to ensure our choice of meeting young people where they’re to be found and in the circumstances in which they’re living. The young people are waiting for us, and it’s their daily life, the present, where we need to meet them. There would be no human development or social commitment or even evangelization and a faith journey were it not recognized that *the starting point is the place where the young and families and everyone find themselves*.

The ability to go out and meet them, learned from Don Bosco, is a sign of our being concerned about their lives, of taking their situation seriously, and above all of the real desire to be on their side and to make their concerns our concerns. That’s why we can’t forget our founding charism as the Salesian Family of meeting the young where they are and, with them, precisely there to work with commitment to improve and transform a situation that’s always a challenge. Consequently every process of human development ought to be seen as a part, and not an end in itself, of a more profound and broad process of promotion that leads persons to make of their own lives a meeting place with others, for the sharing of gifts, for building a more just and worthy society for everyone, as an anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven that’s already being built on this earth, if within us there are the principles of the Good News of Jesus.

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

When Jesus was presented with the situations of those who were “not ours,” he responded at once by making his own those who were not directly opposed to him. Whoever isn’t against us is with us.

### **2.2. UPRIGHT CITIZENS educating our young people for citizenship and social commitment**

Perhaps we’re dealing with one of the clichés to which we sometimes retreat so as to avoid uncomfortable questions, such as when we say that Don Bosco didn’t get involved in politics, since his politics were those of the Our Father. Certainly we have to clarify what politics we’re talking about.

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23 Ibid., 252.

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

For our young people today, used as they are to practical things, easy results, and the immediate effect of their actions; used as they are to encountering difficulties when they try to undertake programs or processes or to accept the burden of sowing the seed or the long wait before they see its fruits – it's indispensable to educate them to social commitment as a way that can introduce many of them to the path of the Christian life.

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

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

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

The social dimension isn't extrinsic to the experience of faith. It's precisely in social commitment that one ought to make more profound the transcendent dimension of every human activity. In *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis gives an interesting interpretation of the ability that young people have of committing themselves in society, and attributes this dedication to a full life of friendship with Christ. All of this is a pastoral project for us educators and evangelizers of the young.

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

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24 *Christus vivit*, 174.

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

The society which Don Bosco had in mind was a Christian society, built on a foundation of morals and religion. Today this vision of society has been transformed: we are in a secular society, built on principles of equality, freedom, participation; but the Salesian educational proposal still retains its capacity to form a citizen who is aware of his or her social, professional, political responsibilities, able to dedicate him or herself to justice and to promote the common good, with special sensitivity and concern for the weakest and most marginalized groups. We have to work, then, at changing the criteria and view of life, to promote an altruistic culture, a modest lifestyle, a constant attitude of giving freely, the struggle for justice and dignity of each human being's existence.<sup>25</sup>

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

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

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

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

Among the many political theories (economic, social, educational, health, international, etc.), we can choose as the Salesian Family the "theory" of the Our Father, of our "daily bread," of a "barefoot" presence among the poorest who are "always" with us (Mark 14:7), in need of a sound political policy of justice and charity. We want to be and to continue to be on the side of the "politically incorrect" because we choose to be on the side of those who have no voice. Archbishop Romero said: "The political dimension of the faith has to be discovered, and it's rightly discovered through the practical service of the poor.... Incarnated in their world, it proclaims good news, gives hope, encourages processes of liberation, defends their cause, and takes a part in their fate."<sup>26</sup>

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

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

- ✓ the dignity and the rights of men and women, always seeking the greater good of the community and of the individual;
- ✓ the safeguarding and protection of the transcendental dignity of people made in the image of God;
- ✓ the promotion of development that's complete and sustainable, and involves the whole person and of all human beings;

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25 Pascual Chavez, "The Salesian Mission and Human Rights especially children rights," in *International Congress on Preventive System and Human Rights, Rome 2-6 January 2009* (Rome: VIS, 2009), p. 82.

26 Abp. Oscar Romero, Address given on the occasion of the honorary doctorate conferred on him by Louvain University on February 2, 1980.

- ✓ the globalization of charity and of solidarity especially with the poor, the weak, and the excluded and against the enormous weight of indifference, exclusion, and egotism;
- ✓ the achievement of fraternity as the driving force of economic order and of the development of all the potential that peoples [*popoli*] have;
- ✓ the extension of the principle of subsidiarity as free and responsible participation, as the basis of a democratic society in which all have a voice and can participate;
- ✓ the shared availability of the goods of the earth, and the fostering of the idea of coming together and sharing; including care of our common home, with a natural and human ecology of living together, harmony, peace, and wellbeing in the present and in the future.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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27 Francis, Video message sent to TED, 2017.

28 SDB Constitutions, 32, and Regulations, 22.

29 Pascual Chavez, “Like Don Bosco the educator,” *Acts of the General Council*, no. 415 (2013), pp. 14-15.

30 Salesian Youth Ministry Department, *Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference* (Rome, 2014), p. 107, referring to GC23, n. 178.



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

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

#### **2.4. UPRIGHT CITIZENS: educating our young people to integrity and lawfulness**

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

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

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

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

As educators we must put into practice and encourage uprightness and lawfulness. How? Through prevention. It often happens nowadays that we hear "siren voices" suggesting as the most natural thing to follow the easy paths that corrupt a person's conscience and damage one's integrity, the strength and truth of what we are. "Society as a whole is called to commit itself concretely to combating the cancer of corruption in its various forms.... Corruption is one of the most lacerating wounds of the social fabric, as it gravely harms from both an ethical and an economic point of view; with the illusion of quick and easy gains, in reality it impoverishes everyone, removing trust, transparency, and reliability from the whole system."<sup>31</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

Educating means all this.

To educate means helping individuals to rediscover themselves, and to patiently accompany them on their journey of recovering values and self-confidence. It means reconstructing reasons for living through discovery of the beauty of life. Educating also means a renewed capacity for dialogue but is also a proposal full of interests, firmly anchored in what is the most fundamental of approaches: involving young people in experiences that help them grasp the meaning of daily effort, offering them the basic tools for earning a living, making them capable of acting responsibly in every circumstance. Educating requires that we understand the juvenile social problems of our time.<sup>32</sup>

## **2.5. UPRIGHT CITIZENS sensitive and co-responsible in a world of migration and movement**

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

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32 Salesian Youth Ministry Department, op. cit., p. 93.

## The phenomenon

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

According to United Nations statistics, **international migrants today number 271.6 million**, about 3.5% of the world population. Of these, 39 million are minors under 18 years of age. Internal migration (that which takes place within a country) was estimated according to 2009 figures at 790 million people.

One particular and very tragic feature is that of the **70.8 million people forced to migrate**, 41.3 million migrants have had to relocate within their own country, especially because of war. Those leaving their own country are 25.9 million refugees, plus 3.5 million seeking refuge. These are the official statistics of the U.N., while it's known the actual numbers could be higher. Half of these forced migrants are minors under 18 years of age. It's been calculated that there are 111,000 unaccompanied minors without any family. More frequently the refugees are living in cities (61%), being more invisible.

## Don Bosco

For our religious family the phenomenon of migration is nothing new to our charism.

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

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

The Salesian missionary enterprise began with care offered to Italian emigrants in Argentina. Don Bosco exhorted the first missionary expedition in 1875 as follows: “search out these brothers who were driven to a strange land by poverty or misfortune; teach them how great is the mercy of God who, for the good of their souls, is sending you to help them...”<sup>34</sup>

The Salesian Congregation in the times of Father Rua and Father Albera consolidated the attention being given to Italian emigrants, and also Polish and German. One only has to think of the enormous work undertaken among the emigrants; already in 1904, in America alone, there were 450,000 emigrants being helped by the Salesians.<sup>35</sup>

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33 John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales*, trans. Daniel Lyons, SDB (New Rochelle, 1989), p. 233.

Cf. Istituto Storico Salesiano, *Salesian Sources: Don Bosco and his work* (Rome: LAS, 2017), p. 1,413.

34 Eugenio Ceria, *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, trans. Diego Borgatello, SDB, XI (New Rochelle, 1964), 360.

35 Francesco Motto, “Bosco (Don) Giovanni e la missione dei Salesiani per i migranti,” in Graziano Battistella, ed.,

*Migrazioni: Dizionario Socio-Pastorale* (Cinisello Bal, 2010), p. 62.

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

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

### **Vision for the future**

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

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

→ focusing first of all on children, teenagers, and young people, offering them educational-pastoral courses of a certain caliber;

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

→ supporting an "educational presence" with which we make ourselves as much as possible an essential part of the physical and existential world of those we're working with and for;

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

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

→ with a presence ever more coordinated, more formalized, more visible and professional. It's a great opportunity for the Salesian Family to do something, where each group can make available to the mission its own gifts. Salesian missionary volunteer services and the Salesian Youth Movement have an immense opening for engagement with these youths on the move.

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

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

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

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

### Some pastoral proposals

→ *Ecological conversion*

The first proposal is very much connected to a change of mentality and of the way of looking at reality. Pope Francis invites us to “become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering.”<sup>36</sup> This is why we have to adopt a radically new spirituality, a spirituality in which our commitment to care for the Earth is serious and effective to the extent that it's rooted in an effective ecological conversion.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>36</sup> *Laudato si'*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> See <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/read-greta-thunberg-s-full-speech-united-nations-climate-action-n1057861>; also #FridaysForFuture and #Climatestrike.

<sup>38</sup> Francis, “Address to young people” on the occasion of his apostolic journey in Chile, January 17, 2018.

→ *Toward a human ecology*

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

→ *The educational and cultural approach*

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

## 2.7 In defense of human rights and especially the rights of minors

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

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

→ Therefore we have to be experts in the field of the defense of all human rights, especially those of minors, *and asking forgiveness even with tears should anyone not have acted in this way*. We can’t be complicit in any form of abuse, meaning the abuse “of power, of conscience, sexual or financial abuse” – as it was described by the Synod on the Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment.<sup>44</sup>

As Don Bosco’s Family we’re part of all the efforts that the whole Church is making on behalf of human rights. As we all know, the language of rights has come into the life of the Church with the development of its social doctrine. By virtue of the Gospel entrusted to her, the Church proclaims human rights, recognizes, and greatly appreciates the dynamism with which in our days these rights are everywhere being promoted.

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39 Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *I dieci comandamenti verdi* (Turin: Elledici, 2016), p. 142.

40 *Laudato si’*, 5.

41 *Centesimus Annus*, 36.

42 Aldo Coda Negozio and Guglielmo Aldo Ellena, *Gestire il pianeta terra* (Turin: SEI, 1995), p. xi.

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

44 Synod of Bishops, Final Document, 30.

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

- For Don Bosco the marginalized boy was not a passive beneficiary, a simple recipient to whom assistance was given or services offered. Don Bosco was hoping and working for a new view of the marginalized boy: an educational relationship between pupil and teacher, which anticipates the view of the boy as possessor of rights which the New York Convention confirmed for the first time 30 years ago, on November 20, 1989, as an instrument of international law, today legally binding in 193 nations.
- The rights of minors and the Preventive System have some basic principles in common. Both have the same aim, that is, the integral development and total wellbeing of children. Both children's rights and the Preventive System have some work to do in order to achieve their objectives on behalf of children. This includes the overall care of individuals, the formation of the personnel responsible, the creation of a safe environment, the provision of guidelines for sound discipline, and the formulation of protocols for the protection of minors.

### *In defense of the rights of minors*

- 1. Between February 21 and 24, 2019, the "summit" of the Catholic bishops' conferences of the world was held on "The protection of minors in the Church." Taking part were 190 Church leaders and the presidents of 140 bishops' conferences. At the meeting Pope Francis said that, *docile to the Holy Spirit, we must hear the cry of the little ones seeking justice.* We know very well that every scandal can make the light of the Gospel invisible,<sup>47</sup> and the abuse of power and of conscience does great harm and is extremely dangerous.
- 2. We can't speak about the rights of minors without referring to the *Convention on the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence* of the United Nations, which defines a child as every human being under the age of 18 and provides a standard for care and protection, the identification and management of cases, and their reporting and referral. It identifies four aspects of children's rights: the participation of the children in decisions that regard them; the protection of children from discrimination and all forms of neglect and exploitation; the prevention of harm; and the assistance of children in their basic needs.
- 3. In our educational-pastoral plan, listening to minors is important and vital, as is often affirmed by the Synod.<sup>48</sup> This opens the way to full participation. And participation contributes to personal development, leads to better decisions and results, serves to protect minors, contributes to the preparation and the development of civil society and to tolerance and respect for others, and strengthens a sense of responsibility.
- 4. *A more profound knowledge and reflection on the rights of minors:* it's a question of the many documents and declarations constantly being published on human rights and above all on the rights of minors. Some are at

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45 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1943, preamble.

46 Francis, Address at the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, November 25, 2014.

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

48 Synod of Bishops, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, 6.

the level of the Church and international, others at the level of a region or of a specific subject.<sup>49</sup> Ignorance of these documents will certainly prevent us from being effective educators. Therefore we need to study them in depth and communicate them in our centers.

- 5. *Networking with other agencies*: in the mission of protecting and promoting the rights of minors, we need to network with many other agencies that are working with an “approach based on law.” There are, indeed, very many of them, governmental and non-governmental. In some provinces of the world, some Salesians form part of the “Juvenile Justice Board,” through which they’re able to defend and protect minors’ rights. There are other Salesians who are lawyers and who defend the rights of minors in the civil courts and obtain justice for them. This is an excellent forum in which to spread Gospel values in secular sectors.
- 6. The “system of child protection” is described by UNICEF as “the combination of the laws, policies, regulations, and services necessary in all social sectors to maintain prevention and the response to the risks connected to protection.” Many of the places where we’re present are entirely dedicated to social services and to centers for young people at risk. This ought to continue to be our “small but great” contribution as the Salesian Family.
- 7. It’s essential that in every work of our Family around the world there should be a “moral code” that very clearly defines what’s expected from everyone, from consecrated men and women and from lay educators, and that also clearly determines what constitutes a grave violation of the moral code itself.
- 8. Finally, but it’s a question of a fundamental aspect as far as consecrated persons are concerned, what needs to be re-enforced is our personal and community relationship with Christ. His companionship ought to inspire us to work harder to protect the children and the minors that he loves so much, and that he has pointed out as models of discipleship.

§ *The Preventive System and human rights*: Two proposals

-- Together we’re doing many good and fine things to promote human rights. To be more effective in this ministry, however, we need to change our strategy in the way we think and act. We need to become a Family of Don Bosco that supports the social dimension of charity<sup>50</sup> and promotes human rights through the creative use of the Preventive System. This is the necessary change of model.

1. *Moving on from seeing the Preventive System merely as an alternative to the Repressive System, to seeing it as an excellent means of promoting human rights*. Until now, many times we’ve been accustomed to considering the Preventive System simply as a system of education different from the Repressive System. We have not given sufficient attention to its potential in the area of human rights. We need to study and explain its intrinsic potential in the promotion of human rights and make use of it in this area.

2. *Moving on from making laws that refer to citizens, to rights to which citizens lay claim*: We’ve always said that one of the aims of education is the formation of upright citizens, and we’ve understood that to mean forming citizens who respect the law. This will not be sufficient in the future in an ever more complex world. We have to educate the young to lay claim to their rights; in fact, if rights are not claimed it’s very probable that they’ll be ignored.<sup>51</sup>

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49 Motu proprio “On the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons,” issued on March 26, 2019; Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat, *Guidelines: promoting the human rights and the best interests of the child in transnational child protection cases* (Stockholm, 2015); Rachel Hodgkin and Peter Newell, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 2007).

50 GC 23, nos. 204, 209, 212.

51 Jose Kuttianimattathil, “Don Bosco’s Educative Method (Preventive System) and the Tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” in *In Defence of the Young: On the Human Rights Path with Don Bosco*, ed. Maria Charles, et al., (Bonn: Don Bosco Jugend Dritte Welt and New Delhi: DBYA Commission for YaR, 2010), pp. 123-141.



## THE FINAL WORD: LISTENING TO DON BOSCO HIMSELF SPEAK ABOUT POLITICS

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

Other than Heaven's help, what helps us and what will help us to do good is the very nature of our work. What we aim to do is looked upon well by everyone including those who do not share our idea of religion. If there is someone who creates obstacles for us, we need to say that they either don't know us or they do not know what is being done. Civil instruction, moral education of youths who are either abandoned, or at risk, removing them from idleness, wrongdoing, disgrace, and maybe even prison – this is what our work aims at. So what wise man, what civil authority could possibly stop us?

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

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

### So let us pray:

Lord Jesus,  
you know how much it costs us to put your Gospel into practice;  
help us to contemplate you in Don Bosco,  
to see your love in his gestures,  
to discern your path in his actions,  
to learn your mercy in his affection.  
Give us the light to make our own the style  
with which Don Bosco was your disciple,  
shape our heart like yours, the heart of the Good Shepherd,  
and give us the strength to transform your words into life and works.<sup>53</sup>

**Father Angel Fernandez Artime, SDB**  
*Rector Major*

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<sup>52</sup> *Salesian Sources: Don Bosco and His Work*, pp. 120-121, with minor edits.

<sup>53</sup> Xabier Matoses, *Spirito Salesiano*, in Juan José Bartolomé, ed., *Luce sui miei passi* (Turin: Elledici, 2016),