

## Experience of the fatherhood of God

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Good morning...

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude (to God) for the opportunity given to me to be here and to live with you these days. As a novice in 2009, I was fortunate to participate in this programme and now I am given another chance to relive that experience which would certainly offer me lots of newness.

Two contrasting sentiments arose in me when I received the invitation to share with you my vocation experience and my spiritual journey. I immediately felt a certain fear: **Where am I going? What a Shame! ... With so many important people who will be participating in this programme and who can definitely do better than I, what am I going to say? ...** But after having thought about it with a calm mind, the feeling changed. I was filled with a sense of joy and gratitude. Joy, not because I would be sitting here – in fact, one can notice that my fear and shame have not totally gone away – but because in the course of time, I have discovered that I am not the protagonist of my story, rather it is God, who has done great things in me.

**I like to say that (all) my experience of God is and continues to be a story of fatherhood. I say so, not because it is a nice way of saying, but that's how I have also discovered Him (God) in my life.**

The starting point of my story, is probably very similar to that of most of you who are here. I was born into a normal family; son of a young couple; the eldest of three brothers. The only peculiarity is that my family was not Catholic. My paternal grandparents and my parents were Jehovah's Witnesses. I spent my early childhood in this environment. It was normal for me. I have no negative memories related to (the topic of) religion. I remember a few ideas, a few rules that now seem to me somewhat shocking, but then, they appeared quite normal since I lived in that setting.

But soon my life took a turn. When I was about 8 or 9 years old, my parents, for various reasons, decided to separate in order to get divorce. The separation of my parents was the reason for me to slowly move out of the environment of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Shortly after their separation, I practically had no relationship with them, at least with my father's family who are still (Jehovah's) Witnesses.

Until this moment, I had spent a normal childhood without many ups and downs. Although I had come from a religious background there was a phase marked by the absence of God and everything concerned with religion.

Adolescence was the most complicated stage of my life in every way. I decided to stop my studies without completing high school; in Spain one has to complete high school in order to enter University. After having spent two years of my life doing nothing with regard to studies, I arrived at a decision. I opted to do studies in technical accounting. After having completed the course, which lasted one year, and when I just turned 18, I began to work.

Meanwhile, thanks to a person very dear to me, I learnt that in my neighbourhood there was a Salesian Parish, which had a Youth Centre and Social (Service) Centre. Under the Youth Centre there was a sports school which had a men's volleyball team. I encouraged myself to try my luck with the sole intention of having the opportunity to train and play in a place close to my home. This was my first contact with the Salesian world.

They welcomed me without any problem; I was not only in the team, but slowly there were other avenues that were opened to me. As part of the youth centre, the sports school carried out educational and faith programmes. They offered prayer moments every Friday; certain group activities that made one feel part of the centre; opportunities to participate in activities during the weekend, in retreats and above all in faith-groups, and as in my case, to be part of 'values-groups' (groups of values), in which the beneficiaries were those of us who were not considered believers or were seekers (of God).

It did not stop here. Once you enter into a Salesian environment and you allow it to enter into you, there's not much you can do (rather there's so much you can do!). The next year they proposed to me to be part of a new project. They wanted to start a sports school in order to give opportunity to children, who wished to participate in this project and practise some sport. Looking at myself and knowing that I could perfectly combine this commitment with my work, I accepted the proposal.

I knew this was an important step, at least at the level of holding responsibility within the Youth Centre. I was no longer a simple beneficiary; but now there were a few things that I had to take care of (and live). Looking back, now I am convinced that it was a decisive year (for what would come later). In a specific way, it helped me to discover slowly something within me that I was unable to name. This experience, the contact with the youth (children) and with the other animators of this environment, made me question about my faith life. Most of the animators spoke of a process, of the fact that being animators was a way to respond to what God was asking of them; that their commitment was part of being believers... and I had no such feeling. The personal contact with my animators, with the salesians who were in the Youth Centre, their way of life, what they did, the meaning they gave to life, the serious conversations, and what they shared, made me question my faith life. Because they lived their life based on the experience of God; but as for me God had no place in my life.

Without much anxiety, I tried to deal with what was happening in my life. As an animator, they invited me to some more specific activities that helped me a lot to start a journey (of faith) which gave rise to many questions and *few (not many)* answers. I remember the Retreats for animators, the Youth Pasch, the Friday prayer in the parish, and above all the group sharing and the discussions with the Salesian in-charge about these themes. Without my realization, I almost started being catechised I often used to talk about my doubts, share my experiences and feelings... Without being aware of it, I began a journey above all towards discovering God in my life. It was a beautiful process that helped me to change myself slowly. I realised that the things that I earlier considered absolutely not important were becoming essential to me. I noticed change in me with regard to the gift of reading some books on God and on spirituality (something simple), and of taking small steps in my journey of personal prayer.

The main task was to undo the image of a distant God, a punishing God... and to begin discovering in my life and in my story, a very different God, a God who is a Father and who is merciful.

This process of seeking ended with one of the most beautiful and important moments of my life. There still remained some doubts, but the lifestyle that I was leading, the experience of the importance of faith in common and the whole process of catechesis – the accompaniment that I experienced – led me to take the step forward and to be baptised.

As I mentioned before, my initial experience as animator went hand in hand with my work experience. They were the years that helped me to grow even in important areas of my life. They helped me especially to discover the plan (project) that God had in mind for me. They were happy years, but I realised that I was living an unfulfilled life. I enjoyed economic freedom; I did not have to answer anyone about what I was doing; not much was demanded of me... and yet I felt that it was not the way of life meant for me.

After taking the decision to be baptised, my involvement as an animator in the parish grew; I also began to have an experience of being a catechist. All these together and reflecting on my work, I realized that my life was directed to serving others in such a setting and especially in the Salesian Family.

My formative journey continued. I did not belong to any 'values-group,' but I was part of a group preparing for Confirmation. That year I began a more serious 'accompaniment' to find out especially how to respond to what God wanted from me. Evidently the Salesian ambience gave me a sign, and an idea was lingering in my head: I want to do for other youngsters what they (the Salesians) did for me... to help them to be happy and to find God in their lives.

After having received the sacrament of Confirmation and with more clarity, I decided to quit work (which at home was not taken well) and to begin a community experience with the Salesians to confirm whether this desire to be a Salesian is what God wants of me. They were very intense years of changing certain attitudes of mine, and imbibing Christian values; but they were two years filled with God (experience). I had to resume studies when I was almost 23 years old, while my classmates were just 16-17 years of age... it was a challenge that turned out to be an experience, which helped me to discern.

After a year in the Aspirantate and a year in the Pre-novitiate, during which I was able to learn about the Salesian life and to grow in my relationship with God, I decided to entrust myself to Him (God) and so plunged myself into an incredible experience of the Novitiate.

I made the Novitiate here at Genzano, in Rome... a year, which was a gift in every sense of the word. It was a year that made me become aware of the God's presence in my life. It was a year, during which I experienced the true fatherhood of God, the importance of prayer and I was able to see the face of God in every brother and youth with whom I shared my life and vocation. I made my first profession on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2009. That day, I was excited the whole morning. A teenage (an adolescent) atheist, now a son of Don Bosco!

The two years of Philosophy was a period during which I had to knock down all of my earlier life experiences. After the initial enthusiasm, it was time to live one day at a time. Nothing significant occurred. Living in such a way, I had to learn to be a Salesian. The different experiences, both good and bad, that I have had helped me to understand that my training was not totally finished.

I then did my practical training in a well-known house in Salamanca; as you know, two full years of pastoral work. I believe, in short, the experiences that I had in this phase were hundred percent Salesian. Once again I saw the paternal hand of God in my life; not only that, I also felt in some way His educative presence.

I am currently a second year student of theology. Last June, I made my perpetual profession. There were many moments, during the retreat that we had before the celebrations, that made me review my life; I could not but be grateful to God for my whole life journey.

**I would like to conclude by re-emphasizing my conviction: Based on my experience, I believe that one does not have to seek God. It is God who seeks us, who He is near to us and it is He who finds us. We just have to become aware of His presence and welcome Him as a Father into our lives. A spring gushes forth from Him that transforms our lives and those around us. This is what I experienced.**