

# SCHOOL OF FORMATION FOR FAMILY ANIMATORS

**Salesian Family Spirituality Days  
Jan. 20, 2017 - Salesianum, Rome**

by

**Loredana Simeone, Ruggiero Diella, Don Mario Oscar Llanos**

**«ASSOCIAZIONE CERCHI D'ONDA - ONLUS»**

**“ASSOCIATION RIPPLES – A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION OF SOCIAL BENEFIT”**

[www.cerchidonda.org](http://www.cerchidonda.org)

## **1. THE BEGINNINGS**

It was 1977 when Don Enzo Policari, Director and Pastor of the Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco in Rome, shared his idea of creating a group of young families who would set out on a formative Christian and Salesian journey. The animation of the group was entrusted to a few couples, among whom were the spouses Ruggiero Diella and Loredana Simeone. Don Mario Oscar Llanos, an Argentinian Salesian who was working in the Dicastery for Formation in the Salesian Generalate (the Pisana) was charged with the formation and the spiritual animation of the animators and of the group of families.

Following a period of study, reflection, and comparison of the different proposals for family ministry already in existence in the Salesian Family and in the Church, we made the decision to construct a model which capitalized on the contributions of these various experiences, coupling them with the principles of Salesian animation, so as to apply the Preventive System to the group's and each family's life.

The Don Bosco Families Group, a true workshop of Salesian family pastoral, gave life to numerous forms of ecclesial, social, and Salesian service - initiatives of ongoing formation and of the betterment of the quality of relationships. The goal of these is the realization of one's own spousal and family vocation and a greater understanding of one's own role as educator. In the meantime, animated by an intense sensitivity where solidarity is concerned, the group had begun to develop activities of solidarity. Those families involved on a journey of personal and conjugal maturity and who wanted to feel that they were completely involved in the social sphere and in being ever more the protagonists of their own reality in a continual and structured way, founded in 2003 a true and proper *family of families*: the Association “Ripples”, a non-profit organization of social benefit [*Cerchi d'Onda* – ONLUS]. The Association was conceived as a tool at the service of the Salesian mission undertaken by families. Its specific goals are: the social, health, and educational development of infants, adolescents, young adults, women, and families; assistance to couples and families in the realms of psychology and spirituality; the development of a pedagogy for families and sensitization to social realities on various topics concerning the family; and solidarity with the poor through projects which tend to lead to self-development and formation.

The choice of this name reminds us of its "mission": the love of every couple and of the family of families formed by them is pictured as a "little drop" of good and of life which plops into the sea of

humanity's needs so that its ripples of solidarity and of formation may reach to the very ends of the earth. The effect of that little drop, thanks to this network of friendship and co-responsibility, very quickly resulted in more than 100 projects: sewing and weaving artisanal workshops; oratories; silos to hold grain; wells for drinking water; husbandry; a mobile health dispensary; relief given to those affected by the earthquakes in Aquila, Haiti, and Chile; numerous works on the frontiers with the Salesians in Guatemala, Argentina, and the Congo, and with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, in Vietnam and Sicily. Many other works were financed in Bosnia, Israel, Benin, etc., for the good of child soldiers and children in difficult socio-economic situations who were given scholarships for work or for study; and, together with the Salesian Cooperators, to welcome and take in a Syrian family living in Rome and support for Syrian families helped by the Salesians in Damascus.

In addition to these solidarity activities realized, those in charge of the Association felt themselves called to give concrete responses to the educational and formative emergency faced by many families. It was thus that the school of formation for family animators, SFAF (Scuola di Formazione per Animatori Familiari), was born.

## **2. THE MOTIVATIONS UNDERLYING THIS PROJECT**

Our pastoral work with families permitted us to detect the urgency of specific formation needs for those who intend to brave the Salesian mission among families in an efficacious and qualified way:

- A concrete and experiential living of the Preventive System, the fulcrum of Salesian Spirituality for the individual, the family, and for the *family of families*;
- the need to grow as a couple, together with their children, in each one's vocational orientation and maturity;
- a serious and up-to-date approach to the state of the family and to the educational emergency;
- a well-founded initial methodology in family animation;
- a basic habilitation in regards to managing processes and group dynamics;
- a theoretical-practical knowledge of the principal elements of family counseling and accompaniment;
- the acquisition of necessary skills so as to network in service to families;
- the sensitization to psychological and spiritual assistance of couples and families and of the development of family pedagogy.

In order to respond to these needs, the Association, beginning in 2005, established the School of Formation for Family Animators, an initiative of intense formation, with the understanding that: "*one is not born a family animator, one becomes one...*"

## **3. SFAF'S GOALS**

The specific identified goals are the following:

- To inspire and guide the life of the couple and of the family through the experience of Salesian Spirituality and Don Bosco's Preventive System.

- To habilitate those working on initiatives of family animation with the skills and the experience necessary so as to be able to respond to the psycho-social needs of families.
- To give support to couples in the discovery and the understanding of their role as primary educators as parents through the day-to-day process of awareness-raising and of growth.
- To foster an experiential deepening of the theories and methods of action in the field of animating family groups.
- To initiate dialogue among and integrate the family, youth, and vocation pastorals.
- To offer formation itineraries of growth adapted to the different ages of the young people who are participating, having them converge with those offered to the parents.
- To propose contexts for prevention and for the bettering of "the quality of family life" through the acquisition of techniques and strategies of communication and of planning.
- To form persons who might be able to give rise to initiatives which serve the family, groups, or family associations and to integrate them in a network.

#### **4. "ANIMATION" OF SFAF**

The School is fundamentally a space to grow in faith through prayer, living a Sacramental Life in Confession and daily Mass, special moments of Adoration, vigils, *Lectio Divina*, and spiritual moments – all of which constitute the heart and inspiration of SFAF.

In addition, this formative experience gives particular relevance to the modalities of communication and the type of relationship established by conveying the course content chosen. It is not only a matter of applying techniques or strategies as much as it is a fostering of the acquisition and mastery of a science and of an art, which presupposes the integration of a multiplicity of factors: attitudes, methodologies, and valid guidelines.

The Association decided to elaborate an innovative project which would not be a mere repetition or copy of other initiatives, but which might offer an experience of a family pastoral which is specifically "Salesian." Therefore, SFAF is distinguished - beyond its spiritual proposal - by its experiential method, which alternates lessons of a more intellectual nature with work in small groups, role-playing, and simulations, and foresees active participation. Therefore, the method of Salesian animation which is used:

- gives priority to the spiritual formation of the couple and of the family;
- respects persons by people helping them to share, in a safe environment, about what they are living and experiencing;
- offers "experiential support" for the couple, the family, and the group;
- provides a formative style which adapts the proposals, the programs, and the content to the persons and needs of the group;
- efficiently utilizes the resources of the same;
- bears in mind the participants' cognitive levels, knowledge, and rhythms of life and of learning.

A methodology like the one here proposed brings one to welcome and to accompany persons as companions on the journey, paying attention to relationships and interests with kindness and

cordiality – not only to the individual but also to the couple and the family being accompanied – generating significant and long-lasting bonds.

## **5. THE CONTENT**

The formation course is based on the guidelines of the Magisterium of the Church, on the contributions to theological and pastoral studies, especially on the family and youth pastoral and on the contribution of the human sciences, social pedagogy, psychology of education, and family counseling. The course content of the School has both a practical and a theoretical character. Here below are noted the principal three significant areas:

- ◆ The theological-spiritual-pastoral area:
  - ecclesial Magisterium on the family, and on the family pastoral
  - spirituality of spouses and families
  - the Preventive System, and Salesian Spirituality
  - the indications of the Rectors Major on the family and on family pastoral
  - theological-biblical elements concerning couples and families
  - the theology of the Sacrament of Matrimony
  - Family Pastoral
  - attention to present-day ecclesial guidelines
  
- ◆ Psycho-pedagogical area:
  - effective communication
  - group dynamics and leadership
  - problem-solving and conflict resolution
  - transactional analysis in interpersonal relationships
  - care for relationships and interventions of support for couples and individuals
  - systemic relational theory
  - the life cycle of a couple
  - support in parenting
  - male and female sexual differences
  
- ◆ Methodological area:
  - the methodology of family animation
  - accompaniment of the person and the couple
  - organizing events at the service of families
  - simulations "with" and "for" families
  - Family Pastoral workshop
  - Family Politics workshop
  - Couples in conflict workshop
  - Parent-child dialogue workshop
  - Movies and the Family workshop
  - Humor as a resource in the life of a couple workshop

## **6. ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS**

The School is organized around the contributions of various persons with differing professional roles. The rhythm of the day and of the activities proposed is formulated keeping the family in mind - showing concern for their time and objective needs.

### **6.1. ANIMATORS AND FORMATION INSTRUCTORS**

The Board of Directors of the Association entrusts the visioning, the planning, and the coordination of the School to a small team, composed of one SDB and a few Salesian Cooperators; for the running and animation of the school and of its execution, they avail themselves of a larger team of:

- ◆ University professors who are experts in the psycho-pedagogical and theological areas, as well as in giving psychological assistance to couples and adolescents [from the Salesian Pontifical University (the UPS) in Rome and other universities], and other experts, Priests, and counselors of accredited competence and experience;
- ◆ Animators in charge of the Family Pastoral in different ecclesial areas;
- ◆ an SDB Spiritual Assistant to animate the young people;
- ◆ a team of 15 young adult Animators for the children;
- ◆ two who are responsible for the finances.

### **6.2. PARTICIPANTS**

The School for Family Animators is directed to the following people:

- those who work in the fields of animation and education;
- those in charge of groups and associations which are dedicated to caring for families;
- couples or single individuals who are willing, able, and interested in carrying out this type of service;
- young couples with a vocation to service and animation;
- Priests and Religious who are active in or have a love for the area of the Family Pastoral.

The adult participants are subdivided into four groups which respect the variety of the experiences of the individuals and of the formation they have received in previous editions of the School. The Association cares for the economic sustainability for participation in SFAF for families concerned - especially for large families or ones that suffer from particular socio-economic difficulties.

### **6.3. FAMILY SPACE**

"Family Space" is entirely dedicated to the family and to spending time in unconventional places so as to grow and mature as a *family of families* through knowledge, dialogue, sharing, work carried out, or their own personal/family/associative experiences or Family Pastoral.

### **6.4. "JOY-FILLED EVENINGS"**

Each day concludes with a "joy-filled evening". Under the guidance of the young animators, children and parents, subdivided into teams, compete in games, treasure hunts, carnival-style games, and talent shows. This pattern is modified on the last night so that the young might have adequate time to present the activities they did in the workshops given along the week.

Each day ends with the "Salesian Good Night" in which the Lord is thanked for the various moments lived together.

## **6.5. TIME AND PLACE**

SFAF meets according to the following schedule:

- a week of intensive formation in the summer (the third week of August-with a movable site), residential in style;
- one weekend in Winter (February/March); and
- periodic meetings along the year to cover particular topics.

## **7. SFAF RAGAZZI [SFAF YOUTH] (by CANDIDO PORCELLI and CHIARA DIELLA)**

One of the added advantages of SFAF is the integration of youth and family pastorals, thanks to the presence of a team of young, motivated, competent, and creative animators. The objective of “SFAF Ragazzi” (SFAF Youth) is to foster a course of formation for children, teens, and young adults which dovetails with that carried out for their families, and therefore, it allows them to live an experience of authentic human and spiritual growth.

The animating team, coordinated by an SDB Spiritual Assistant and by animators who are more experienced, dreams up and plans a course of formation which is specific to the age of the participants – ranging from 0 to 25 years old – respecting their needs and their peculiarities - taking on full responsibility for it.

The young people are divided up into age groups thus: 0 to 3-year-olds; 3 to 5-year-olds; 6 to 10-year-olds; 11 to 13-year-olds; 14 and 15-year-olds; 16 to 18-year-olds; and 19 to 25-year-olds.

Each of these is coordinated by a mini-team of animators who plan a particular *iter* on a common theme, which is developed according to the developmental and formative stages when carrying out the various activities.

For the little ones, educational games and activities are proposed as the instrument for formation; for the pre-adolescents and the adolescents, moments of reflection, experience, and coming to know oneself are foreseen. These employ methods of active formation (brainstorming, films, songs, and outdoor activities) that alternate with moments of intellectual formation.

For those of the oldest age groups (16 to 25 years of age), the path is one of self-discovery in view of a vocational choice: the animators are psychologists, sociologists, or other professionals with particular experience with young people and as guidance counselors.

Guidance for the children comes in the spirituality moments which coordinate with those of the parents as far as the themes are concerned.

A typical day is structured this way: after the opening prayer with the families, divided according to age groups, there is the formation moment; which is followed by a coffee break – a profitable moment for the parents, children, and animators to get together and talk about the activities carried out until that point.

In the second half of the morning, the workshops take place – generally something specific to the 6 to 11-year-old group (singing, skits, arts and crafts) - while the older ones can choose from among musical, circus, and theater. Their goal is to develop each one’s creativity and to create a climate of trust and family among the young, giving them greater freedom for initiative from among the young people themselves, proposed on the basis of their talents and abilities.

The afternoon is the time dedicated to the family, when the children and the parents experience their "Family Space" which offers them the possibility of spending some time together at the shore or in other recreational activities together with the other participants in SFAF.

The formation moments of the School, carried out in the morning, are fundamental for reaching the objectives of the proposal, but another important educative role is provided by the informal moments of encounter and exchange (meals, going to the beach, evenings). These moments bring parents and children together as a family sharing a common formative journey and establishing moments of intense educational communication.

A strong point in the organization of SFAF Ragazzi is the group of animators, comprised of 15 young people on different formative journeys, coming from various Salesian realities – or not – and from all over Italy. During the year, the team coordinators, together with the Salesian in charge, plan formation around: the identity of the role of an animator; the development of relationship and communication skills; instruction in new techniques of animation; the acquisition of a planning mentality for animation and for one's personal life; as well as reflection on and deepening of one's own spirituality.

The principal wealth – the different experiences and places of origin of the young people – represent a challenge when planning formation, workshops, and the evenings because the distance they need to travel and the basic differences in vocabulary oblige them to work very hard to achieve synergy and integration. This has taught us to create in the team animators a planning mentality, clear subdivision of roles and tasks, and a climate of trust and of shared responsibility. The formation of the formators is a tool to give a mark of familiarity and of quality to the experience.

For the children and youth participating in SFAF, the witness of these youth animators is a great motivating force for they become a point of reference to which the children can compare themselves. Some have referred to it in this way:

- ◆ "I appreciated the joy of SFAF, the great and beautiful synergy of the staff in their work is easily seen." (Andrea, 20 years old)
- ◆ "I return home with a great sense of happiness; it was beautiful to see all of us active and ready to get involved, to share our thoughts, feelings, hard work, and collaborative planning." (Giuseppe, 26 years old, animator)
- ◆ "For me, it was a personal rebirth." (Licia, 20 years old, animator)
- ◆ "It was beautiful to be here together and to see my SFAF friends once again." (Marco, 8 years old)
- ◆ "I'm happy that I got to see the animators again, to have played, and to have gone together to the beach." (Maria Giulia, 9 years old)

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Since 2005, about 1500 persons and more than 600 families have participated in SFAF. The numerous participants have progressively learned tools and appropriated to themselves motivations which have allowed them to make vocational choices of various kinds:

- ◆ some have begun the formation journey to become Salesian Cooperators;
- ◆ some have founded family groups and associations;

- ◆ others have thrown themselves whole-heartedly into initiatives of various kinds for the good of the family (Family Meeting, Family Week, The Forum of Family Associations, etc.);
- ◆ many have been encouraged and motivated in their daily work at the service of the family; and
- ◆ many young people have discovered the direction for their own personal plan of life.

Some testimonies help us understand the way of living that SFAF has raised up in them:

*“An experience in which one feels welcomed, listened to, loved, and helped”; “water in the desert”; “an oasis of grace”; “an amazing experience”; “the plank of salvation”* (a reference to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in: Tertullian, *De Paenitentia* 4,2:PL 1,1343; cf. Council of Trent (1547): DS 1542); and *“an encounter with oneself, so as then to be able to share as a couple certain aspects which escape us in daily life and to grow in our spousal and family relationships and in our pastoral service”...*

SFAF, therefore, is not simply a school in which one acquires skills to be able to lead groups or to give support to couples or to be parents. It is, rather, a space which generates vocations and sustains each person and each family in their spiritual, relational, and emotional aspects, rendering them more greatly aware of their own call and of realizing the plan that God has for them.

SFAF has received recognition in the 2010 Friend of the Family Award; from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and in diverse patronage - among which are those of the Association of Salesian Cooperators, the National Forum of Family Associations, the Diocese of Rome, that of Vallo della Lucania, and that of Mileto, etc.; of local entities and institutions (the Province of Salerno and that of the Lazio and Campania Region); and from the Salesian Pontifical University. Just recently, it was granted the 2016 Life Page Award.

The results obtained, the positive assessment of the experts, the formators, the animation team, and, above all, the participants in SFAF, plus the encouragement of the recent Rectors Major of the Salesians, have encouraged the Association *Cerchi d'Onda* to persevere in involving more families, groups, and associations to work in synergy so as to guarantee a quality formation to the leaders of Salesian family animation so they may give witness to the Gospel of the family which beat in the heart of Don Bosco.