

# Strenna 2018

“Lord, give me this water” (John 4:15)

**let us cultivate the art of listening and of accompaniment**

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**I. AN ENCOUNTER THAT DOES NOT LEAVE INDIFFERENT: “Listening.” - *A Form of Listening that is RECEPTION and PERSONAL ENCOUNTER.* - II. AN ENCOUNTER THAT PUSHES THE PERSON FORWARD: “Discerning.” - *Faith and Vocation to Joyful Love.* - *The Gift of Discernment.* - III. AN ENCOUNTER THAT TRANSFORMS LIFE: “Accompanying.” - *Accompanying, like Jesus.* - *Don Bosco, Educator and Spiritual Guide of His Young People.* - IV. IN VIEW OF WHAT KIND OF PASTORAL ACTION? - *Vocation Discernment as Suggested by Pope Francis.* - V. IN COMPANY WITH THE SAMARITAN WOMAN**

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Dear brothers and sisters of the whole worldwide Salesian Family,

As has been our tradition, at the end of the year I present the strenna to our sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and from that day it becomes a gift for our whole Salesian Family in every part of the world. The purpose of the strenna and its commentary is to help us have the same heart and outlook in the many initiatives in all our works and in the mission that each one is called to carry out according to the specific charismatic vocation of the groups of our Salesian Family.

The theme chosen is in continuity with last year’s and refers to the forthcoming major ecclesial event of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, convened by Pope Francis for October 2018, which is entitled “Young People, the Faith, and Vocation Discernment.”

This is a subject that directly touches our charism at its heart and that we will try to prepare in the best possible way, sensitizing ourselves and making many lay people and young people aware of this important event of the Church’s life and of the need to take part in it. With this synod, “the Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today.”<sup>1</sup>

The strenna I am presenting to you this year is proposed as a help so that in all our Salesian Family presences around the world we can achieve the objective stated in the Preparatory Document of the Synod.

The theme chosen, which I consider simple and very direct, contains two elements of vital importance in today’s world: listening and personal accompaniment. To put some light on these two aspects, I offer you a beautiful Gospel icon that lends itself to multiple reflections: Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

Despite the presence of ethnic diversity and religious antagonism, the episode tells us of an encounter that

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<sup>1</sup> Synod of Bishops. 15th Ordinary General Assembly, *Young People, the Faith, and Vocation Discernment: Preparatory Document and Questionnaire* (Turin: Elle Di Ci, 2017), pp. 22-23. Henceforth quoted as PD.

takes place at the deepest personal level, to the point that a conversion of life is effected.

I invite you to accept the strenna with the positive openness customary every year and to benefit from what may be useful to you according to the different pastoral situations in which we work.

I can testify to you that, in the hundreds of meetings I have had in almost four years with young people from the six continents, I have come to the certainty that in the houses and works led by the groups of the Salesian Family there are thousands and thousands of good young people, open to life, eager to be formed and to learn; young people who are searching. Many of them have a great and generous heart and wish to serve others, to do something for others, to help, to give themselves.

They are young people who ask for our help to continue to grow and mature in their faith. And there are others who do not ask explicitly, but who feel a great need for a personal encounter and for being listened to.

There are many who would be willing to take a personal and communal path of discernment and accompaniment.

So I ask myself: What are we waiting for? Why do we not decide to be much more available to accompany all our young people in what is most important to their lives? What is holding us back? Why are we “being busy” or “spending time” in other things when this is a real priority for education and evangelization?

We will take many more significant steps, my dear brothers and sisters, on the day when we truly convince ourselves that what we are and who we are is more important than what we do; that more important than the things and activities we offer to adolescents and youths (*los adolescentes y jóvenes*) and their families is our presence, our listening, and our openness to dialogue. This is what leaves makes a lasting impact on a life. It leaves its mark on young people and their families.

All this underlies the choice for this year’s the strenna and constitutes the real and profound motivation for it.

### **I. AN ENCOUNTER THAT DOES NOT LEAVE INDIFFERENT: “Listening”**

Now I invite you to a calm and meditative reading of the passage known as “the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman.” This icon will help us understand how the Lord establishes a relationship with her and what consequences the encounter with him causes in the life of this woman.

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water,  
and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”  
(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)*

*The Samaritan woman said to him,  
“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:7-9).*

Jesus and the anonymous Samaritan woman come from two different peoples who have lived in contrast for a long time and who consider each other radically distant from the ancient faith of Israel. We can state that their families considered themselves enemies from a social, religious, and political point of view, and not because they were different, but precisely because they were very similar and at the same time opposed: each convinced that they were the authentic custodians and guardians of the original religion of ancient Israel. In fact, the two peoples considered each other to be impostors.

Here are the protagonists.

A Samaritan woman arrives at the well and undoubtedly recognizes where Jesus is from. He is a Jew, given his characteristic way to dress. For the Samaritan woman, he is a stranger. He is thirsty but has no bucket available, and the water in that deep well is out of his reach. On the other hand, the woman now faces a stranger; before her, from a religious point of view, there is a “rival.”

At the same time, from what can be understood by the whole story, the woman is a person marked, to say the least, by a dubious reputation, in a situation of “irregular” life. We can infer that emotionally the woman feels that she is the victim of rejection.

Besides, between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, strong ethnic and religious prejudices are at play: according to the customs of his time, Jesus displays reprehensible and transgressive conduct, just by asking for water from this woman.

It is legitimate to suppose that the woman feels safe before Jesus, who is not from her village, is unaware of the “failures of her life,” and is also part of a similar, even though heretical, religious group. Jesus would not have had the opportunity to get in touch with the Israelite-Samaritan leaders of her community, and therefore she has nothing to fear or worry about.

From this situation we can draw some elements of great interest for us: the encounter takes place in a secular and “outdoor” place, a well in the middle of the countryside, which will become *a place of encounter with God*.

Jesus, the true protagonist and primary actor in the encounter, the listening, and the initial dialogue, “plots” the strategy of this encounter, beginning by **listening** to the other person and the situation, which he perceives. The example of the Lord is extremely topical for us.

### **A Form of Listening that is RECEPTION and PERSONAL ENCOUNTER**

**LISTENING** is always an art. “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.”<sup>2</sup> This is why the gift of the word, especially in personal relationships, must have as its counterpart the “wisdom of listening.”

This listening, which is so important in our mission as Salesian Family, must have as its starting point the *encounter*, which becomes an opportunity for human relations and humanization, lived in complete freedom, “reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life.”<sup>3</sup>

In relations with adolescents and youths, with our students, with families in the different presences, authentic listening will have to take into account some concerns:

- encouraging *openness* to others: an openness with our whole person, for we certainly listen with our ears, but when listening is authentic we also listen to each other with our eyes, minds, hearts, with all our being.
- paying full *attention* to what the person communicates and actively engaging in understanding

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<sup>2</sup> EG, 171.

<sup>3</sup> EG, 169.

what the other person wants to communicate, since the foundation of the listening we offer is deep respect for the other.

- accompanying *with commitment* the person, whether youngster or adult (*joven o adulto*), in what he or she is seeking and expects from him- or herself, with true *empathy*, which is the opposite of cold and formal courtesy. It is about identifying ourselves with and walking with the other person.
- setting aside one's own world in order to *get as close as possible* to the world of the other, with the capability to accompany without interfering.
- Listening is, in short, the art that requires *solicitous attention* to people, to their struggles and weaknesses, to their joys, sufferings, and expectations. In fact, we do not limit ourselves to listening to something, but we are listening to someone. The pages of the Gospel that narrate the encounters of Jesus with his people are rich in this solicitous attention.

Listening, when it refers to personal spiritual accompaniment, transcends the psychological dimension and acquires a *spiritual and religious dimension*, since it leads along paths in expectation of Someone.

It also requires a *certain inner silence*, which has as its starting point the acceptance of people as they are and in the situation in which they find themselves.

As educators, our gaze, especially for adolescents and youths, and also for their families, assures us that there is much that is *positive* in every heart;<sup>4</sup> we need to bring out these positive aspects. Therefore, listening must mean for us much more than listening patiently; it is making sure that we understand in depth what people tell us and why they tell us. It is paying attention to what really concerns others, adolescents and youths, and their families.

Listening must lead us to an adequate understanding of what today's young people need, and sometimes their parents need, or the people with whom we are in contact in the pastoral environment. In fact, more often than not, young people or their parents, or both, do not approach us in search of accompaniment. On the contrary, they are often driven by some *necessities, doubts, problems, emergencies, difficulties, conflicts, tensions, decisions to make, and problematic situations to face*.

And we well know from our own formation as educators and evangelizers that it is more common for them to come close if we ourselves make some sort of approach, if we show some interest in them; if we go and meet them, if we show we are available. These same young people, children of a "scientific" culture, dominated by technology and its world of possibilities, and who belong to an over-connected generation, "look for persons of reference who are able to express empathy and offer them support, encouragement, and help in recognizing their limits, but without making them feel they are being judged."<sup>5</sup>

This is why sometimes these meetings and casual conversations may "open doors" to a deeper and more profound path of growth....

This was the case during the encounter of Jesus with the woman, who had gone to the well simply to draw water.

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<sup>4</sup> "[In every boy ... there is] a soft spot. The first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy's heart..." (BM 5:237, quoted in GC 23, n. 151).

<sup>5</sup> PD, p. 33.

Without any claim that I am suggesting listening techniques, however, I would like to stress that if we want to cultivate the most appropriate attitudes for authentic listening, we must be careful

- not to be impatient to speak instead of letting the other speak;
- to be careful not to interrupt the conversation continuously;
- not to react in an impulsive way in the face of any disagreement;
- not to neglect to pay attention to the person we are listening to;
- to keep in mind the need we all have to be listened to.

It will be equally important in these moments of listening:

- to give the person the opportunity to communicate everything she has within herself, which can sometimes be a burden or something oppressing her;
- to ask appropriate questions and avoid those that may cause mistrust or conflict;
- to accept silence with serenity, leaving all the necessary time without filling it with unnecessary advice or questions, because moments of silence can easily put the other at ease and allow him to reflect on what he is hearing;
- to make sure that feelings, which are a very important part of every communication, can be “recognized”;
- to avoid loquacity, too many words, and immediate solutions. Let us not forget that in important matters we need time; we need to do a process.

I conclude this part dedicated to listening with a reference to Don Bosco. The language we use today to refer to listening (to discernment and accompaniment) undoubtedly shows substantial differences with respect to Don Bosco’s cultural and religious context. I find the following testimony is very beautiful, however, helping us understand how his boys (*muchachos*) and other people felt that he welcomed and listened to them:

“Despite his many grave occupations, he was always ready to receive with fatherly affection those boys who sought a private talk with him. Moreover, he wanted them to be on very familiar terms with him, and he never complained of an occasional indiscretion. . . . He left all free to ask questions, to complain, and to defend or excuse themselves. . . .

“He received them with the same respect he showed distinguished visitors, asking them to sit on the sofa while he sat at his desk and listened very attentively as if what they told him was most important.”<sup>6</sup>

## **II. AN ENCOUNTER THAT PUSHES THE PERSON FORWARD: “Discerning.”**

As we continue to read the passage of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, which takes us by the hand on this path of listening, discernment, and accompaniment, we read:

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<sup>6</sup> BM 6:246.

*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."*

*The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" . . .*

*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." . . .*

*The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty." (John 4:10-15)*

As a good expert of the human heart, Jesus uses all the resources of the word, conversation, and gestures to meet people.

- He addresses questions, dialogues, explains, recounts, pays attention to the point of view of his interlocutor; he suggests, affirms, provokes reactions.
- Jesus makes it clear to the anonymous Samaritan woman that he understands her situation more than she can imagine, and that he senses the pain and suffering that, in a certain way, she must have endured.
- He confronts the woman with her real situation and her evasive responses, even in the face of her most intimate truth, as when she says, "I have no husband."
- At the same time, he shows her *compassionate empathy*.
- Jesus does not consider the dialogue to be closed; he does not yield to her initial resistance.
- Dialogue helps to clarify what is ambiguous and reveal oneself authentically; his enigmatic and provocative responses stir the woman to draw closer; she feels surprised and shows trust, reaching a true desire for what can make her life better.

Jesus, who seeks the other's good, instead of issuing a moral judgment of disapproval or reproach, establishes a personal relationship.

- Instead of accusing, he talks and suggests.
- His language and words are addressed to the hearts of those to whom he speaks.
- In his dialogue with the woman of Samaria, he proceeds calmly, without any haste to present himself as the one who can change her life. Little by little, he awakens in her an interest in accessing a source of water that promises a life that is special, different, and better.

Jesus, as an expert in humanity, is attentive and full of interest in the inner world of his interlocutors: he reads their hearts, scrutinizes them, and knows how to interpret them.

### **Faith and Vocation to Joyful Love**

Even in our day, the Lord fascinates many young people, as he did the Samaritan woman. This attraction is closely related to faith and the call that God addresses to each of his sons and daughters to live life as a vocation to joyful love.

Faith makes young people feel won over by the way they see, welcome, relate to, and live with Jesus; this expands their lives. As Pope Francis often says, “Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted.”<sup>7</sup>

And for us who draw from the waters of the stream that flows from the Salesian charism that the Spirit stirred up in Don Bosco, this proposal of faith as the starting point for any further discernment is based on one sole certainty: *We truly believe that God loves us and loves the young.* We believe that the Lord Jesus *wants to share “his life” with young people;* and we believe that *the Holy Spirit is present in them and is at work in each of them.*<sup>8</sup>

The light of faith will gradually and progressively mature in the lives of young people who “*let themselves be touched by God.*” It will allow them to become “aware of God’s plan of profound love for each person,”<sup>9</sup> and so they will discover that “the vocation to joyful love is the fundamental call that God has placed in the heart of every young person so that each one’s existence will bear fruit.”<sup>10</sup>

This journey requires an attitude of openness to the voice of the Spirit in dialogue with the Word of God, in that most intimate and sacred space that the human person knows, which is *conscience*.

With an educational and pastoral gaze, we must keep in mind that young people, married couples within their marriages, or families themselves come to travel this path often driven by a thirst for a quest originating from certain vital situations:

- situations that lead the individual, the youth, the couple, or some family member to experience the need to give life a profound meaning even in the perspective of faith. Sometimes this happens because we are going through situations in which we realize in the core of ourselves that something is not going right.
- moments in which one is not well, does not live in interior harmony, and does not find full meaning in how one lives, or in the “us” in marriage, or in the family. The situation can be concretely manifested in an “existential emptiness,” which often generates personal disorientation, malaise, sadness, and lack of hope.
- bearing in mind also that in some societies we live and are compelled to live projecting ourselves almost as if we were in a showcase where we sell the idea that there is no room for limitations or defects, and where one does not have the right to age or grow old because “it is in bad taste.” More than ever, there is a need for education, a personal and communal journey, for listening and dialogue that foster depth and interiority of life.

### **The Gift of Discernment**

What we have said so far, and other things as well, justify the Church’s intention to reaffirm, through the journey of the Synod, “her desire to encounter, accompany, and care for all young persons without exception” and “not to abandon them to the isolation and exclusion to which the world exposes them.”<sup>11</sup> This makes it possible to highlight how important is the gift of discernment, together with listening. In the Church’s tradition, this has been applied to a plurality of situations: discernment of the signs of the times; discernment of the path for moral action; spiritual discernment if it refers to the search for a path of full

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<sup>7</sup> LF, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. GC 23, n. 95.

<sup>9</sup> PD, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> PD, p. 39.

Christian life; discernment when it comes to one's vocation or life choice.

In any case, dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit are always essential because, as we pointed out earlier, we must be aware that "the person of Jesus and the Good News proclaimed by him continue to fascinate many young people."<sup>12</sup>

Why suggest or promote paths of discernment for all those who are in the situation of letting themselves be *freely* called or touched by God? Simply because we acknowledge that the Holy Spirit speaks and works in every person through the events of his or her existence and that of others. He also speaks through many mediations; but facts, experiences, events, and daily life can in themselves be silent or ambiguous, since they are always subject to very different and subjective interpretations. Illuminating them with the correct method will be one of the fruits of the journey of discernment.

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* offers us three keys for discernment, including the study of the *signs of the times*, as Pope Paul VI already indicated.<sup>13</sup> These three keys or criteria are: recognizing, interpreting, and choosing.

### **RECOGNIZING,<sup>14</sup> in the Light of What the Spirit Inspires!**

- To be lucid in life's ups and downs; in periods of true inner struggle.
- To bring out all the emotional richness that exists in the person, and to give a name to what we experience or have in ourselves.
- To grasp the "taste" that I feel in consonance or dissonance between what I experience and what is deepest in me.
- All this, enlightened by God's Word, must be meditated upon, putting at the center one's capability to listen and one's very affectivity, without being afraid even of silence.
- Assuming that everything is part of the journey of personal maturation.

### **INTERPRETING<sup>15</sup>**

- Understanding what the Spirit of God is calling to, through what he awakens in each person.
- Interpreting others and oneself is a very delicate task and requires patience, vigilance, and also some learning. We must be aware that there are social and psychological conditionings.
- It will be necessary to deal with reality and, at the same time, not be content with the minimum, not to tend only to what is easy, to be aware of one's own gifts and possibilities.
- Naturally, this task of interpretation can develop in a believer, in a Christian, under certain conditions:
  - Cultivating a true dialogue with the Lord (like the dialogue that the Samaritan woman had

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<sup>12</sup> PD, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam* (August 6, 1964), 19: AAS 56 (1964), 632, quoted in EG, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. PD, pp. 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. PD, pp. 46-47.

with Jesus).

- Activating all the person's capabilities, making sure that one is not indifferent to what happens, to what one experiences (as in how her dialogue with Jesus resonated in this woman's heart).
- Letting oneself be helped by a person experienced in listening to the Spirit (in the case of the Gospel passage, Jesus himself was the guide).

## CHOOSING<sup>16</sup>

This leads to the moment when the individual, the youth, the spouses, the family – if discernment is done within the family environment – must make decisions, exercising genuine personal or community freedom and responsibility, as appropriate.

The Samaritan woman had to choose inwardly between ignoring Jesus and continuing her life as if nothing had happened in that encounter, or deciding to let herself be surprised by him and be involved to the point of going so far as to call her fellow townsmen and communicate to them the emotion she felt because that man had reached the depths of her inner world.

- The choice made when one discerns in the light of the Spirit very often gives people great freedom and, at the same time, demands consistency in one's life.
- For this reason, we can state that encouraging in people, and very particularly in young people, life choices that are truly free and responsible constitutes the end goal of every serious process of discernment in the journey of faith and personal growth (and of every vocation ministry that can be thought of).

Discernment, Pope Francis tells us, is “the main tool which permits safeguarding the inviolable place of conscience,<sup>17</sup> without pretending to replace it,”<sup>18</sup> following the example of Jesus who, in dialogue with the Samaritan woman, accompanies her on her journey toward truth and the interiority of her own life.

### III. AN ENCOUNTER THAT TRANSFORMS LIFE: “Accompanying.”

*Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”*

*They left the city and were on their way to him. . . .*

*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” (John 4:27-30, 39-42)*

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. PD, pp. 47-48.

<sup>17</sup> PD, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> AL, 37.

- The Samaritan woman entered the gospel scene as “a woman of Samaria” and comes out “knowing the source of living water” to the point that she feels that she has to run to announce to her fellow townsmen what has happened to her; through her *testimony*, she allows many to approach Jesus.
- Having abandoned the jar, the woman runs to the village to talk to the people about this man. And she will ask them an important question: “Could not this man be the one Israel has been waiting for, for such a long time?”
- Likewise, as can be inferred from the context, Jesus makes his disciples understand that he is fulfilling the will of the Father; that will which gives Life to his life and which he wishes to transmit to others.
- Jesus does not offer an extension of knowledge and learning to the people he meets, as in this case with the Samaritan woman. Rather, he gives them a proposal to grow and change their lives. “Jacob’s well” itself, the symbol of the wisdom that comes from the Law, loses its value and is replaced by the “living water.”
- The image of God, which is communicated in the encounter with Jesus, is not the image of some impassive, distant, philosophically cold god. On the contrary, Jesus reveals the God who gives Life, who can be called Father, who does not allow himself to be contained up, controlled, or possessed, because he is Spirit (worship in Spirit and truth).
- The conclusion of the meeting goes beyond what one would expect in a normal ending, namely that the woman should return to her ordinary life with the jar full of water. On the contrary, the jar, which the woman abandons empty to go and call her people, speaks to us of a gain and not of a loss.

### **Accompanying, like Jesus**

There are numerous biblical stories that, in the first place, tell of the accompaniment which God ensures to his people over time.

At the border between the two Testaments, John the Baptist appears as the first spiritual companion of the Gospels; before Jesus himself, John was able to give witness and prepare the way because God had spoken to his heart.

Jesus himself, in so many passages of the New Testament, becomes a neighbor and companion on the road to communicate to and meet in a personal way with the people of his time.

The encounter of the Lord with the Samaritan woman shows how the Spirit of God can act in the heart of every man and woman: that human heart which, because of frailty and sin, often feels confused and divided, “attracted to different and even contrary feelings.”<sup>19</sup>

In the face of this human reality, personal accompaniment appears as a very valid means of the Christian spiritual tradition, providing believers with instruments and resources that allow them to recognize the presence of the Lord, his demands, and his calls.

How can we define accompaniment? “As a form of ongoing dialogue among companions to welcome

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. PD, p. 50.

Life, accompanying life”;<sup>20</sup> a dialogue whose ultimate aim is to foster the relationship between persons and the Lord, helping them to overcome any obstacles.

As Jesus did when he encountered the people of his time, in every experience of accompaniment the following are necessary:

- a loving gaze, like that of Jesus when he addressed his vocational call to the twelve (John 1:35-51).
- an authoritative word, like the one Jesus pronounced in the synagogue of Capernaum (Luke 4:32).
- the capability to become a neighbor, like Jesus in the encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:3-34, 39-42).
- choosing to walk side by side, to become a companion on the road, like Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

*For us, accompanying adolescents and youths, their families, and adults in general, will involve:*

- knowing the journey they are on, what point they have reached on it, and where they are heading, so as to be able to walk together with them.
- ensuring that the encounter takes place as an opportunity for a human and humanizing relationship, and not a utilitarian one. We are well aware of the importance of encounter in Salesian pedagogy, which focuses on the person of the youngster and of every person, with personal relationships that are based on mutual knowledge, on concern for the other’s good, on understanding, empathy, and trust. And we know that in this Don Bosco was an *exceptional, incomparable teacher*.
- an attitude of **listening** (again, one refers to the art of listening as the foundation of accompaniment!), which makes it possible to know and understand other persons’ reality, the path they are taking, the situation of pain, lack of hope, fatigue, or searching in which they find themselves, as well as the dreams, desires, and ideals hidden in their hearts.
- It will always be an encounter of **mediation**, because the true Accompanying Person is the Holy Spirit. Mystic St. John of the Cross strongly affirms this when he writes: “These directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover of souls in this matter, but the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of souls.”<sup>21</sup> And this is because it will never be said enough that the travelling companion of our entire educational, pastoral, and evangelizing activity is the Holy Spirit.
- The accompanying person and companion on the road must be a witness to and announcer of the action of the Spirit in the person accompanied, but in a discreet way, remaining close, occupying only the space that belongs to him and not another one. Truly, the educator and evangelizer are

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<sup>20</sup> L. Arrieta, *Aquel que acompaña sale al encuentro y regala preguntas de vida para andar el camino (Apuntes provisionales)*. Simposio CCEE (Barcelona, 2017), 11. See also Pascual Chavez Villanueva, Letter of the Rector Major, “‘Come and see’ (Jn 1,39): The Need for Vocation Ministry,” in AGC 409 (2011), p. 33-36; M.A. Garcia, “L’accompagnamento personale nella proposta educativo-pastorale salesiana,” pp. 261-282, in Fabio Attard-M. A. Garcia, ed., *L’accompagnamento spirituale*, (Turin: Elle Di Ci, 2014), p. 349.

<sup>21</sup> John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love* 3,46 in Attard-Garcia, p. 268.

formed as spiritual companions in *the foundational experience of having first encountered Him*. This is so clear, explicit, and radical for the fact that “the true educator of faith is the one who at a certain point must set himself aside, pulling himself back by creating that ‘empty place’ which can be occupied only by the Lord,”<sup>22</sup> in order to allow, as the fruit and result of this accompaniment, the attainment of a true relationship or encounter of the youth, of the person accompanied, with God.

- discovering how God manifests himself in our experience to the point of finding ourselves encountered by Him.
- being aware that the initiative will always be God’s; and (being also aware) that responsibility and freedom will be ours.

### **Don Bosco, Educator and Spiritual Guide of His Young People**<sup>23</sup>

To speak of Don Bosco as an educator means to highlight and be aware of the close relationship between his educational mission and his spiritual accompaniment of young people, and of its significance for their formation.

In order to be very brief and to stress only what is essential, I will highlight some elements that I consider to be of great value.

- Don Bosco is an evangelizer-educator who with great intuition is concerned to create an attractive educational environment, rich in educational proposals and human relationships; he never refuses to take gradual, concrete steps in the Christian formation of his young people.
- Don Bosco is for us *the brilliant companion of his boys*, because he does not limit himself to personal dialogue, or to the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation (simply called confession at that time), but he sees everything in relationship and united with the other elements of educational activity and daily life in its various moments.
- In Don Bosco’s style, both the person accompanying and the person accompanied *are not limited to meeting each other* on the basis of a specific agenda on a set day or time, but daily share environments, recreation spaces, and moments of work, prayer, and joy.
- This leads one to think that *mutual knowledge, trust, and even friendship* could easily be born, which favored trust and the willingness to let oneself be guided.
- In Don Bosco, spiritual fatherhood is the consequence and the ripe fruit of educational fatherhood, which his children live with him on a daily basis. We find this paternity magnificently described in the following expressions: “For each boy, Don Bosco in his capacity as confessor and spiritual director is the one who has welcomed him with affection, sustains him, instructs him, educates him, and encourages him to give the best of himself in the community and in his daily work. Next to him there are assistants, educators, and young friends with whom one

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<sup>22</sup> R. Sala, *Pastorale Giovanile 1, Evangelizzazione e educazione dei giovani* (Rome: LAS, 2017), p. 391.

<sup>23</sup> I invite you to refer to the existing abundant and rich Salesian literature; in particular I highlight: Aldo Giraud, “Direzione spirituale in San Giovanni Bosco,” in Attard-García, pp. 148-172; Chavez, pp. 9-16; Juan E. Vecchi, *Spiritualità Salesiana* (Turin: Elle Di Ci), pp. 22-36, 117-124, 173-174; Dicastero per la Pastorale Giovanile Salesiana, *La Pastorale Giovanile Salesiana: Quadro di Riferimento* (Rome, 2014), 3d ed., pp. 24-25, 78-103, 114-117; E. Albuquerque, ed., *Espiritualidad Salesiana: 40 palabras clave* (Madrid: CCS), pp. 77-82.

can share the same ethical tension, the same spiritual values, in a stimulating and fruitful dialogue exchange.”<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, the emotional tone and the creation of trust and sympathy are for Don Bosco fundamental conditions of his educational method.

- Don Bosco *is at all times the educator* who not only provides his children with food, health, and education. His educational commitment is always oriented toward the Christian education of his boys. This is why we can affirm that “spiritual accompaniment to Christian perfection is an essential and necessary part of Salesian pedagogy.”<sup>25</sup>
- It is very enlightening to know that as he accompanied them Don Bosco did not establish the same relationship and bond with each of his boys, but he did it with “*different tonalities and degrees.*” He did not act in the same way with the boys he met only at the festive oratory on Sunday evenings or in confession as he did with those who lived day and night in Valdocco and, among these, with the ones who showed that they were vocationally sensitive and available.
- A characteristic that “must be *very much ours,*” because it was Don Bosco’s, is that of always taking *steps toward the creation of communities of life.* In such communities cordial encounters, continuous presence, and the empathic closeness of the educators (typical of Salesian assistance) arouse trust and friendship and are the usual characteristic of that community of adolescents, youths, and adults.

The goal toward which he always tended, as far as possible, was “*the conquest of the heart.*” This is wonderful! If only one were to think what this can mean in a true evangelizer and educator!

- We also know that for Don Bosco *the quality of the educational environment,* which had to be offered and built together with the boys in Valdocco, was *the most effective accompaniment for each one,* whatever the situation in which they met.
- In his educational activity Don Bosco *tries to understand the boys,* to be aware of their juvenile needs and desires; so in this educational relationship the young person feels *understood, welcomed, supported, and loved.*

The boys’ trust in their friend, educator, and father makes them open their hearts and accept to travel with him along paths that allow them to discover new and attractive realities. An example of great significance, enlightening at the same time, is offered by the initial resistance of young Michael Magone – as Don Bosco himself narrates – who enjoys only singing, shouting, running, and jumping,<sup>26</sup> until he reaches a “crisis” that upsets him, and a change that takes place thanks to the conversion of his heart<sup>27</sup> and makes him experience a great joy and a spiritual journey he had not known until then.

For all this we affirm that “Don Bosco is a model: he tends to identify in himself the educator, the confessor, and the spiritual director; he insists on an affectionate welcome, goodness, magnanimity, care for individuals; on the intensity of affection shown in such a way that the youths may entrust themselves

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<sup>24</sup> Giraudo, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Giovanni Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell’Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales.* 2d ed. (Turin: Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, 1866), p. 15. Eng. ed: *Biographies of Students Michael Magone and Francis Besucco*, trans. Wallace Cornell, SDB (New Rochelle: Salesiana, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 16-24; Eng., pp. 9-18.

to him, open their hearts, and collaborate in formative activity with prompt and hearty obedience.”<sup>28</sup>

All this is achieved through a **step-by-step pedagogy** so common in the spiritual tradition. “Christian life is lived in a progressive way, according to distinct degrees of depth and fullness, and is constantly open to ever greater growth”<sup>29</sup>:

- according to progressive steps that *must not be forced* from either inside or outside;
- to the point of becoming aware of the process and making it one’s own, since it is the Spirit who unleashes it in each one.

#### IV. IN VIEW OF WHAT KIND OF PASTORAL ACTION?

##### Vocation Discernment as Suggested by Pope Francis

I believe that everything we have said so far offers suggestions and pastoral paths that we must face. And the very fact that the Preparatory Document for the Synod of Bishops invites pastoral action allows me to suggest some guidelines to pay attention to. The same text to which I have just referred invites me “to focus on how earnestly to respond to the challenge of pastoral care and vocation discernment.”<sup>30</sup>

Taking these challenges seriously with a Salesian point of view could be translated into the following considerations:

1. We must be aware that this is the *favorable time*, and we must continue to walk with boys and girls, with youths and their families, with fathers and mothers who need and agree to walk these roads in company, instead of going through them in a harsh solitude in which they will never feel at ease. Father Vecchi said this years ago in his letter “Now is the Acceptable Time.”<sup>31</sup>

Pope Francis commented on it at different times in his apostolic exhortation and in this Preparatory Document to the Synod; many of us also know it from our own educational and pastoral experience, and I myself have expressed it with strong conviction as the motivation for this strenna. Father Vecchi wrote: “Individual conversations with young people have revealed how much they think about the radical following of Christ. But it often finds them unprepared to respond and, as has already been said so many times before, it finds them uncertain in the face of discovering the real possibilities that match their expectations for living out such a vocation for the whole of their lives.”<sup>32</sup>

2. We must cultivate at every moment *a vocation culture*, even in cultural contexts that may seem difficult to us.

This expression “vocation culture” was used for the first time by Pope John Paul II in the message of the 30th World Day for Vocations. As educators and evangelizers, we propose to help young people to face life, the present and the future, with a deep self-knowledge and with an attitude of availability and generosity in listening to the voice of God in each one, accompanying them on their journey toward a

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<sup>28</sup> Giraudo, p. 160.

<sup>29</sup> S. de Fiore, *Itinerario espiritual*, in S. de Fiore et al., ed., *Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad* (Madrid: Paulinas, 2004), p. 755.

<sup>30</sup> DP, p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Juan E. Vecchi, Letter of the Rector Major, “Now Is the Acceptable Time,” AGC n. 373 (2000), pp. 3-46; cf. Chavez, pp. 3-47.

<sup>32</sup> Vecchi, Letter, p. 10.

personal and consistent plan of life.

This will not refer only to some, as if they were an elite, but is an invitation and a call from God himself for the journey of each person toward his or her full development.

We wish young people to discover *a way of living and dreaming about their lives* in which values such as freely giving oneself, openness to others, and openness to God may mature. We want to help these young people, and every person who is taking this journey, to discover that life can be understood as a gift and a task,<sup>33</sup> and that this will make them happy. To discover that in the face of the dominant cultural tendencies conveying messages according to which the only important thing is one's own self, a significant alternative is to understand that life is a gift, according to a plan of life that each person feels "made according to his own measure and according to his own possibilities" and in which one feels happy, as a response to the meaning of his life from the perspective of God and others.

We want this for all young people, always with great respect for their persons, and appealing to their freedom as we walk together.

3. We must foster *an intense spiritual atmosphere that constitutes the great help for their personal relationship with Jesus*. My visits to the six continents make ever deeper my conviction that the vast majority of "our" young people around the world, those with whom we meet every day, are open if we present to them and bear witness that God who dwells in us, dwells in our person, and in his name we live for them.

I sincerely believe that if sometimes the "results" of our pastoral action are lacking, this may be because we ourselves do not have the courage to be more decisive in our proposals. Perhaps, for fear of being rejected, we choose to stay on the "lukewarm path" that offers proposals that do not bother anyone.

I am more and more convinced that our young people around the world are *thirsty for spirituality, thirsty for transcendence, thirsty for God*, even if sometimes they do not know how to express it and ask us for an answer. With Don Bosco the young learned to feel and to experience, almost spontaneously, that God loved them and that he had for each one of them a plan for happiness and full life.

God's plan for each of his sons and daughters has not changed. It always remains the same. This spiritual atmosphere is, therefore, more necessary than ever. It is nourished through a personal relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters, prayer shared with the young, the celebration of faith through the sacraments. It is nourished by listening, in silence that welcomes the Word, in dialogue with it and in sharing it. And it is nourished with Marian devotion and with a strong feeling and experience of love for our Mother, for Mary, for the Help of Christians.

4. We must offer this opportunity *to all young people* and all those who request it, without excluding anyone, because in each one the Holy Spirit is at work.

We believe that the vocation of each person is God's initiative. "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Since the vocation of each person is a call and a gift that is received, no one can inspire or give birth to it except God himself. But we must accompany that vocation with a path through which faith becomes as personal as possible; a path in which we grow in our interiority and our encounter with Jesus the Lord.

The call Jesus addresses to the rich young man and his response make us understand that it is not enough

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Chavez, pp. 20-21.

to be enthusiastic and honest to respond positively to God's call. To respond to this call, the ethical and moral dimension of the person needs, first and foremost, the spiritual dimension and faith.

If this dimension is lived out, young people will be able to feel that call as a *plan of life and God's dream for each of them*, and it will become possible to accompany them on every type of vocation journey: for lay Christian life, for consecrated life, for priestly ministry, for consecrated secularity, etc.

5. We must propose a spirituality that fosters ***a unified vision of life***. It is a trait that should be inherent to our Salesian spirituality of "union with God," which we have received as a spiritual patrimony from Don Bosco.

We speak of a spirituality in which are closely united the God who gives himself freely, the personal encounter with Christ, and the freedom with which each person responds in faith to the Spirit who acts in each person.

Don Bosco, a great spiritual master for young people, lived with them a spirituality that was, in the first place, educational and helped them to travel in a natural way a path that led them to a spiritual maturity for which "the presence of God becomes as 'natural' as breathing, sleeping, or thinking. It is a dynamism that does not refer only to the 'religious' aspect but that affects the whole of life."<sup>34</sup>

#### ***6. Witnessing to the Joy with Which We Live.***

Young people who dream of living their Christian life in an authentic way and who wonder what God wants from them, want to see our enthusiasm and want to experience it personally as well.

"No one will take away your joy," says the Lord (John 16:22). This is possible when we ourselves, young people, adults, fathers and mothers who are searching, have lived the experience of the Lord's encounter with us. And that experience must be translated into joyful living, into the optimism with which we meet every day, into the serene courage with which we face problems and difficult times. There is nothing further away from the God who fulfills our life than an existence lacking expectations, liveliness, motivation. This is why I have repeatedly expressed in these pages that in accompanying others in the discernment of life and vocation we must be *significant and credible points of reference*. Otherwise we will end up performing a function that leaves no lasting, worthwhile trace in people's lives.

#### ***7. In the Logic of "Come and See"***<sup>35</sup>

It is clear that the young people of the six continents to whom I have referred, fascinated by Christ, will follow the paths that attract them. As Father Vecchi says in the text already mentioned, young people will not be fascinated by our works and organizations, our structures, nor even by our work. At most they will be able to devote some time, perhaps a few years, to animation and service, but if they do not discover the depth and charm that Jesus Christ arouses, sooner or later they will go in search of something else that will satisfy them more. The same applies equally to religious men and women and young priests. Therefore, the experience of values such as evangelical fraternity in the name of Jesus, the family spirit that we feel "so very much to be ours," the atmosphere of family affection, prayer, and the shared witness of the small or big things in our lives, will constitute what gives meaning to our personal searchings and the "yes" we give in response to God's call. It is that "more" that attracts, "the extra something which forms part of prophecy, of meaning, of basic values; or in what might be called the 'warm experience'

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<sup>34</sup> M.A. Garcia Morcuende, *La educación es cosa de corazones* (Madrid: PPC, 2017), p. 109.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. John 1:39 and Vecchi, Letter, pp. 26-27.

which gives rise to inspirations and the desire for a life commitment.”<sup>36</sup>

The aspect that would be lacking in the presentation of this “come and see” is being aware, for any type of vocation discernment in the Church, that silent witness and silence about vocation are not sufficient to make the vocation that God is rousing become concrete. Personal invitation and the proposal of suitable paths for each person must be part of the “come and see.”

#### 8. *With a Salesian style of accompaniment, which is **not only individual or intimate but also communal***

In our Salesian style, when we speak of accompaniment, we refer not only to individual dialogue, but to a much wider and richer reality that helps people, especially youths, to internalize the values and experiences they live. Among these, *service to others and solidarity toward the neediest* are of great importance.

As was already the case with Don Bosco, accompaniment starts from an educational environment which favors the interiorization of proposals and personal and vocational growth.

In addition to moments of personal and systematic dialogue, short, occasional meetings with other people are decisive in this journey, as also are simple, familiar meetings with other people, members of the Christian community, the faith group, or religious communities themselves.

### **V. IN COMPANY WITH THE SAMARITAN WOMAN**

I would like to conclude this commentary by imagining that, as she went to meet her fellow townsmen and spoke to them of the One who had fascinated her and helped her to encounter herself in her most authentic truth, the Samaritan woman would perhaps take us also by the hand and

- she would lead us to Jacob’s well, the well where she encountered Jesus, who made her understand that he does not stop in the face of our resistance and our being anchored in areas of comfort and security against what we do not know; he remains close to us until he leads us to discover our deepest thirst;
- she would invite us not to let anything and anyone stifle or curb our deepest ideals, the ideal that filled us with enthusiasm at the beginning of our missionary vocation journey, or of married life, religious consecration, priestly ministry, or lay consecration;
- she would certainly propose that we do everything possible to be always open to the “gift” that comes from God; a gift we never succeed in discovering completely and do not taste fully because of our limitations;
- she would convince us, starting from her own experience, of the importance of accompanying each other, of guiding and supporting each other in faith;
- and she would confide how she herself learned from Jesus to be more human, and perhaps even a little more “expert in humanity,” which is an ongoing challenge for us.

Like Mary, who lived the newness of the Annunciation, the encounter with a “personal” God who knocked so delicately at the door of her freedom, making fruitful what humanly would not have been possible, we too are invited to question ourselves on our faith, on our “abandoning ourselves” in God,

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<sup>36</sup> Vecchi, Letter, p. 27.

who is a perennial newness of life, and to let ourselves be carried by the Spirit.

May the Lord help us follow this path and help young people walk along it. May our Mother grant us the grace to be authentic mediators of the word of the Lord, which resounds, not always in an immediately comprehensible way, in the heart of every young person, in married couples, in families, in all those who are searching.

By invoking the mediation of Mary Help of Christians with her Son and the protection of Don Bosco and all the members of our Family, who are already on the road to holiness, I greet you and wish you every good.

Angel Fernandez Artime  
Rector Major