

**YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY**  
**THE JOURNEY OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION**

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## YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY

### THE JOURNEY OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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*Youth Ministry and Family* is at the centre of our reflection as it is at the heart of our Salesian charism. From this statement we let ourselves be guided in the following reflection that has as its main purpose to make a reading of the journey that the Salesian Congregation has embarked on over the last decades around this theme. A reflection that finds its starting point in the experience of Vatican Council II that has given the whole Church the opportunity to deepen its mission in today's world. In the light of the mystery and the Word, we contemplate our calling to be a Church today, that is to be a mirror of Christ's light for humanity, in the contemporary world with its joys and hopes.

That the family is at the heart of our Salesian mission is clearly and simply stated within our *Constitutions* and *Regulations*. There are two articles that are like two solid and eloquent indicators:

#### ***Constitutions, article 47***

The educative community and lay people associated with our work

We bring about in our works the educative and pastoral community which involves young people and adults, parents and educators, in a family atmosphere, so that it can become a living experience of Church and a revelation of God's plan for us.

In this community lay people associated with our work make a contribution all their own, because of their experience and pattern of life.

We welcome and encourage their collaboration, and we give them the opportunity to get a deeper knowledge of the Salesian spirit and the practice of the preventive system.

We foster the spiritual growth of each of them, and to those who may be so inclined we suggest a closer sharing of our mission in the Salesian Family.

#### ***Regulations, article 5***

The application of the plan requires that in all our works and settings we establish the educative and pastoral community, whose animating nucleus is the Salesian community.

Let all the Salesians play an active part in the drawing up, realization and subsequent revision of the plan, and let them see to it that in a family spirit the young people, their parents and other collaborators also take part, according to their different roles.

At the end of this paper, I hope that the scope of what these two articles contain will be clearer. That we discover that behind these few lines we have a wealth that confirms the protagonism of the family – the subject and object of the Salesian youth pastoral.

## I. POST-CONCILIAR JOURNEY OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

In this first part we take a look at the firm points that emerge within the Congregation's journey in the immediate post-Council period. But to do this we have to start from a central point we need as a compass. It is the compass around the theme of the family that the Conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, 1965) left us. The two parts of GS are, first, the Church and the vocation of the human person (Part I), while the second addresses some urgent problems (Part II). At this point it is helpful to grasp the prophetic scope of the first theme covered in Part II since it bears the title: *Fostering the nobility of marriage and the family*.

At a distance of more than 50 years, we realize that the Council Fathers had foreseen the ground where the Church would be called upon to invest much of its pastoral energies. The post-Conciliar Church's journey is nourished and strengthened by all the freshness we find in the GS, how it presents the family and the marriage: the family that is not perceived as a patient to be cured, but an active subject; the family who has a mission to accomplish; the family being helped and promoted by all the members of society.

### a. The General Chapters

This very brief statement is obligatory, as already in the first instance of reflection that the Congregation had, the **Special General Chapter** (SGC 20, Rome, 10 June 1971 - 5 January 1972), the theme of the family emerges with the same force and vision.

It begins with a **first affirmation on the family as the place where the first education takes place**, convinced of the fact that **responsibility for younger generations needs to be largely assumed by a wider group**: that of the adult educators in the first place, but not only. The SGC indicates a responsibility that goes beyond the walls of the family as well as beyond the buildings where the pastoral proposal takes place:

Since education begins in the family and in many cases the human development of the child depends on this initial education, Salesians will do everything possible, by writing and lectures, to help parents in the Christian and human education of their children. Lay people who are directly responsible for the young have also a great influence of the evolution of youth. Hence we should increase our contact with them. We may also have the care of many other people who are on a higher socio-cultural plane. With their social and political responsibilities and their scientific and pastoral skill, they can have a great influence on the education of youth (SGC n.55).

From this premise, that time has largely confirmed its relevance, we meet two focal points around the family. The first point is offered from the perspective of a sound setting of the educational-pastoral project, where the family as a subject within the educational and pastoral community and together with it there is a sound collaboration together in the service of youth growth.

The second statement addresses the theme of **evangelization and catechesis**, paths of education to faith, within the parish. A first reference is found in *Document no. 4* that carries the title *Pastoral Renewal of Salesian Action among Youth*. Within this document we find a paragraph about the characteristics of our pastoral service where “relationships with the family” are considered and lived in relation to the fact that youth are at the main concern:

Salesian activity should take the young *in relation to the family*, in order to integrate, supplement and rectify its educative influence. **It is the task of the communities to maintain collaboration and a deep understanding with parents in their shared responsibility and action**. There are various forms of this collaboration. The importance of this union between the family and ourselves in the formation of the young should spur us on to a renewal. (SGC n. 356).

That these relationships do not only remain simply on the level of good intentions, they are further commented and deepened when it comes to the educational and pastoral project that the *Educative and Pastoral Community* (EPC) assumes (it should be noted here that the SGC refers to the EPC with the term *educative community*):

The renewal of pastoral work in the Congregation and in each province will be obtained, in the opinion of the Special General Chapter, if the following points in the doctrine of an EDUCATIVE COMMUNITY are put into practice: a) **co-responsibility** in the running of affairs on the part of the religious and lay *educators*, of the *pupils*, and their families; b) the **programming** and periodic revision of all the educative work of the community; c) the **creation of a real family atmosphere** in which the active and fraternal presence of the educator is indispensable; d) the division of the boys into **groups according to age and degree of preparation** (SGC n. 395).

This is the language that immediately after the Council the Congregation has matured in the SGC. **Collaboration with the family is an indispensable choice, a solid and central choice towards a genuine pastoral renewal.** A path of pastoral renewal that is based on *co-responsibility, planning, family atmosphere, and proposals for age groups* overcoming the model of a unique proposal for everyone without paying attention to a diversified pastoral proposal for children and youth.

A second reference, found in *Document no. 5, Salesian work in parishes*, deals with the theme of the family in relation to evangelization and catechesis, but this time within the experience of the parish. The SGC in a very clear and prophetic way primarily emphasizes the **need to be aware that the scenario we are living in is constantly changing**. In this context, the family has a unique role as a protagonist:

We are in touch with the child throughout the whole period of his education till he reaches maturity, and at the same time we have a **direct and continuous relationship with his family**. Such a relationship is all the more necessary at the present day, because when young people live in a **de-Christianized social milieu**, education is of little avail unless at the same time we try to re-evangelize the family and the society of which they form part (SGC n.401).

**Evangelization cannot be said to be complete if one does not assume the relationship with the family as an irreplaceable partner:** for its need to be evangelized, and also for its importance, capacity, and opportunity to strengthen long-term processes. In this manner the danger of 'educating with little avail' is averted.

From the awareness of this clear pastoral vision, there follows an invitation we often encounter today in the documents of the Church's Magisterium, and also that of the Congregation. I think it is useful to find out that **already in the CGS we reached the understanding that "the family is not only subject but subject of pastoral action"**:

The renewed role of catechetics and its effective organization in the adult and youth sectors **must converge and meet in the family, considered not only as the object but more especially as the subject of pastoral action.** The family must be brought to fulfil its Christian duties as a means of educating the young in the faith, since it is precisely through the family that the young are brought into civic partnership with their fellow men and into the people of God (SGC n.422).

In addition, the SGC suggests **concrete steps** that, after decades, they still retain their pastoral validity and timeliness. Realizing that the family is the object and the subject of pastoral action, the EPC needs to engage in pastoral planning so as to render this belief operational. The concrete steps offered by the SGC have a **double binary**:

a) **the first is that of the couple**, that is, how to help and accompany her. Offering ways to promote a journey of mutual support and mutual growth, human and spiritual, within the same couple;

b) the second is the logical pastoral consequence of the first: to offer the opportunity of **family spirituality groups**, groups where the **growth is outward-looking**, thus avoiding the trap of a group centered on itself. Let these groups be a space where real spirituality become courage and dynamism in order to assume pastoral commitment, in other words, to become prophets:

Parents should be the **first preachers of the faith** to their children, and the first catechists. Similarly each married person will become an educator and help for the other partner in the course of their Christian life.

Finally, **if the Christina family is the place where the faith really accepted it follows that the whole family will bear witness to the gospel**. To this end, groups to intensify family spirituality should be encouraged. Parents who are willing to be trained to **undertake pastoral action in the community**, especially by preparing those who are engaged (and young people in general) to be married. In this way the family will become a 'domestic church', a 'first seminary', an 'open community', and will thereby rediscover in the faith a new dimension of love, of liberty, and of service with and for others (SGC n.422).

We note the language used by the SGC in the quotations: it captures the foresight of how in the immediate aftermath of the Council the Congregation had intuited:

- *family, considered not only as an object, but especially as a subject of pastoral action;*
- *parents are therefore prepared to be the first to announce faith, the first catechists for their children;*
- *the Christian family ... the place where faith is welcomed ... gives witness to the Gospel;*
- *the spouses are willing to engage in pastoral commitment in the community;*
- *the family becomes a domestic Church, the first seminary, open community.*

At this point we realize that by studying the journey of the Congregation, we are endowed with a heritage that avoids the unnecessary fatigue of inventing new formulas. Instead, we do well to renew our memory, to keep alive this rich and hope-filled process that this **Special General Chapter** has transmitted to us.

For various reasons, the prospects and the lines generated by the SGC had not generated similar reflections in the following General Chapters. We know that the efforts of the Congregation in the *General Chapters 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25* have been very focused on the subject of education and evangelization, the renewal of the *Constitutions*, the education of young people to faith, Salesians and lay people, communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, and the Salesian community today. This focus somehow left no room to deal more specifically with the family, even though at this time the Church was engaged in the Synod on the family which gave the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*.

We note that the theme of the family within these General Chapters is always in relation to the central themes the Congregation was studying. Let's review these references that have been quoted several times in various publications and writings:

In times past “piety” was expressed in forms pedagogically suited to the conditions of contemporary youth. **Today there is an urgent need for a rethinking of the best times and forms of initiation to it, beginning from the family itself** (GC 23, n. 139).

In this family situation, the question put by Fr Egidio Viganò makes us think: **“We have to ask ourselves: can an educator at the present day form the person of his youngsters without the deepening, clarifying and reliving of family values?”** (Letter published in AGC n. 349, Rome, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1994, quoted in GC 24, n. 10).

**Collaboration with youngsters' families should be intensified, since parents are the primary educators of their sons and daughters.** To this end they should be offered in our works an educative climate rich in family values, and in particular an educational team with a harmonious integration of men and women components. (GC 24, n. 177).

In recent years action and reflection have given rise to vocational planning at both local and provincial levels; greater attention has been given to methods of formation; there has been a greater involvement of young people in groups and in the Salesian Youth Movement. **We have not always known how to involve the family as the primary setting for vocational growth** (GC 25, n. 41).

**General Chapter 26** (CG 26, 2008): there is a clear and forceful reappearance of the theme of the family into a General Chapter whose intention was *starting afresh from Don Bosco*. During this General Chapter there are two particular moments where the theme of the family is explicitly dealt with: the first, within the same Chapter's scheme; the second is within the two interventions of Pope Benedict XVI – one at the beginning of GC 26, through the letter written to the Salesians of Don Bosco by Pope Benedict XVI<sup>1</sup>, and the other is the speech towards the end of the General Chapter.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to refer to the aforementioned letter before commenting on how GC 26 reflected on the family theme. It is a letter that enlightens and highlights the already proposed agenda for the General Chapter. It is a letter that must be read in the light of the Pope's commitment, as is also the case today of Pope Francis, on the theme of the family and its educational mission. Some key points serve as indicators for the future:

- the family as a domestic church,
- the family is the first educational hearth of faith,
- the invitation to the Salesians of Don Bosco has a dual importance:
  - o within the journey of the same Congregation because of our mission, that of being educators and evangelizers of young people with special attention to the family;
  - o ecclesial importance since the Salesian charism and the family are a gift to be shared with the Church;
- finally, an invitation to deepen this singular convergence: youth ministry and family.

Scrive Papa Benedetto XVI:

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the occasion of the General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20080301\\_capitolo-salesiani.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20080301_capitolo-salesiani.html)

<sup>2</sup> Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Members of the 26<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080331\\_salesiani.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080331_salesiani.html)

It is indispensable to help the young to make the most of their inner resources, such as dynamism and positive aspirations; to put before them proposals that are rich in humanity and Gospel values; to urge them to integrate themselves into society as an active part of it through work and participation and commitment to the common good. This requires those who guide them to expand the areas of educational commitment with attention to the new forms of poverty among young people, to advanced education and to immigration; **it also requires attention to the family and its involvement.** I reflected on this most important aspect in the Letter on the educational emergency that I recently addressed to the faithful of Rome, and that I now present in spirit to all Salesians.<sup>3</sup>

A keyword all along is the word “**involvement**”. Pope Benedict puts together “attention to the family” and the focus on the “involvement” of the family, namely the family as the object and subject of pastoral action. For is this is a call to shared responsibility, to an overall project within our educational and pastoral communities, but also a call who hold ecclesial, political and social responsibilities which Pope Benedict expresses in the terms in the letter *Urgent Task of Educating Young People*:

Responsibility is in the first place personal, but there is also a responsibility which we share as citizens in the same city and of one nation, as members of the human family and, if we are believers, as children of the one God and members of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

Following this *Letter*, CG 26 as anticipated in the preparatory work, offers a renewed vigour to some *New Frontiers*: Family, Social Communication, Europe. On the theme of the family we encounter a language that has now become common heritage: ours and the Church:

Special attention needs to be given to the current situation of **the family, originally responsible for education and the first place for evangelisation.** The entire Church has become aware of the serious difficulties the family finds itself in and warns of the need to offer extraordinary assistance for its formation, development and the responsible exercising of its educative role. **This is why we are also called to act in such a way that youth ministry is ever more open to family ministry.** (GC 26, n. 99).

GC 26 is open about the fact that there is still a long way to go: “attention has grown in provinces to the family which is the essential point of reference for education, but the efforts we have made so far are still insufficient” (GC 26, n. 102). For this reason, it affirms and encourages a pastoral direction that has given positive signs of hope in these in these last years. We need to strengthen our attention to the family which goes beyond considering it sole as object of our pastoral concern, as if it was a “patient” in need of our sympathy. We are called to move on from “a youth ministry insufficiently attentive to family contexts, to one of greater investment of energies on behalf of the family” (GC 26, n. 104), taking on board the commitment “to give privileged attention to the family in youth ministry (GC 26, n. 108).

In a more specific manner GC 26 offers some lines of action that are very much in line with the pastoral vision proposed in SGC:

*Let the community:*

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<sup>3</sup> Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the occasion of the General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the *Urgent Task of Educating Young People*, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2008.

- *involve and form parents in the educative and evangelising activity they carry out for their children;*
- *develop curricula for affective education especially during adolescence and accompany young people during their time of engagement for marriage, making good use of the contribution of parents, lay people who share this responsibility and members of the Salesian Family;*
- *foster new forms of evangelisation and catechesis of families and by means of families (CG 26, n. 109).*

**A summary note:** I believe that GC 26 in this field has offered a platform that leaves two positive consequences: the first is that of strengthening the theme of the family not only as a proposal enclosed in our walls, but as an **ecclesial journey**. In fact, the two Synods on the family that followed are a confirmation of this pastoral choice. It is also to be noted that in recent years the theme of the family as subject of the educational and pastoral community is gathering interest, reflection and concrete proposals in several **Salesian Provinces**. These two aspects, the ecclesial and the congregational ones, offer hope for the future as we can see later.

In **General Chapter 27** (CG 27) we witness the continuation and strengthening of the process launched by the GC 26. Here we have an even more focused reflection on the family theme together with Pope Francis's intervention towards the end of the General Chapter. The two strengths on which this General Chapter insists are the following: a) **the involvement of the family**; and b) formation: **the pastoral journey and formation**. Here too, we see the convergence of the Church's journey: the preparation for the two Synods on the family and the work of the General Chapter.

As already mentioned, GC 27 insists on the **protagonism** of the family. The terms used have a clarity that enlightens, guides, and strengthens our journeys of pastoral planning. In the part that has as a title *Available for planning and cooperation*, we read:

An emerging apostolic front that we have begun to take better care of is **family ministry**, and not only in parish or adult formation contexts. **It needs to be reconsidered in close connection with youth ministry** (GC 27, n. 20).

This statement in its brevity should be taken as a light and as an indispensable indication for our pastoral and educative communities. Family ministry, first of all, is not just a call for certain environments, it is not exclusive and much less excluding. Here we have a danger, a trap that we must be pastorally alert in avoiding. The family is a subject in all the places where we are called to servant and pilgrims for the young. The family is there to the extent that we accept to meet young people with all their history, in its complexity, but also in its potential.

Family ministry is not a separate sector. Family ministry is not a responsibility of somebody who organizes activities, whatever these activities may be. "Family ministry (is) to be reconsidered in close association with youth ministry." This is a belief that makes us reflect. It is a perspective that helps us to avoid the fragmentation of small personal pastoral realms. It is a call that has to strengthen a community that educates the family through involvement, offers the chance to the family to become an educative and pastoral active agent, protagonist.

Again, this point is taken up by GC 27 in the section entitled *Experiencing fraternal life, as at Valdocco, available for planning and cooperation*:

In the Church, which is the People of God on the march and a communion of individuals with different charisms and roles, **we share the service of building the Kingdom of God with the laity.** It is charismatic to see to the involvement and shared responsibility of all the members of the *animating core of the EPC* (cf. C 47), Salesians and lay people, **foster a planning mentality and common action on behalf of the young, families and adults amongst the ordinary people** (GC 27, n. 20).

GC 27 provides us with the processes and concrete steps that while giving weight to this pastoral insistence can put together a) the **involvement** of the family and b) the formation, that is, the **pastoral journey and formation**:

Integrating family ministry into the Provincial and local SEPP, providing for the formation and involvement of lay leadership [CG26, 99, 102, 104] (GC 27, n. 71, 5);

Ensuring attention is given to family ministry and lay formation at all levels and encouraging coordination of reflection and intervention by the Sectors for the Salesian mission and for Formation (GC 27, n. 71, 7).

Pope Francis in his speech to members of the GC 27, reiterated the theme of the family with the same insistence of the discussions during the Chapter. The Pope, starting from the vocational perspective, insists on the fundamental choice of involving the family within the vocational youth ministry:

Apostolic vocations are ordinarily the result of good youth ministry. Caring for vocations requires specific attention: first prayer, then activities, personalized programmes, courage in making the proposal, guidance and **family involvement**.<sup>5</sup>

#### **b. Letters of the Rector Majors**

This presentation of the Congregation's journey through the General Chapters obviously needs to be completed with a reference to the three letters written by our Rector Majors, Don Egidio Viganò, Don Pascual Chávez and Don Angel Fernandez Artime on the theme of the Family.

**The letter by Fr Egidio Viganò**, *In the Year of the Family* (1994), addresses the pastoral challenges regarding the family from the standpoint of the new evangelization. Then he continues to widen the horizon, social, political and cultural, pointing out some pastoral orientation that connect with the Congregation's journey at the time: the involvement of lay people that was going to be the theme of GC 24.

Fr Viganò starts with a statement that touches on the heart of the challenge that remains valid even for us today:

It is opportune therefore that we consider seriously how this theme of the family impinges deeply on our process of renewal. It will help us to feel ourselves more deeply «at the heart of the Church» and more solidly united «with the world and its history». The Holy Spirit has raised us up among the People of God with **a specific task of pastoral work for the young**. We know very well, and we have

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<sup>5</sup> Address of Pope Francis to Participants in the General Chapter of the Salesian Society of Saint John Bosco (Salesians), 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014; [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140331\\_capitolo-generale-salesiani.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco_20140331_capitolo-generale-salesiani.html)

said it on several occasions, **that no authentic pastoral work for the young is possible without a practical and interrelated pastoral work for the family.**

Fr Viganò was convinced that “the family is certainly one of the *new frontiers* of evangelization and is deeply linked (...) with the mission to the young and the poor inherent in our charism.” And for this he insists that “the theme of the family is of the greatest importance for all, and is so in a particular way for educators in the faith.”

Passing on to offer a broad theological and anthropological reading, Fr Viganò points out “on three aspects linked with pastoral work for the family,” which reflect the same ones matured during the previous General Chapters: **pastoral protagonism, formation and accompaniment.** We note that the understanding left by Fr Viganò is that of a synthesis between youth ministry and family, that is a path that needs to be strengthened, never fragmented:<sup>6</sup>

The point on which we need to insist, for a practical renewal in a **greater exchange between pastoral work for youth and for the family**, is to place firmly at the centre of educational planning a program for continued initiatives for the development and strengthening of self-donation, linked with the demands of sexual and vocational differences. Hence once again the **urgent need to incorporate in all educative activity an authentic youth spirituality**, including also an adequate ascetical pedagogy and a practical sense of personal resilience and of reconciliation with God.

**Fr Pascual Chávez's letter**, *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man* (Lk 2,52) (2006), begins with a reading of the risks and threats weighing on the family today. He then offers a very rich theological and charismatic reflection, giving space to the figure of Mamma Margherita. Finally he focuses on renewing the mission of the family by pointing out some pastoral and pedagogical applications.

We pause for a moment to focus on this latter part to emphasize those lines that are in full accord with the journey of the General Chapters. As a prelude to these lines, Fr Pascual Chávez writes:

For us, members of the Salesian Family, living as a family is not just a pastoral option so urgently needed nowadays, but **a way of living our charism and an objective to be given preference in our apostolic mission.** As a characteristic charismatic trait we Salesians and members of the Salesian Family live the family spirit; **as a primary objective we share with the families who entrust their children to us the task of educating and evangelising them;** as an educative and methodological option, we work to recreate in our environments the family spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Here are the texts that may serve for further insight:

- **Formation and animation of the marriage covenant:** to be concerned with the evangelization of various groups of married couples;
- **Sexual education:** experience shows that this will not be effective without a youth spirituality: love, sexuality, spirituality are all intimately united in the process of education to the faith. And here must necessarily be included education to vocation which, in whatever state of life, is precisely a concrete formation to love as self-giving;
- **Preparation for marriage:** the formation of the person to love, which is the essence of all education, should be a guiding factor in the educative plan for a good preparation for marriage. Since marriage is the ordinary vocation of the majority of our young people, this is an aspect of vocational pastoral work to be considered alongside vocation to the consecrated life, even though in a different way and with different emphasis.
- And so in youth pastoral work there are specific values to be developed by intensifying the daily spirituality so much recommended by the *GC23*.

It is within this logic of “sharing the educational and evangelizing task” that the following pastoral and pedagogical applications need to be read:

- **guarantee a special commitment to education to love** within Salesian educational practice and in the journey of education to the faith proposed to our young people;
- **follow-up and support of parents in their educational responsibilities**, by fully involving them in the implementation of the Salesian pastoral and educational plan.  
**foster and prepare the Salesian style of the family**: in individual families, in the Salesian community, in the educative and pastoral community.
- **involve the families in the process of education and evangelisation**.

The vocabulary of Fr Pascual Chávez enriches and focuses more and more on those key points that are getting clearer in these years.

In the letter of Fr Angel Fernandez Artime, this year's Strenna 2017, *We are Family! Every home, a School of Life and Love*, we encounter the theme of the family against the background of Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), by Pope Francis. After a Salesian reading of the 9 chapters of AL, the Rector Major reads the family situation in the light of the Salesian charism and the qualities of **empathy and accompaniment that are the signs of our specific pastoral educational contribution**.

And it is the **theme of the accompaniment that serves as the silver thread** that links the various proposals contained in the letter. Three key questions follow:

- How to accompany parents, spouses, and those who have the responsibility of the family?
- How to accompany the children, especially those in the Salesian environments, so many boys and girls around the world?
- How to accompany through our youth ministry, family and parish ministry our young people who are maturing a project of life in marriage and the formation of a family?

The various indications that follow, which are not meant only as a response but also as operational lines, can be summed up in the following synthesis that reflects the spirit of AM. These are points that open a wide network of actions and processes for all the protagonists of the Salesian mission:

- i. to risk on the family, **attention to families as an educational and pastoral priority**. We need to convince ourselves that it is not enough for us to have as a priority young people as recipients of our mission. Today, more than ever, this educational and evangelizing task is inseparable from the family;
- ii. to make a **priority the choice of accompaniment**:
  - **accompaniment as a way that aims at a proposal for spirituality and faith**;
  - **vocational accompaniment** of young people aimed at helping them towards maturing their life project;
  - **accompaniment and support to parents in their educative mission, involving them as much as possible**.

## Synthesis

At the end of this journey, one should begin by recalling, **first of all, the prophetic force of the *Special General Chapter***. In the light of Vatican Council II the SGC has captured the Council's right spirit and laid the foundations for a pastoral vision. It is a gift we do well to keep alive. The study and reflection of all that happened at this particular moment is a heritage for all of us who cannot and should not miss.

**Second**, we note that **for some decades the theme of the family has been recalled in other topics** that the Congregation was dealing with at this particular time: how to educate and evangelize young people, the Constitutions, reflection on the journeys of faith with young people, as well as the effort still in place to strengthen the shared educational and pastoral experience with lay people. As we have seen the theme of the family was not entirely forgotten, but treated within a broader vision. Although the letter by Fr Viganò in 1994 is not reflected in the GCs at that time, we can say that if we are facing and working on the theme of the family today as it deserves, we also owe it to this reflection.

**Third**, we note **a path that is being strengthened in its attention to the family**: the family as an educational and pastoral subject, in keeping with the path of the Synods; the family in the light of the new evangelization (*Evangelii Gaudium*) and in the light of the invitation for the next Synod on *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*.

**Fourth**: The theme of the family asks from us **a continuous effort of reflection, study and sharing**. The effort is growing in rethinking the theme of the educative and pastoral community in the light of the family's involvement. As we have seen both in the GGs and in the letters of the Rector Majors, as well as in letters and speeches of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis to the Salesians, there is a clear sign that does not allow superficial or mediocre attitudes.

**Fifth**: I believe that a **synthesis** of the main nuclei that results from this study is the following:

- i. **Involvement**: this term has appeared several times as a primary necessity, as a call we must follow not at a mechanical level, but as a response to a silent and hidden cry by the family that is inviting us to a response that expresses a sense of welcome, of 'feeling at home';
- ii. **Protagonism**: family as a subject. This is a recurring phrase that as time goes on is making itself more present. It is not enough to offer a space for involvement unless it goes on to be a true and real shared experience. Here we are challenged on our pastoral ability and creativity, regarding how are we proposing, living and accompanying the EPC and how does all this matures into the *Salesian Educative and Pastoral Project* (SEPP);
- iii. **Accompaniment**: Chapter 8 of *AL* is a synthesis and a map. Synthesis of some of the suggestions made during our GCs and in the letters of the Rector Majors. It is also a map in situations that socially and culturally are presenting us with new pastoral challenges. Here the family is asking more and more to be helped through accompaniment, discernment and integration. Our presences and educative and pastoral experiences are an extraordinary opportunity where convergence can happen together with holistic proposals;
- iv. **Formation**: finally, we note in these decades the frequent call for formation. The family is seen as a resource in the processes of evangelisation. Today more than ever, faced with such big challenges, this call has a strong prophetic value added to it.

The part that follows is a snapshot on how the Congregation is at this historic moment dealing with the theme of the family. At the beginning of 2016, the Rector Major sent a letter to all the Provinces of the Congregation inviting them to make an educative and pastoral reading about the family. Here we offer the synthesis of this work that has been studied in the various regional meetings of Youth Ministry Delegates in the last two years.

## **II. ANATOMY OF THE CHALLENGE**

The first question that was given to every Province was to identify the challenges that the family presents to salesian youth ministry in the Province. We collect the responses into five categories; the reality we encounter, the understanding of marriage and the family, the challenge of faith, pedagogical processes, the proposal of youth ministry, and ultimately the urgency and the need for accompaniment.

### **a. Realty**

In this field, we recognize the call to be more willing to know the situation of young people and the environment of their families. There is a certain distance between the family and our surroundings. Families can greatly benefit from what we profess to offer: proximity to their children who feel alone and not well accompanied, support to materially poor families and people who are poor in their ability to offer their children the necessary attention. We also notice a marginal growth in solidarity as an antidote to the culture of waste.

Another aspect of this reality speaks of cultural, religious, social, ethnic and sexual pluralism that most of the time we are unable to decipher, and much less manage. In this area there are also the challenges of the various family models we necessarily encounter in our various educational and pastoral courtyards: single-parent families, families with same-sex parents, parents and children who are experiencing a new family situation.

In this *scenario* we hear the call to assess the growing participation of women in various pastoral processes, their specific contribution as women, and many times as mothers at all levels in all sectors of society.

Finally, we realize that we need to deepen the theme of family protagonism in the integral development of the child, teenager, and young person. We see the need to deepen this call within our educative and pastoral model, as it is assumed and proposed in the experience of the educative and pastoral community, and translated into the dynamics of our projects and processes.

### **b. Marriage – Family**

A second theme that came out very strongly from the replies of the Provinces is how the subject of marriage and family is perceived. The dimension of the sacredness of marriage and the family is heavily put into crisis. In the era of the global village, strongly marked by the digital culture, the values that have brought us so far, the so-called 'traditional values', values transmitted from one generation to the other, suffer from the shock of the change, fast and aggressive.

The increase in the rates of divorce, the exchange, sometimes continuous, in the family structure are signs that must be read from within a very complex social framework. The issue of migration that affects so many families moving from country to city brings with it a change in social and family relationships that makes the various subjects foreign to each other within the same family. In light of these changes that lead to a real

relational earthquake, there is the awareness that often the school, the oratory or the parish are the only example and place of belonging, stability, 'family' in the life of children, teenagers and young people.

### **c. Faith**

The theme of faith and religious practice is suffering a significant blow. We recognize that we are at a crossroads – even if there is a risk of losing the connection with our recipients, there is also the conviction that in this historic moment we also have a great and new opportunity.

While on the one hand we notice a diminished participation in the various proposals, along with a weakening of the practice of faith, and a life less marked by moral values, on the other we realize that young people are looking for new reference points, significant adults.

The theme of the processes of faith, catechesis, human and spiritual formation must be taken seriously, that is, they must be revisited since 'today's' the context is not 'yesterday's'. We note the temptation of repeating the same pattern processes in what we say and do: 'we have always done so'. We realize that the itineraries of faith, the group proposals many times are not connecting with the new language, they look like old answers to new questions.

The perception and image of the Church in society in general, what is communicated through our presences – school, oratory, parish, reception centers – we generally recognize that these perceptions and images have drastically changed. If the family is no longer close to our proposal, we must have the courage to check if we are away from the family, and not vice versa.

### **d. Pedagogy**

If for us the combination of evangelization and education is fundamental, we must say that the symptoms we have presented in the field of faith (evangelization) have a relapse on the dimension of pedagogy (education).

The transition to postmodern and globalized culture challenges us to find new pedagogical languages. We are called to discover those convergent spaces that are typical of our educational proposal. These presuppose the family spirit as an integral existential category: human, pedagogical, and spiritual. We directly feel that this challenge asks us to examine ourselves whether the relationship with the family has simply and gradually been reduced to a 'supply and demand' relationship, a 'provider and a consumer'.

Generally speaking, it is clear from the Provinces that we are questioned by the challenge that brings with it the loss of the father and mother figures in our young people's lives. The same applies to the theme of the real crisis of authority, the absence of significant figures because of their authenticity. This is very evident in those moments where we are pilgrims to our youth. When they open their hearts in search of landmarks, experiences, and listening spaces.

The same search that young people are going through is present also in their parents. In their own way, the latter respond well when we take the initiative to offer spaces of belonging, they are grateful when they see educators wanting the good of their children. This attitude invites us to strengthen our availability, to be more present and open.

Here we meet families that are experiencing moments of crisis and permanent poverty. Family ministry, and so many Provinces express it, cannot be limited to an activity that is performed. It needs to be a witness that becomes visible and permanent within a pastoral project that reaches those who are seeking support and accompaniment.

A theme that came out very often is that of marriage preparation, together with love education. Here too we recognize that the path ahead is as big as much as it is demanding.

#### **e. Salesian Youth Ministry**

There is an increasing insistence and awareness on the part of the Provinces is that the theme of the family cannot be considered as a work or a separate activity. We must reflect on the family within the *Provincial Salesian Educational and Pastoral Project* (Province SEPP). If this step is not done, the family will never be integrated neither as an object nor as a subject of pastoral care.

For this reason, we realize that our work with and for the family will be move on based a number of criteria: overcome a ministry which is solely based on activities, follow a long-term project and as a result of this get committed to create a pastoral culture for the family.

A disturbing point is the following: from the responses of the Provinces one can notice that this challenge at times meets resistance, whether desired or not, by those who have pastoral responsibility in the various environments and sectors. Some are burdened with a responsibility that frequently puts them in a situation that renders tedious the culture of encounter and engagement in listening.

#### **f. Accompaniment**

Lastly, the theme of accompaniment has been mentioned very frequently. The configuration of family models is changing and with this change must also follow a change in the way we communicate our pastoral proposals. Here the reference is directly made to children, teenagers and young people living in a single-parent family, a new union, parents of the same sex. This involves the challenge of a new set of values derived from a reality other than the dominant one of the traditional family that we have known so far. In this reality accompany people and their stories asks us to explore new frontiers with new languages. It necessarily requires some preparation.

In the responses received one can see the conviction that even within this new scenario, the 'family spirit', our way of communicating with everyone, without distinction, without prejudice, remains the most appreciated experience of the people we meet.

That is why the theme of accompaniment, as a clear proposition of compassion, welcome, and proposal, is a unique pastoral opportunity that has wide-ranging consequences. It is a proposal that helps people discern their personal choices. Accompaniment is a path that opens a window on those values that the educational and pastoral presence promotes, while at the same time encouraging adults to participate in various educational processes.

Accompanying is also offered to young people who are preparing to take their life project: preparation for marriage, discernment of their vocation. In this area we have a call that, with the passage of time, gains ever greater clarity within the youth ministry processes. In the wake of a poor preparation for the sacrament of marriage, in various provinces we are questioning what opportunities are to be considered and explored.

Finally, another point mentioned in the various answers is that of the formation and preparation of pastoral agents. The theme of formation, which has been present in recent years both in the CGs and in the letters of the Rector Majors, has come out many times in this reflection. Here we reconfirm the urgency of a formation plan that many Provinces are taking very seriously: the accompaniment and formation of the educative and pastoral community.

### III. THE CURRENT RESPONSE TO THE FAMILY

As Provinces, we have also wondered what are those experiences and choices in the field of Youth Ministry and Family that are currently present within the projects of the Province, such as the *Overall Provincial Project* (POI), the Salesian Educative and Pastoral Project of the Province (Province SEPP) and other pastoral orientations?

#### a. Proposals

The synthesis of the answers received indicates, first of all, a remarkable commitment in this field, youth ministry and family. But it also highlights some of the limitations that can serve as indicators for a clearer pastoral engagement and more solid processes. The various pastoral proposals in this field can be presented in three categories: **spiritual proposal**, **formative proposal** and **pastoral collaboration**.

The first, **spiritual proposal**: consists in offering days of retreats, camps, or other moments and events of a spiritual nature devoted to families, such as family *lectio divina* and family catechesis. In this proposal, there are also experiences that are inspired by Salesian spirituality.

A second category is that of the **formative proposal**: a formative proposal around the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* to the Salesians, organization of seminars and study conferences on the theme of family.

In many Provinces there are experiences for teenagers on the theme of education to love. This is a very common proposal within the local SEPPs. Close to this proposal is also the preparation of young couples for the sacrament of marriage and the possibility of various accompaniment experiences for couples.

An experience that is growing is that of the school for parents in various Salesian presences and that is not limited to the school sector. The same growth is noted in the number of counselling centres, listening and spiritual accompaniment centres.

A third category is that of a genuine **pastoral collaboration** structured between families and Salesians in youth ministry. Here we notice how in some Provinces for some years there is a good and solid reflection together with pastoral processes that are giving good results. The growing involvement of the family in animating various youth ministry proposals is becoming more and more present and strong: for example, accompanying youth in faith groups, marriage formation groups, missionary animation groups, attention, accompaniment and welcome to unaccompanied boys, unwedded mothers.

#### b. Limits

The limits we find in this field can be seen on the level of **preparation** – of the Salesians and lay collaborators –, **pastoral projects** and **pastoral structures**.

We note how the growth of pastoral engagement around the family is not reflected in a similar focus on the **preparation of properly prepared staff**. We all recognize that the family is asking us for more attention and more energy, but we have not yet come to the point of preparing enough and sufficiently pastoral agents for these new frontiers. In the absence of prepared people, some pastoral resistances have more strength in stopping or preventing innovative pastoral processes of which importance and opportunity are clearly perceived.

We also note the need to clearly take on the theme of the family, subject and object of salesian youth ministry, within our **pastoral projects**. This is a call to strengthen a pastoral mentality that avoids pastoral

fragmentation on the one hand, and pastoral individualism on the other. In this fragmented *scenario* any pastoral response to the family is likely to walk on a parallel track.

A third level is that of **pastoral structures**. Basically here the Provinces have indicated that there needs to be **protagonism of the family in the EPC**. In the light of the *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference* (FoR), “the EPC is a centre that welcomes the greatest possible number of people interested in the human and religious aspects of the area. One clearly identified pastoral challenge is to achieve a fuller sharing with the family, which is the primary and indispensable educational community” (FoR, p.119). in the light of this goal, a limit is recognized which has to be recognized and dealt with. The following point seeks to suggest lines that avoid the danger of being stuck with an attitude that looks at the family just as an object, as a patient who needs our care.

### c. Opportunities – Positive Points

Along with the pastoral proposals and the limits already mentioned by the Provinces, there follow a set of goals that serve as guidelines for the future.

First of all, the importance of being clear and explicit in our pastoral programs: **SEPP of the Province, local SEPP and the EPC of each presence**. The positive experiences in some Provinces indicate the way forward. They are experiences that have a common thread: this is a serious reflection that overcomes the danger of a salesian youth ministry parallel to a family ministry.

A second opportunity is to **accompany the young couples** who have been part of our pastoral experiences. In some Provinces there is collaboration with various groups of the Salesian Family in offering accompaniment journeys towards marriage to young couples who have lived the experience of animators in the Salesian Youth Movement.

A third experience is that of many Provinces that strengthen the commitment of the local CEP in **being close to families, especially those who are living in discomfort and poverty**. The visits to the families of our students, listening and counselling centres, parents’ programs, are all experiences that open up a very urgent frontier to a world that is very close, yet it can be very far away because it is not known.

Finally, there are also projects for the **formation of pastoral agents for the family**, for Salesians and lay people. There are some formative proposals that need to be known because they are the result of a collective pastoral effort of the whole of the Province, the Provincial Council, the Youth Ministry Commission, groups of the Salesian Family Groups and the Families themselves.

## IV. HORIZONS FOR A STRONG DON BOSCO’S CHARISMATIC RESPONSE TODAY

At this point we offer some insights that serve as indicators for a stronger and significant alliance between salesian youth ministry and family.

### a. Young people at the centre of *Salesian Youth Ministry*

In the first article of the *Salesian Constitutions* we find the reason of the attention to young people and the central place they have within the Salesian mission:

*With a feeling of humble gratitude we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture but by the initiative of God. Through the*

*motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth, "that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise." The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys" (Cost. 1).*

**Starting from this root, we grasp the true meaning of the Salesian mission.** In the first chapter of the *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference (FoR)*, we have a very clear narrative of how Don Bosco lived through transmitting this centrality of youth into the Salesian mission:

Don Bosco was the first Saint to found a Congregation not only for young people but with young people. He valued, in a way previously unheard of, the unique part that young people could play and involved them actively in the adventure of their religious and human development. This is why Salesian ministry is essentially youthful, not only because we see young people as the beneficiaries of our ministry, but because they play an active part in it (FoR, p. 33).

In this perspective, it becomes clear that this is not a populist choice, a blind protagonism without any objective. We are not dealing with an unhealthy way of looking at youth. Here we are called to grasp how the **'family spirit'** together with the **educational responsibility of all the subjects** present on this journey are invited to give each one his/her part in this wonderful story of our young people.

*Salesian Youth Ministry* è **youthful** because at the centre of its action we find the person of the young, especially those most in need. We meet the young where they are to be found:

Imitating God's patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith (Cost. 38).

The goal proposed by the Salesian Youth Ministry for every young person is to achieve the integral development of one's own personality, where Christ is the fundamental point of reference.

**In the light of this charismatic foundation, the family is called to be subject**, that is, the pastoral protagonist; protagonist in living personal moments of growth, protagonist in witnessing one's own personal choices, protagonist in accompanying young people together with all pastoral agents of the EPC. In the *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference (FoR)* we have a synthesis that serves as light in this path that we have ahead of us:

We recognise that the family is the basic cell of society and the Church. Despite all its difficulties, the family is esteemed by the children because there they receive the affection they need and cannot do without. For parents, education is an essential duty, connected to the transmission of life. The role of the family is irreplaceable and inalienable and comes before the educational role of anyone else. It cannot be delegated or substituted [cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 36] (FoR p.119).

Only in the light of the charism as experienced and transmitted to us by Don Bosco, only in the light of the pastoral lines the Salesian Congregation proposes to us, we can live and share an **educative and pastoral proposal that is holistic and promotes wholeness**. In keeping alive the organic unity of the SEPP, provincial and local, in allowing our SEPP be a living experience of EPC, only then do we avoid the real risk that any pastoral proposal in favour of the family becomes an independent, separate, autonomous experience parallel to the journey of the province.

### **b. Journeys and Processes**

With great satisfaction, one can notice several experiences in various Provinces that are seriously treating the theme of the family within Salesian Youth Ministry. If there is a **common criterion**, if we have a constant choice we can say that it is the following: **a path enriched by a reflection shared by all subjects of the EPC**.

There are no projects thought out in a detached manner. The family is the protagonist of its own growth. The family becomes the protagonist of the growth of the young by walking along with EPC members: a path enriched by the 'family spirit', a path backed by the spirit and the word of the Gospel, a path lit by the spiritual and pedagogical experience of Don Bosco:

**The EPC is committed to making parents aware of their educational responsibility**, in the face of new emerging patterns of education. It pays particular attention to accompanying young couples and actively involving them in the EPC. It is necessary for Salesians and lay people together to make a careful community discernment, in order to identify and respond to the most urgent problems of the family, making use of all the resources available. **A greater involvement of the family in the SEPP is needed** (FoR p.119).

The involvement of the family within the processes of Salesian Youth Ministry is not enough willing it. It is necessary that this goal find persons, spaces, and proposals that encourage greater involvement and participation of parents and their families. Our presence, our environments, must **promote an educative and pastoral 'ecosystem' where the theme of the family and the climate of the 'family spirit' can grow and can also generate a force of attraction**.

A reflection by the Rector Major Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi is very appropriate in this regard: "(Don Bosco has created) a community, which was not only visible, but indeed quite unique, almost like a lantern in the darkness of night: Valdocco, the home of a novel community and a pastoral setting that was widely known, extensive and open."<sup>7</sup> Today, on the steps of our Father and Teacher Don Bosco, we are called to keep alive this pastoral culture, marked by a renewed relationships between family and educators, young people and educators, young people and families, a relationship so necessary as much as it is appreciated.

### **c. Government and Animation**

Finally, at this historic moment, the **urgency of making intelligent and creative pastoral choices by those responsible for the government and animation at all levels is increasingly evident**. Pastoral processes that mark the life of a Congregation or institution, even the processes of the same Church, do not fall from the clouds. Enough to read and meditate carefully on the post-conciliar journey of the Church through the experience of the various Synods of Bishops.

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<sup>7</sup> Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi, *Now is the Acceptable Time*, AGC 373 (2000).

**The processes that really leave an imprint on a Province are the result of a serious reflection, based on prayer, enlightened by the charism of Don Bosco, and shared with all the members of the Provincial EPC.** The true government, so founded and rooted on the Gospel, on the charism and on the pastoral life as experienced by the various members, is able to listen where the Spirit of God is blowing.

Here it is not just a sociological reading and proposal, however indispensable all that is. Here it is not about offering experiences that can sell. Here it is about listening to the cry of young people, a hidden but deep cry. Here we have to read carefully and seriously and honestly contemplate the social, cultural and spiritual implications of our young people's lives: the lost hope, the lack of trust, the absence of horizons.

In the light of these challenges, **the family is not another resource, but an indispensable protagonist:** that needs accompaniment, that is seeking support, but that it also has a unique, unrepeatable, indispensable vocation.

The government has the call to “recognize”, “interpret”, and “choose” those ways the Lord is providentially pointing to us. The beauty of this historic moment is that we are already seeing them in some parts. What we want to happen is already taking place. All of us have to take Jesus' words seriously: *Get up and walk!*

## CONCLUSION

In these pages we have tried to present and read the path of the Salesian Congregation in recent decades. A journey that contains a remarkable commitment on the part of the Congregation. Within the general process of spiritual, charismatic and pastoral renewal it has also been able to assess the theme of the family in the wake of the attention given by the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (GS).

It is a choice that in the light of the experience proved to be pastorally prophetic. The Synods on the Family, with the two apostolic exhortations – *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia* - testify to the consequences on the whole journey of the Church.

The hope is that this journey can grow in strength and courage. A journey backed by a healthy synergy between Salesian Youth Ministry and Family and a pastoral proposal that will truly be a gift for the family today.

**Thank You.**