



SOCIETA' DI SAN FRANCESCO DI
SALES

CASA GENERALIZIA SALESIANA

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The Rector Major

Rome, July 24, 2017

**LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR
TO THE SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO**

The Preparatory Document of the Synod of Bishops 2018
on “Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment,”
the compass for our journey

Dear Confreres,

I am writing this letter to you with the desire to exhort you to be aware that at this time we are living a *kairos*, a propitious time for our service and our communion with the Church.

In fact, on October 16, 2016, Pope Francis announced that in October 2018 the **15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the topic “Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment,”** will be held. It is the first time in the history of the Church that such an important and representative assembly is dedicated in a direct and explicit way to the study of this topic. The Synod on New Evangelization (2012) and the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) have dealt with the issue of how to carry out the mission of proclaiming the joy of the Gospel in today’s world. To the accompaniment of families in their encounter with this joy, on the other hand, were dedicated the two synods of 2014 and 2015 and the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016). Continuing along the same path, the Holy Father has decided that the Church should examine herself on how to accompany young people in recognizing and

welcoming the call to love, and to love to the full. He has also asked young people themselves to help the Church identify the most effective ways to proclaim the Good News nowadays. On January 13, 2017, therefore, the secretariat of the Synod of Bishops offered for the attention of the whole Church a *Preparatory Document* (PD) to launch “the phase of the consultation of the whole People of God.”

As Salesians of Don Bosco we are called to offer the Church the gift of our charism, together with our reflections and pastoral experiences with and for the young. Therefore, today I am asking you to join in the efforts of the whole Church in the study of this document and in responding to the attached *questionnaire*, allowing yourselves first of all to be challenged by this question: following the convocation of this synod and the publication of this *Preparatory Document*, how do we feel challenged in our charismatic experience? I ask you also to share your reflections with the local Church in the knowledge that our reflections are meant not only for the young people and educators in our Salesians centers, but above all are to be shared and discussed with them and many other young people and educators engaged in the youth ministry of local Churches.

With a view to our being involved in this, we have asked all the provinces to reply to the *questionnaire* and to send their replies to the Youth Ministry Department.

1. The first essential step to take must be that of reading the *story of the young people* who have been entrusted to us. This step implies being familiar with the challenges and opportunities of the area in which we are called to bear witness to the love of God for the young, especially the poorest ones. The whole of the first part of the *Preparatory Document*, in fact, is based on the importance of a reading of the contemporary situation of the young. In the spirit of *Evangelii gaudium* we are called to “go out” and “listen,” so that we may then share the Good News. Knowing the real situation of the young people we meet is not a luxury we may allow ourselves but an obligation we cannot neglect. Not to do so would be a betrayal, turning our back on the cry of the young – which is often hidden but profound. The temptation of “we’ve always done it this way” together with the attitude “we already know the answer,” even if the question has changed, are the very real dangers that we have to recognize and overcome.

2. The second part of the *Preparatory Document* concentrates on the concepts of ***faith, discernment, and vocation***. These are closely linked: faith is the source of vocational discernment. “It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (*Lumen fidei*, 53).¹ As Salesians we are called to recognize in this field some challenges and confirm certain choices: our educational and pastoral plan ought to offer young people programs that will bring them to live an integral human experience. Therefore, our plan ought to help the young people to live life as a gift to be welcomed and shared and for which to be grateful. Finally, as educators and pastors, we are called to accompany the young in discerning their own vocation, and therefore in the construction of their own plan of life, in the knowledge that “every vocation is directed toward a mission” (PD II, 3).

The topics of discernment and accompaniment require a serious and well-organized human, spiritual, and charismatic preparation for all those, both consecrated and lay, involved in the

¹ Editor’s note: Pope Francis’s first encyclical, June 29, 2013.

educational-pastoral community. I invite you to reject two pastoral temptations.

The *first temptation* that we encounter here is that of stopping to realize the shortage of time and necessary resources for a strong commitment to the accompaniment of the young. To this temptation we respond by offering ourselves in the first place to become true and authentic witnesses by allowing ourselves to be accompanied: “guided guides,” who themselves have personal experience of spiritual accompaniment and only then are in a position to offer it to others, setting in motion suitable procedures for training in accompaniment the lay people co-responsible in the Salesian mission.

The *second temptation* is that of being satisfied with a reductionist view of accompaniment, which seems to emphasize the individual role of the one who accompanies in this process. To this other temptation we respond by offering to the young people in places where we find ourselves a progressive accompaniment on several levels: an accompaniment by the Salesian center, which welcomes the young and hands on to them a “family spirit”; an accompaniment by the educational-pastoral community, which in its turn needs to be guided in co-responsibility in the Salesian mission and the community discernment that precedes educational and pastoral planning; a group accompaniment of the group to which the young person belongs, in a gradual process of learning and apostolate; and finally, the personal accompaniment of the young people which is decisive for their vocational discernment.

The *Preparatory Document* tells us that the last kind of discernment is not a one-off but rather a “process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialog with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one’s state of life” (PD II, 2). In every young person educated in the faith the question arises: “How does one live the Good News of the Gospel and respond to the call which the Lord addresses to all those he encounters, whether through marriage, the ordained ministry, or consecrated life?” (PD II, 2). Mindful of the universal call to holiness (*Lumen gentium*, 40), we are called to accompany each young person, none excluded, in responding to this fundamental question, that is to say, to the threshold of adult life, gradually but fearlessly proposing, as Don Bosco did, the goal of a high level of human and Christian life.

3. The third part of the *Preparatory Document* brings together some suggestions regarding *pastoral action*, identifying those involved, the places, and the resources. We are invited to “accompany the young,” with the three attitudes of “going out,” “seeing,” and “calling,” which describe the way Jesus encountered the people of his time. This sounds familiar to us sons of Don Bosco, and represents a further appeal to listen to the young and be totally available to them in their needs, aware that the relationship of spiritual paternity is an extension of educational paternity. From the encounter with the young, well represented by the practice of assistance, there can develop accompaniment in vocational discernment and the subsequent construction of the young person’s plan of life.

When the *Preparatory Document* invites us to consider as those to whom youth ministry is addressed “all young people, none excluded,” there echoes in us our conviction, which was Don Bosco’s, that “*even the most callous boys have is soft spot.*” *In view of the high-quality pastoral service offered to young people with different needs, therefore, there ought to be promoted a clear and participative experience of all the participants in the community that educates and evangelizes: the educational-pastoral community. On the part of the local Salesian community and the Salesian*

province leadership, this requires a commitment, ever more serious, professional, and well-planned, to the formation of our lay co-workers, also as regards the accompaniment of the young.

The co-responsible co-involvement of the various participants in pastoral action needs to be accompanied by their understanding of pastoral work as not being limited to a generic pastoral plan, but as including procedures of community discernment based on a shared understanding of an educational-pastoral plan. Then in the course of pastoral planning it is appropriate that the processes followed aim as far as possible at seeing that young people are capable of developing a sense of personal responsibility in the course of their human growth and development in the faith, in which the idea of a progressive journey finds its place. In addition, I urge you to make an effort to provide lessons and experiences of prayer within the educational and evangelizing process, wherein the young people can have a taste of the value of silence and contemplation: “no discernment is possible without cultivating a familiarity with the Lord and a dialog with his Word” (PD III, 4).

In the context of this letter, finally, I offer you **three questions** that may guide your reflections on the challenges and opportunities regarding the faith and the vocational discernment of the young nowadays. I am offering these three questions as material for reflection for the various provincial councils, at directors’ meetings, at meetings of Salesians in the quinquennium and practical training. I also ask you to consider the possibility of sharing these three questions with the different groups of the *Salesian Family*:

1. What are plans are we making at the level of the local Church so that *Evangelii Gaudium* remains the compass for our pastoral journey?
2. What are the pastoral choices that we have in mind and/or could be proposing so that everyone – young people and adults, parents and teachers, catechists and leaders – can feel part of a community that is educating to the faith, a community that is evangelizing?
3. What are the difficulties that can weaken the continuity and consistency of the pastoral processes? What are the plans to strengthen the continuity and consistency of the pastoral processes?

Following the invitation of the Holy Father (PD III, V), we entrust to Mary this process in which, together with the whole Church, we examine ourselves on how to accompany young people to accept the call to the joy of love and the fullness of life.

In Christ,



Angel Fernandez Artime

10th Successor of Don Bosco