

The way is expressed in the communitarian experience of faith

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(FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium* 99)

Greetings to each and every one of you.

This morning we wish to resume with the major themes of the Strenna, whilst eagerly trying to be faithful to the chosen themes. I shall outline my address in three facets: starting from being “With Jesus”, we shall move to “Walking Together”, and finally we shall speak of “The Adventure of the Spirit.”

Our communitarian faith experience shall be the main focus.

1. WITH JESUS

Jesus is the irreplaceable. He is not an absence to be replaced: he assures us of being the one who is with us till the end of time. He has come to remain with us forever, bringing us God’s love. In the beginning, in the triune God, there is fullness of communion, a loving relationship, an original and beatifying harmony. The reason and fulfilment of creation can only be a real “widening” of this communion, of this link, of this relationship. There is not, nor can there be, a creation and a humanity that exists as an alternative to this project, nor a self-fulfilment that does not go in this precise direction! In this sense, Jesus is the bridegroom, not an optional presence. He is eternally irreplaceable, not an accessory. He is the desired fulfilment, not a stranger to avoid.

Our very identity is inherently relational, and there can be no fulfilment beyond communion. Jesus is the *son*, *brother* and *spouse* of humanity: three words, which whilst defining Jesus as true God and true man, define both God and mankind in their innermost identity.

1.1. A self-referred mission? No, a friend and a soul mate of the Father!

The deep secret of the life of Jesus is in his relationship with the Father, whom he willingly calls *Abbà*. The privileged viewpoint, the decisive keystone, the central strategic perspective of the Gospels, is the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Introducing the first volume of his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, J. Ratzinger explains that:

“without the rootedness in God, the person of Jesus remains fleeting, unreal and inexplicable.” (R. Schnackenburg). This is the basis of this book of mine: considering Jesus from the point of view of his communion with the Father. This is the true centre of his personality. Without this communion, one cannot understand anything, and starting from it, He becomes present to us even today.¹

John’s prologue, testifying Jesus as the Logos of the Father made flesh, is the guide capable of helping us understand how Jesus presents himself as the “only begotten” before being the “firstborn.” Its historical singularity is substantially-rooted in this deep and unique link: “The teaching of Jesus does not emanate from human learning, whatever it may be. It derives from direct contact with the Father, through “face to face” dialogue, from the vision of the One who is “in the bosom of the Father.”²

¹ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Rizzoli, Milano 2007, 10.

² *Ivi*, 27. «Jesus is entirely “relational”. In all his being, he is nothing other than a relationship with the Father. This relatedness helps us understand the formula of the burning bush and of Isaiah; The “I am” is placed entirely in the relatedness between Father and Son» (*ivi*, 399).

The incomparable relationship of Jesus with his *Abbà* illuminates and explains the unprecedented novelty of his teaching and the involvement of the disciples, who are also duly called to enter, by grace, in this filial relationship. Eliminating this bond or putting it aside, would not make possible the grasp of the originality of Jesus which can be felt in every page of the Gospel.

1.2. Noble lineage of origin? No, son of a carpenter and a carpenter himself!

If we carefully read the long and complex genealogy of Jesus which the evangelist Matthew puts at the beginning of his Gospel, we realise how the life of God wants to be twisted and kneaded with the lives of humankind. It does not only have to do with God, but with a descendant of the line of David, with all that it entails! The letter to the Hebrews, in summary, speaks of Jesus as the one who is similar to us, yet without sin.³

He shared with us being born in a human family, for many years he resided in the suburbs of a small village; he grew in age, wisdom and grace abiding by his parents; he earned a living as all others. The hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth is not an appendix to his mission, but a necessary preparation during which he joined in the rhythm of our humanity with simplicity and courage.

Interestingly, the *first* royal title that Jesus receives at the beginning of his mission is the recognition of his humble origins, which seem to be in contrast with his entitlement and his word:

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honour except in his own town and in his own home." And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.⁴

He lives and works in a family of craftsmen. Even today, craftsmanship is appreciated anywhere in the world because, unlike division of labour, it produces unique and unrepeatable works of art in its genre. The craftsman works with his hands, through his creativity, using unique abilities. This is the value of craftsmanship. The wood craftsman knows that every piece of wood is alive, has its own consistency, and, in a sense, owns a soul. It has a special vocation within, to become something for which it was created and which it contains within, that the introspective capacity of the craftsman has to perceive, understand and develop.

1.3. Withdrawn from men? No, craftsman of souls!

Before having to do with men in his short apostolic mission, Jesus was for a long period of time involved in crafts work - a long and faithful apprenticeship which then paid off in his short work of explicit evangelization. The proportion is interestingly 10:1! The life of faith, similar to an educational relationship, is always an artistic creation in no manner repetitive and alike. It is fine craftsmanship and Jesus demonstrates a unique sensibility in recognizing the uniqueness of every person he meets and in proposing to each person the way they can go about at that time.

Never in the Gospels do we observe Jesus dealing with different persons in an identical manner: he has a unique approach with every person. Peter is not treated in the same way as John, Bartholomew is not called in the same manner as the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus is not seen and called in the same way as Levi, similarly as Thomas cannot be taken as Nicodemus. The Syro-Phoenician woman who asks for graces for her daughter is not similar to Simon the Pharisee who coldly welcomes Jesus in his house. The rich young man, who is asked to leave everything and follow Jesus, is different from the blind Bartimaeus who wishes to follow him and is sent home to announce the good news to his brethren! Jesus has a specific, artisan, and original approach for every soul, every hurt, and every pain.

For each of them and every one of us, Jesus has a unique and unrepeated word, singular as our soul, as our inner state, as our outer core. His feelings are refined and his intelligence is divine. His gaze is more than human, because it

³ Cfr. *Eb* 4,15.

⁴ *Mt* 13,54-58. The synoptic version of Mark, probably more original, states instead that Jesus is not only the son of a carpenter, but a carpenter himself: « *Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?* » And they took offense at him.» (*Mk* 6,3).

partakes of God's gaze: "People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."⁵

Blessed Card. J. H. Newman used to frequently utter *Cor ad cor loquitur*. Jesus is the one who sees the heart, the one who knows everyone intimately, the one who knows our needs even before we ask him. Similar to an artist who perceives the unique bond between a piece of marble and a work of art, Jesus was able to glimpse each person's absolute and peculiar dignity so as to acknowledge, heal and promote to perfection, which is never a repetition of another.

1.4. First epilogue: the apostolic interiority of don Bosco, artisan of education!

I would now like to think of Don Bosco, starting from these three points of view of Jesus' life.

Firstly, his interiority. We discussed this at length in the 2014 Strenna dealing with spirituality, as well as the preceding ones dealing with the story (2012), and pedagogy (2013). Through a vision of modern mysticism, I enjoy going through his prayer and his relationship with God which is still not well-known and appreciated. It is indeed his magnificent secret and the soul of his apostolate.⁶

I see that his prayer is basically Johannine, full of love, wonder, and affection for God. His knowledge of prayer is not so great, he cannot fully imagine the triune God. He focuses on some Gospel images and, in Christ, he contemplates the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: he loves them, leads all to them, and, in amazement, bears all for love. His love for God is passionate: it is not easy for him to introduce people to the world of his prayer. He lacks distance: in regard to God, others' faith, and his own faith. He lives in a sort of immediacy, which I personally like, a Johannine purity; he desires nothing more than to love and to contemplate God, and experiences a childlike joy in being able to, along with others, love in this manner.

In all the works he carries out, he lives by the word of the Lord: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 24, 40), and in an immediate bid to bring all souls to the Lord and look for them in His Name. If his brothers pray too little, if they experience more joy in doing, in carrying out projects, in the outward appearance, rather than in God and his marvel, then he becomes sad and does not know what to do. He does not know how to communicate his passion for God to them. He has surely given them so much. However, after his death, they were to find in him that which he had been unable to communicate.⁷

Then *his life before his apostolic mission among young people*: it was simple, hardworking, honest, and committed. He personally went through all professions which he then taught his boys: farmer, waiter, tailor, mason, carpenter and so on! A hidden, humble, artisan life which intensely induced him to share in the life of his boys, an experience of poverty shared with them. He was thus capable of being moved by each one of them! Like Jesus, he was truly a craftsman in every way and for everyone!

Finally, *his capacity for introspection*: I believe one could define Don Bosco as one who "discovers talents", a "craftsman in education", one who was capable of recognizing potential in each one of his boys, a unique charisma given by God. He learned well Jesus' lesson, and that of St. Francis of Sales who said that "every soul is a diocese"! This is confirmed by his third successor, blessed Philip Rinaldi, during a conference given to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians:

You are more than one hundred here, no one has a character identical to another; however you have to live together and become holy. There is a great difference even amongst saints! What different energies we see between Don Rua, Don Sala, Don Durando, Don Cerruti, and Don Bonetti! Don Sala was all dedicated to bridges and buildings, Fr Cerruti to books and numbers, Fr Bonetti full of life and passion, and Don Durando! Yet Don Bosco made great men of them, whom, had they remained in the world, would have intermingled with ordinary men. Why then did they become so famous in our congregation and outside? Because *Don Bosco was able to take them in as they were, and took out the greatest good they could give.*⁸

2. WALKING TOGETHER

At the center of our 2016 Strenna, there seems to be a Synodal exigency: to walk together, not move forward on one's

⁵ 1Sam 16,7.

⁶ A questo proposito rimane sempre insuperato li testo classico di E. CERIA, *Don Bosco con Dio*, SDB, Roma 1988.

⁷ A. VON SPEYR, *Das Allerheiligenbuch, Erster Teil*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1966, 210-211 (traduzione nostra).

⁸ E. CERIA, *Vita del Servo di Dio don Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, Torino 1951, 303-304.

own, not think independently, staying with the community, with one's own Institute, with the universal and the local Church. Walking as a Salesian Family.

We can and must call it a *prophecy and a mystical brotherhood*.

A *Prophecy* because we do not see fraternity in the world. One notes and appreciates the frequency in which Pope Francis exhorts the Christian communities to be the first place in which fraternity, forgiveness, and mutual respect are experienced. He asks us *not to give away the community nor the ideal of brotherly love*⁹ and, at this point, it is good to listen to at least one explicit passage on the subject:

I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another [...] It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?¹⁰

This fellowship is *mystical* as its demand derives from the heart of the triune God, whose love for us is not simply one-sided (that is, an *agape* love, a totally free, totally undeserved, unimaginable and overwhelming gift from above), but it is also a love which desires reciprocity (a *philia* love, which calls for an amorous reciprocation, which wants us to get into the rhythm of commitment, which aims to create a true bond with each of us, which wants to make us true *partners* of the alliance capable not only of receiving, but also of donating). It is also an emotional and a passionate love that seeks us, that wants to participate in our lives, in a sense similar to a jealous person who has really lost his mind for each one of us: it is love *eros*.

In this second part of my exchange, I would like to talk about us who are called to walk together: young people and adults walking in the Church and with the Church today.

2.1. Nihilism of young people? A simple, convenient and false thesis!

Let's start from the young. Those who are badly talked about, even within the Church. Those whom many consider "nihilists" and also a "faithless generation". Many-a-time the adult world portrays the young as narcissistic, as a generation which thinks only of itself. I think it is not exactly this way, and the argument that too often gallops also in the ecclesial world, that of the "nihilism of youth", is unfair and humiliating for us and especially for young people. This view is particularly provoked by those who are not with young people, who do not share anything with them and basically who do not want to feel responsible for the new generations. I think Don Bosco would never have shared such a view!

In truth, we have to do with youth who grew up, after the various crises of our times, without fathers. By "father", I obviously do not only mean the physical presence of a father, but that set of boundaries, authority, educational structures, and shared rules that a generation usually offers to the next generation, helping in the difficult path to become an adult.

An evocative image for us is that of Telemachus which, in a society without fathers, marks the advent of a *dialectic of nostalgia, of waiting and invocation*. We are always in the presence of young people who desire and are committed to the return of good authority, the right and logically appealing paternal authority, marked by a desire to find good links that renew their filial condition. As enticingly indicated by psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati, Telemachus

looks at the sea, scanning the horizon. He expects that his father's ship – whom he has never met - returns to bring the law into his island dominated by suitors who have occupied his house, delighting with impunity and shamelessly on his property. Telemachus is freed from the parricide violence of Oedipus; he seeks his father not as a rival with whom to fight to death, but as a wish, a hope, as a possibility of bringing the Law of the word on his own land. If Oedipus embodies the tragedy of the transgression of Law, Telemachus embodies the invocation of the Law; he prays that his father returns from the sea, putting in this return the hope of fair justice for Ithaca.¹¹

⁹ Cfr. in particular *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 87-92 e 98-101.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, n. 99.100.

¹¹ M. RECALCATI, *Il complesso di Telemaco. Genitori e figli dopo il tramonto del padre*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2013, 12.

I think this is the situation of many young people, who are hoping to find significant adults with whom to enter into a positive alliance. They longingly await for and are capable of recognizing someone who approaches them in the right style and with the right intention. *It is all well and good to think of young people in this way.* Today's young people clearly answer to Jesus' question to his disciples - "What do you seek?"¹² - "*we seek in you significant adults*", "*we seek in you masters of spirituality*", "*we seek in you a visible and a liveable holiness!*"

2.2. Adult Narcissism? A quite certain fact!

In my opinion, however, the real problem does not seem to be young people, but adults and the educating society as a whole. In fact, in today's cultural, educational and pastoral reflection, a concentrated analysis is making its way around what we could call "the issue of adults": many books of great interest dwell around this theme: the lack of significant adult models for children, adolescents and young people today.¹³ They unanimously converge on the complaint of a persistent narcissism of adulthood. The neologism "adulthood" - a word that indicates the presence of adults according to the chronological age, but adolescents according to human maturity - is symptomatic of our time.

The well-known dramatic dialogue, between Captain Francesco Schettino and the head of the Port of Livorno Gregorio de Falco, on the tragic night of the sinking of Costa Concordia near the island of Giglio, has travelled all world round. This episode clearly portrays the mentioned issues of the adult world: instead of a dialogue between two adults, it seems to be a paradigmatic dialogue between an adult and an "adulthood", who is encouraged to own his responsibility.

We are witnessing a pronounced and tragic reversal marking the transformation of one's age. Whilst in the past the adult figure had an attractive power for every teenager and young person who desired to become (finally) an adult, today we see adults who try in every way to become young again, and senior citizens who do their utmost to live the second, third and fourth youth. Unfortunately, biology is rather ruthless: month after month, at about twenty-five years of age, the aging process of the cells starts!

In summary, we can say that today's cultural background reveals a world of adults who love youthfulness, but are envious of and compete with young people; adults who wish to be eternally young, therefore competing with the young; adults who are too busy with their own survival, and therefore unable to become passionate and generous for the education of younger generations.

2.3. A credible Church? The word to the young!

The Church is the people of God. We are all Church. We walk in the Church and as a Church. We invite young people to be a living part of the Church, to share in it, and to be protagonists.

But too often, young people do not feel attracted by the Church institution as a whole. It is not only the Church who has an impression of young people, but young people also have their own impression of Christianity, of the Catholic Church, of Christians and of religious issues. In brief, I shall bring to your attention five evaluative dimensions young people have of the Catholic Church as a whole. These should give us food for thought.¹⁴

Firstly, young people have an idea of a Church which lives in a dynamic of a *not-so-transparent power*, a Church which wants to be not only politically incisive, but which basically wishes to take the place of the personal conscience, and knows how to well-conceal and camouflage its troubles, especially those that concern "moral" failures of its own ministers.

¹² Jn 1,38.

¹³ Am listing some books which are particularly significant and useful for this theme: F. BONAZZI F. - D. PUSCEDDU, *Giovani per sempre. La figura dell'adulto nella postmodernità*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2008; G. CAPPELLO (ed.), *L'adulto svelato. Gli adolescenti guardano gli adulti*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2004; F.M. CATALUCCIO, *Immatùrità. La malattia del nostro tempo*, Einaudi, Torino 2014; M. CHIARAPINI, *Dove sono gli adulti? Assenti ingiustificati*, Milano, Paoline 2013; G. CUCCI, *La crisi dell'adulto. La sindrome di Peter Pan*, Cittadella, Assisi (PG) 2012; S. LAFFI, *La congiura contro i giovani. Crisi degli adulti e riscatto delle nuove generazioni*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2014; C. LAFONTAINE, *Il sogno dell'eternità. La società postmortale. Morte, individuo e legame sociale nell'epoca delle tecnoscienze*, Medusa, Milano 2009; L. MANICARDI, *Memoria del limite. La condizione umana nella società postmortale*, Vita & Pensiero, Milano 2011; A. MATTEO, *L'adulto che ci manca. Perché è diventato così difficile educare e trasmettere la fede*, Cittadella, Assisi 2014; P. SEQUERI, *Contro gli idoli postmoderni*, Lindau, Torino 2011; F. STOPPA, *La restituzione. Perché si è rotto il patto tra le generazioni*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2011.

¹⁴ For further reading you can see: A. CASTEGNARO (con G. Dal Piaz e E. Biemmi), *Fuori dal recinto. Giovani, fede, Chiesa: uno sguardo diverso*, Ancora, Milano 2013, 129-149.

A second aspect worth-mentioning is the *magnificence* of the Church. In a time of crisis, the Church many-a-time is presented as a place of prosperity and wealth, extremely scandalous in this period of crisis. Pope Francis' style is certainly a breath of fresh air on this sore point that unfortunately characterises some aspects of the life of the Church and its ministers.

A third evaluation aspect is that of a *conservative setup*: a certain rigidity, closure, backwardness. They see the church closed in a cold and heavy armour making it impenetrable and locked.

A positive aspect is the acknowledgment that the Church is still the essential agency that *watches over the core values* of human existence. Although seemingly amazing, it is well-proven that young people also recognize in the Church an unparalleled cultural and human heritage.

A fifth and final aspect in which the Church is understood by young people is the image of *a mountain of prohibitions*, in which the Church is seen as an agency producing authoritarian rules governing the life of the faithful. Young people question the legitimacy and the outdatedness of certain rules imposed on the lives of the faithful.

I think these five aspects of evaluation are important to help us understand what youth think about the Church and about us working within it and in its name. They can also become aspects of verification and positive planning for our way of doing youth ministry today.

2.4. Second epilogue: we are the first recipients of the new evangelization!

At the end of this second stage, I wonder *what we mean by "new evangelization"*.

On one hand, there are those who emphasize mainly the *recipients* of evangelization: today's culture, man today, and young people who in our eyes are radically different. Thus, the general structure of the transmission of the faith has to be rethought. In this sense, we need to do more so as to understand *"how to talk about God to young people"*.

In another direction, there are those who focus on the *subjects* of evangelization: before believing in its adequacy to the Gospel, the Church must first of all realise that it is the privileged destination. Basically, it is an awareness that there is no moment in history in which the Church can say it is "ok with God", but it is always called to continual conversion to the living God who is always greater and more ahead than the Church! In this sense, we should do more to understand *"why we talk to young people about God."*

This is not about countering these two "accentuations" – one more cultural and the other more ecclesial, one more *ad extra* and the other more *ad intra* - but *to put them well in order*: the re-evangelization of us adults, educators, consecrated persons and ministers of the Church, is the condition which makes possible for the evangelization of young people! An evangelized Church is credible and efficacious because it testifies through human witness rather than with words! In short: It is not possible to be credible apostles if not authentic.

The work of evangelization is only but a renewed conformation to Christ the Lord, who is always "the first and greatest evangelizer"¹⁵ and thus the inspiring model, because the Lord Jesus is the eternal novelty: "And if you have this thought: but then, what novel has the Lord come to bring us? Know that he has brought *all newness* by bringing himself."¹⁶

3. THE ADVENTURE OF THE SPIRIT

Let us set moving for the young and, above all, with young people. The idea that the Spirit will lead us towards an adventurous path is a known, because the Spirit of Jesus is a *Spiritus Creator*, an innovative spirit, continuously renewing all things. The Spirit does not say anything new, because it brings us Jesus and leads us to Jesus. However it does so in a new and creative, compelling and convincing, manner. Certainly adventurous.

Sanctity within the Church, evidently a work of the *Holy Spirit*, is always new and unseen before. Think about it carefully: the saint does not say anything more than what was mentioned in the Gospel (i.e. there is in him a perfect

¹⁵ PAOLO VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 9; FRANCESCO, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 12.

¹⁶ IRENEO DI LIONE, *Contro le eresie*, IV,34,1.

ecclesial orthodoxy), but he says it in a completely new way, never seen before and perfectly adequate to the era in which he lives and operates (there is always *an innovative and unedited praxis*). This is why it is hard, at least initially, to understand the prophecy of a saint.

3.1. How shall we proceed? As an educative and pastoral community!

Nowadays, we frequently mention educative-pastoral projects and educative-pastoral communities. The idea is clear: It is not possible to have freelance individuals. These functioned well in the past, but are now outdated! *Communion is now the noble road and the winning strategy for the education and evangelization of young people.*

The adventure is common and shared. We are not only called personally, but all together. This has to become a true *conviction* - a thought which in some way has to convince us, that is, it wins on our resistances - for one and all, our educative-pastoral action is always a community experience, and the unique and articulate subject of the mission is the educative-pastoral community, which is well-defined in the recent SYM *Frame of Reference*:

community: because it involves young people and adults, parents and educators in a family atmosphere. The thing that unites us is not work or efficiency, but a set of values of life (educational, spiritual, Salesian ...) that form a shared identity willingly accepted by all;

educative: because it gives first place, in all its projects, relationships and organisations, to concern for the integral development of young people. By this we mean the development of their potential in all aspects: physical, psychological, cultural, professional, social, religious and spiritual;

pastoral: because it is open to evangelisation, it walks with young people on their journey to encounter Christ and creates an experience of church where young people experience human and Christian values in communion with God and with others.¹⁷

The Rector Major who insisted mostly on this affirmation was J.E. Vecchi. For him, the *determining reason* leading to co-responsibility is precisely “the new season within the Church. It reveals an acute awareness of being communion with God and amongst men, and takes *communion as the main way for achieving the salvation of man.*”¹⁸ This affirmation is imperative, because it reorders the priorities from *what* we do to *how* we do, highlighting the fact that the manner in which one walks says something decisive about the destination: communion, sharing, and co-responsibility are not to be considered external and extrinsic to our mission, but the very heart of the mission, because they are an anticipated realisation.

The various Christian vocations cannot be considered as whole on their own. Their richness emerges in the perspective of communion:

The journey was not brief. The pre-conciliar toil, the reflection of the Vatican Council, the effort to reset the Church’s life and the post-Council pastoral ministry, the doctrinal synthesis and practice which matured in recent years leading us to the millennium, the Synods on lay persons, ordained ministers and the consecrated life, and the Apostolic Exhortations clarifying how *the different vocations complement each other, become enriched, are coordinated; indeed, they cannot gain an original identity if not in mutual reference within the ecclesial communion.*¹⁹

Not only was the journey lengthy, but we must add that we are still in the process, since we still need to deepen and concretely realise these statements both as a Church and a Salesian Family. It is worthwhile considering the indications which the recent Synod on the family brought up.

We need to develop a true *spirituality of communion and relationship*. We need to acknowledge that Don Bosco excelled in relationships and involvement, especially with young people. The first gift he gives to his followers is that of a friendly relationship, in that, the quality of the educational relationship is very dear to him. He is indeed an excellent disciple of the meek and humble St. Francis de Sales, in that, he favours relational virtues as the cornerstones of the educational dialogue and of working collaboratively.

This has to be translated into *daily and weekly, simple and effective concrete attitudes*, which are at the basis of an educative-pastoral community: a cautious awareness of our attitudes in relationships and communication, patiently

¹⁷ DICASTERO PER LA PASTORALE GIOVANILE, *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference*, Rome 2014³, 110.

¹⁸ Cfr. Acts of the General Council 363 (1998), I.3.

¹⁹ *Ivi*.

listening and willingly giving space to others, a decision to give confidence and hope, willingness to welcome the possibility of exchanging gifts, readiness to make the initial approach and to kindly welcome everyone, embracing daily discipline thus enhancing the being together, and readiness towards reconciliation.

3.2. In which direction shall we move? Counter current, towards the fecundity of the Cross!

I don't imagine and think of the Church as just a group of friends who every now and then decide to do rafting in the turbulent waters of the river of life. It would seem to be a predictable image, adventurous and enjoyable, essentially worldly, downhill and amusing.

I believe that nature leads us in a better direction: I like to think of the Church as a group of salmon which, with the same sense of adventure, adamantly and with difficulty decides to go against the river currents, as opposed to other salmon choosing to take the enjoyable journey downwards. Forcefully jumping through the waterfalls, prudently and cunningly going through the dangers of hungry bears, trying not to get stuck between the sharp rocks, the salmon move counter current with great effort and sacrifice. Once they reach their goal, they die whilst laying eggs, thus giving birth to new lives, new adventures, new possibilities.

For Jesus, the adventure of the Spirit means coming to the fecundity of the cross. His adventure amongst us is exactly that of the grain of wheat, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."²⁰ There is no Christian fecundity that does not arrive at Calvary, the mountain of self-giving that regenerates the world, that which St. Francis of Sales calls "the mountain of lovers", because only those who really love according to God, get there.

The self-giving outlook offers depth, substance and content to pastoral work: it means overcoming the risk of "ostentatious youthfulness" (*giovanilismo*) in youth ministry, of a neutral and detached closeness to the young, of being unable to be effective and meaningful in their lives. For Don Bosco, the educator has a very clear and specific identity. In his small treatise on the *Preventive System*, he calls the educator "an individual *consecrated* to the welfare of his students, thus ready to face any trouble, and to make every effort to achieve its purpose, which is the civil, moral, scientific education of his students."²¹ That is, he must be available to lose himself for the salvation of the young: "I promise you, and I give you all that I am and I own. For you I work, for you I study, for you I live, and for you I am willing to give my life."²²

3.3. What is to be achieved? Works of mercy according to our charism!

We are now at the core of the year in which Pope Francis invites the whole Church to live the experience of the "Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy."

We all know the traditional distinction between the spiritual and corporal works of mercy proposed again in this Jubilee Year.²³ In my opinion, in a famous essay dedicated to the theme of mercy, Cardinal. W. Kasper in a genial way grasped in a more simplified manner our apostolic commitment in favour of mercy, following a fourfold distinction which I believe hits the mark on the identity of the Salesian charism committed in an integral way to the service of every young person and of all youth. He states that

the differentiated numbering of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy is neither naive nor arbitrary. It corresponds to a *fourfold distinction of poverty*; it is easier to understand *physical or economic poverty*: not having a roof over one's head and nothing in the pan, being hungry and thirsty, not having any clothing and shelter to defend oneself from atmospheric turbulences, and today we could add being unemployed. We add to these the serious illnesses or severe disabilities, which cannot be adequately treated and cured by medicine. No less important than physical poverty, is the *cultural poverty*: in its extreme case, it signifies illiteracy, in less extreme, yet determining cases, no or a limited possibility to study and, therefore, fewer prospects for the future, being excluded from participation in cultural and social life. A third form of poverty worthy of mention is *poverty in terms of relationships*; it takes into consideration man as a social being: solitude and isolation, loss of partner, loss of family members or friends, communication difficulties, a guilty exclusion or that imposed by social communication, discrimination and marginalization leading to isolation in a prison cell or because of a public prohibition. Finally, we should mention *spiritual poverty*, which is a serious problem in the western

²⁰ *Gd* 12,24-25.

²¹ G. BOSCO, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, n. 3.

²² G.B. LEMOYNE, *Memorie biografiche di don Bosco*, VII, 585.

²³ Cfr. FRANCESCO, *Bolla di indizione del giubileo straordinario della misericordia*, n. 15.

world: lack of guidance, inner emptiness, lack of comfort and hope, despair about the meaning of life, moral and spiritual decline to the point of psychic collapse. The diversity and the multidimensionality of poverty situations require a *multidimensional response*.²⁴

It seems to me that this fourfold poverty is what Don Bosco met in the streets of Turin more than one hundred and fifty years ago as a young priest. He was moved in front of young people and experienced the same compassion that went through the heart of Jesus. The *idea of the oratory* born in the heart of Don Bosco, today expressed through what we rightly call the “oratory criterion”, which has to characterize all our actions and all our educative-pastoral apostolic work, is summarized in Article 40 of our Salesian Constitutions:

Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters *a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelised, a school that prepared them for life and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.*

As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and work.

Whilst trying to create a connection, it is natural to recognize the link between the fourfold poverty expressed by Cardinal Kasper, and the four pillars of the oratory criterion which make up the identity of the Salesian charism of all times and of all the manners of carrying out our mission.

The corresponding pillar of *corporal poverty* is the “house that welcomes”. Meeting the basic needs of many young people (today we even call it “human promotion”) was the first step for Don Bosco: giving a bed, a blanket, a meal, a meeting place, an environment in which one could feel welcome, a family environment in which fatherhood and motherhood are felt. Even if we only think of the situation of refugees knocking at the doors of Europe, we cannot but go back, to a certain extent, to the situation of Turin in the 800s which saw a protagonist, passionate, and creative Don Bosco.

The corresponding pillar of *cultural poverty* is the idea of a “school that prepares for life.” Don Bosco immediately noticed that the answer to basic needs was necessary yet insufficient: thus the beginning of the evening schools, trade schools, the first employment contracts signed by him so as to ensure justice at work, a structured itinerary of intellectual and practical formation. Giving a cultural consistency means giving a defined human structure and a guaranteed personal dignity. A lack of culture results in a missing critical spirit and social profoundness, conditions which could give rise to degradation and manipulation by others.

To *relational poverty*, Don Bosco responded with “the courtyard where to meet up with friends and enjoy themselves”. The teacher who teaches from the platform, the priest who preaches from the pulpit, the educator who holds formation sessions, and the superior who commands from above, are not appropriate figures for Don Bosco: for him, the true relationship is born and developed in the courtyard, a place of shared affections, lived friendships, and joyful and carefree games which open up the possibility for confidence and familiarity.

Finally, it is evident that *spiritual poverty* finds its match in the necessity to give young people a “parish that evangelises”, that is, a systematic education of the faith. We are aware of the terrible religious ignorance and therefore must “unhesitatingly assume the current situation of faith illiteracy of many believers and the illiteracy of the living experience of many contemporaries, and move towards a new manner of learning the grammar of relationships.”²⁵

3.4. Third epilogue: having more trust in young people!

We finally reached the third and final epilogue.

Being educators and pastors requires a *fundamental attitude* towards young people: *trust and hope in young people themselves*, identifying them as the real protagonists of their own education and evangelization.

The necessary accompaniment, support and evaluation - also in the face of failures they may experience – are not to allow us to lose hope in the capabilities and possibilities of young people in being protagonists of their own lives.

Unfortunately, as rightly said by Benedict XVI, the task of education and pastoral care is shot to death when a general lack of confidence and, above all, of hope is present, which, when attacking faith and charity, empties their driving force from within:²⁶

²⁴ W. KASPER, *Misericordia. Concetto fondamentale del vangelo - Chiave della vita cristiana* (Giornale di teologia 361), Queriniana, Brescia 2015, 216-217.

²⁵ L. MANICARDI, *La fatica della carità. Le opere di misericordia*, Qiqajon, Magnano (BI) 2010, 47.

²⁶ The following book's reflection on the theme of hope understood as a "driving force" of faith and charity, remains unsurpassed C. PEGUY, *Il portico del mistero della seconda virtù*, in C. PEGUY, *I misteri* (Mondi letterari 35), Jaca Book, Milano 1997³, 155-282.

*The most serious aspect of the educational emergency is a sense of discouragement that overcomes many educators, especially parents and teachers, when faced with difficulties their role presents. I therefore wrote in the mentioned letter: “The soul of education, as of the whole of life, can only be a dependable hope. Today, our hope is threatened on many sides and we even risk becoming, like the ancient pagans, people “having no hope and without God in the world”, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Ephesus (Eph 2: 12). What may be the deepest difficulty for a true educational endeavour consists precisely in this: the fact that at the root of the crisis of education lies a crisis of trust in life”, which, after all, is nothing but a lack of trust in the God who has called us to life.*²⁷

The worst possible attitude of a pastoral worker is that of not having hope in the young people to whom he is sent. This discouragement is a mortal sin, which condemns to death the very existence of the Church and its particular vocation, because

there is *only one* mortal sin: discouragement, from which despair is born, and in substance, despair is not much a sin, but it is actually the death of the spirit. [...] Beware only of one thing: discouragement.²⁸

The Bible and our charism truly show us how important it is to seek and cultivate this solid trust which is rooted in the persistent awareness that the seeds of goodness and generosity have been sowed in every person, even though their ways of life actually demonstrates the contrary:

Thus, Incarnation *remains actually the fundamental crucial plot of the whole drama of salvation history*. In the parable of the murderous tenants, which it retraces synthetically, all this has its own clarity:

He went on to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. ”Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘*What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.*’ ”But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”²⁹

Thus the beginning of the Salesian mission is marked by an obstinate and hard-headed trust in young people, capable of going against common sense:

Whilst religious and literary instruction were being organised in a better manner, a greater need necessitating urgent attention appeared. Many youths from Turin, as well as foreigners, full of good will to give themselves to a moral and hardworking life: but when encouraged to start, they weren’t eager to respond; having neither bread nor dress, nor accommodation where to rest at least for some time. To house at least some who did not know where to find shelter in the evening, he prepared a barn where they could spend the night on some hay. But some would repeatedly take away the linen, others the blankets, and finally the hay itself was stolen and sold.³⁰

Don Bosco worked in perfect faithfulness to the words of Saint Paul, who praising Abraham, paradigmatic model of the faith, affirms that “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’.”³¹

The same is with the Christian life, a life marked by faith, hope and charity! The Salesian charism was born and has developed with the same obstinate trust in young people!

This is therefore the adventure to which we are called to walk with Jesus, with the Church and with young people today!

Thank you!

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²⁷ Dal *Discorso di Sua Santità Benedetto XVI nell’udienza ai Capitolari* del 31 marzo 2008.

²⁸ V. SOLOVIEV, *I tre dialoghi e il racconto dell’anticristo*, Marietti, Torino 1996², 52.54.

²⁹ *Lc* 20,9-16.

³⁰ Cfr. G.B. LEMOYNE, *Memorie biografiche di don Bosco*, III, 211-213.

³¹ *Rm* 4,18.