

PRESENTATION

Don Eusebio Muñoz,
The Delegate of the Rector Major from the Salesian Family

I cordially greet you and I hope my salutation reaches to every member of your groups. This is an appropriate time to welcome you, because in these days, we share many values, significant and important for us, as to the groups affiliated to us. This gathering for the Salesian family spirituality days is transformed, year-by-year, into a special invitation that God gifts us in order to achieve a rich experience of human, Christian and Salesian communion.

These Spirituality Days help us to become more mindful in what it means to belong to the Salesian Family. In these days, we will have the opportunity to have a special get-together with the Rector Major, the center of unity and communion of the Salesian Family. We will reflect together on the Strenna, the central annual message of our Rector Major. We will get to recognize and know better the other groups. We will encounter with people from so many different places with whom we have a surprising spiritual affinity. We will understand better that what the Holy Spirit did with Don Bosco continues to recur in our time.

The whole setup of these Spirituality days can also shed light on our ongoing challenge for formation. The contents, group experiences, personal sharing, communal prayer, and the Salesian family environment is a good synthesis of what we call formation and can illumine our formation process and programs of our respective groups. A development and process that allows us to respond appropriately to different situations that life gifts and offers us.

This year's Spirituality Days focuses on the theme of family. Many people expect a lot from us, as there is a constant need for personal accompaniment in these complex times of ours. To gaze on the family in an opportunity and

challenge for our groups to which we must respond with generosity and wisdom. Our gathering will also propose many reasons to better consolidate our response that we are called to give.

Eventually, this gathering enables us above all to strengthen our spiritual experiences that has brought us to Rome. I am convinced that this encounter will allow us to make our own the internal experiences of many believers. In a special way I think, it will also be an intense experience for us as the same way Mary responded with inner conviction after the angel's greeting. Right from the beginning to the very end of these spirituality days let us thank the Lord who constantly continues to work wonders in us. Every member of our extended group bears and gives witness to the strength of God, who is able to take care of people genuinely and transform society.

I invite you to participate actively in this meaningful encounter. Thus, by returning to your places of origin you can share with others the lived experience of these days, which in turn can enrich the journey and accompaniment of your groups.

I entrust into the hands and the heart of Don Bosco and Our Mother, Mary Help of Christians these spirituality days, organized and prepared with such enthusiasm and dedication.

I wish you a peaceful and fruitful encounter.

Don Eusebio Muñoz,
Delegate of the Rector Major for the Salesian Family

The family experience of Jesus of Nazareth

Son of Mary, Son of the Father

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“Jesus is a model of obedience to his earthly parents, placing himself under their charge (cf. Lk 2:51), but he also shows that children’s life decisions and their Christian vocation may demand a parting for the sake of the Kingdom of God (cf. Mt 10:34-37; Lk 9:59- 62). Jesus himself, at twelve years of age, tells Mary and Joseph that he has a greater mission to accomplish apart from his earthly family (cf. Lk 2:48-50). In this way, he shows the need for other, deeper bonds even within the family: “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21) ¹

1. The facts

With the exception of the so-called infancy Gospels (Mt 1.18 to 2.23; Lk 1.5 to 2.52), the evangelical tradition barely mentions the family of Jesus. And when it does, it usually does not describe it too favorably: the ministry started in Galilee, Jesus was considered crazy by "his family", who tried to get him back home (Mc 3,20-21; cfr. Jn 10, 20); when he visited Nazareth, "fellow citizens, relatives and those of his household" have not believed in him (Mk 6.4). While preaching the kingdom of God, he had no relatives among his followers (cfr. Jn 7.2 to 5). Only the fourth gospel records the presence of his mother, with Jesus and his disciples during a wedding in Cana of Galilee, at the beginning of his public ministry (Jn 2,1-12), and finally, during his agony and death on the cross (Jn 19,25-27; cf. Mk 15.40 to 41; Mt 27.55 to 56; Lk 23,49.55).

But it was not his close relatives who have distanced themselves from him, it was the same Jesus, who throughout his public ministry, adopted an "apparently anti-family attitude." ² And not just with his family (Mark 3.31 to 35; Mt 12.46 to 50; Lc 8,19-21), but also with the families of his disciples, whom he ordered to break up with them as an immediate consequence of his invitation to follow him (Mk 1,20; 10.28 to 30) or, even, as a preliminary condition to start to follow him (Lk 9.59 to 62, from 12.52 to 53; 14,26).³

¹ FRANCESCO, *Amoris Laetitia*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family (19 March 2016), n. 18.

² S. GUIJARRO, “La familia en el movimiento de Jesús”, en ID., *Jesús y sus primeros discípulos*, Verbo Divino, Estella, 2007, 145.

³ For this it is shocking that such a radical attitude assumed by those who have lived with him until his death, do not remain within the group of the disciples after the resurrection: the generations

Well, despite this deep reserve that Jesus had with respect to family life, his and his relatives, evangelical tradition transmits enough episodes in which he values it highly. He demands the duty to honor parents (Mk 7.6 to 13) and defends the indissolubility of lawful marriage (Mk 10.2 to 12, Mt from 19.2 to 12; Luke 16:18). He encouraged to welcome and bless the children of others, which was very unusual in his time (Mk 10,13-16; Mt 19.13 to 15; Lk 18.15 to 17). He sends his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to families and to stay in their homes (Mk 6:10; Mt 10.12 to 15; Lk 10,5-7). And he himself, throughout his public ministry maintained friendly relations with some families, accepting their hospitality (Mk 1.29 to 31; 11.11; 14.3; Lk 10,38-42; Jn 11: 1-45). And it also reached the point in presenting family relationship as a model and goal of discipleship (Mark 3.31 to 35) or as its best reward (Mark 10.28 to 30).

How do you explain this apparent 'ambiguity' of Jesus with the family, his own and that of his relatives?

2. The family institution in the times of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in the context of an agrarian society, immersed in the eastern Mediterranean culture, regarding the family as the fundamental social institution. Organized to ensure self-sufficiency and protection for its members, it was subdivided through a hierarchical network of relationships, in which affection among its members was not predominating but rather paternal authority. Family life primarily took its place in homes, places where the members lived, who were particularly careful to preserve the customs and traditions of the family.

The family aimed at safeguarding the identity of individuals and the continuity of the group, ensuring life on earth and after death, through the memory of their descendants (Sir 30.4; 44.10 to 11; 46 12). A fundamental point of reference for its members was offering them a particular and differentiated social role, being allowed to remain integrated in society. Promoting and safeguarding the reputation of the family and assuring them of the means of production (material goods, employment), a heritage to live (inheritance, fame) this cohesion and solidarity of the family was not making it easy for the authorities, civil or religious.

The family was defined and dominated by the father figure, whose authority in the home was almost absolute (Sirach 7.18 to 28). The honor of the family, the patrimony of all its members who felt the duty to defend it, and a profound sense of belonging kept it united. The men enjoyed great

that created the NT do not support the position, ambiguous if not contrary, to Jesus about the family institution, and eventually organize themselves according to the familiar pattern.

privileges; They were responsible for maintaining the honor in the family, which mainly consisted in honoring parents, living under their authority (Sir 03:11; cf. Ex 20:12; Dt 05:16; Lv 19.3). The relationship between fathers and sons was close and constant, because in it was based the continuity of the family. Women and children depended on the father, without whose support and without subordination to him, they could not survive. As long as the boys did not yet come to be adults, the relationship with their mother was very strong and influential in the daily events. Widows and orphans were in a very precarious situation, the only chance to get protection and help was in the family - unless through public charity.

The land, rather limited and based on production, was in first century Palestine, the principal economic support. With the preeminence of family heritage, laws demanded that possession of the land be maintained among the closest kinship; but the law on the consolidation of ownership in a few hands was a growing phenomenon in a rigidly structured society, where the separation between the classes made the change of social status and the prosperity of poor families difficult. Among these, we must put the family of Jesus, if Joseph, his father (Lk 4:22), were a craft craftsman (Mt 13,55), as would have been the same with Jesus (Mk 6.3).

In the time of Jesus families were distinguished by the house they dwelt, the number of members living there, the capacity to provide support and protection to the kin, the amount of land they owned and, consequently, the social class to which they belonged. The vast majority, composed of families of peasants and workers, constituted of nuclear families, living in houses of brick, wood and branches for cover; inside, shelter for both persons and animals was found.

Children and adolescents, if they did not belong to wealthy families, were among the most disadvantaged groups of society. Child labor was a fact, socially and economically necessary. Already at six years old children were working in their home or in the field, along with their father and older brothers; for the most part manual labor offered them the unique formation they could receive. The working hours were from sunrise to sunset; when they work outside the home, they are repaid usually, in the beginning with one meal; then, with a small salary. Sometimes, child labor was used to pay off the debts of their father.

Childhood was seen as a transitional phase in which the children had to leave their immaturity and dependence until they get to take on their responsibilities in relation to the divine law; obedience to God, rather than entering into society, was the goal. This path was accompanied by education that, basically oral and through the family (Prov 1,8), did not spurn the severity of treatment nor of punishment (Sirach 30.12; Pr 13,24; 22,15; 23,13 -14) . Taking care of their father brought blessings; despising

him brought about evils (SIR 3.8 to 16); disobeying him, even death (Dt 21.18 to 21; 27,16).

The obligation of parents was to teach (Pr 4.1 to 4) and transmit the faith of the people (Exodus 12.26 to 27; 13,14-15; Dt 6.20 to 24; Jos 4,6-7.21-23). In the family they learned a trade, how to interact with the environment and, in particular, the traditions of the people (Dt 32.46 to 47). Reading, repetition and memorization of the law was the normal means of learning; his goal was the internalization of the history of the people and the covenant. The family was, therefore, the primary place of socialization and identification for a child; in it and through it, the child actively participated in worship and in social life.

For a child, adulthood began at 13 years (Gen. 17:25), the age that marked the end of education and the beginning of social responsibility. While his father lived, the son did not own land while working with and for his father. Honoring their father was the second great commandment (Ex 20:12; Ex 21,15.17; Sir. 3,2.8.16). Marriage was considered an obligation: at eighteen years for men; for girls beginning at thirteen years (m. Ab 5.21), children were made a little independent from their families, enjoying a certain autonomy.

To attempt against the life of the family or just giving it up entailed the most absolute social exclusion. With the family unit being the primary place of identity, not having their own home meant living socially stigmatized. He who lived homeless (Lk 9.57 to 58), for whatever reason, became a person with no status that had adopted a style of life that was dishonorable, wandering (cfr. Mk 1.14 to 39) and without roots (cf. Lk 9.57 to 60)..

3. Jesus and his family

Jesus lived most of his life in the bosom of a family of craftsmen in Nazareth, a village without importance in Galilee (John 1:46). The fact is significant: he was welcomed as a child, he learned to be a man and he prepared for his mission in the bosom of a family with few resources. God chose a mother so he could be born man (Lk 1.31 to 35, 2.7). And Jesus was endowed with a family (Mt 1,18-21.24) to grow and mature as such (Luke 2,39-40.51-52).

The will to become man asked of God to become a child. He did not only want to be a man but he had to learn to be a man, like us, welcomed, educated, and for the most of his life accompanied by a family. It was his free choice, because God did not have to save us, nor even less be like us to accomplish this plan of salvation. If the reason for our salvation was the love God for us, the incarnation was the way he carried it out and entering into a family was the logical consequence.

A family, in Nazareth, was the home and the school of the Son of God growing to be a man. In fact, except for a few years - between one and three - the last years of his life, when he completely devoted himself to preach the kingdom of God, Jesus spent his life in a family, and everyone knew him as the son of Joseph (Lk 4:22; Jn 6,42), the craftsman (Mt 13,55), son of Mary, brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon (Mark 6,3; Mk 3.31 to 35; Mt 13:55; Acts 1:14; Galatians 1:19; 1 Cor 9.5). God was not satisfied, therefore, to be "born of woman" (Gal 4,4), but wanted to have a family in which to grow "in wisdom, stature and in grace before God and man" (Lk 2:52).

We must not forget that for God to become man he had to place his will to the parents that were chosen. He had to announce his birth to his parents and convince them why they had to give their consent. And even before knowing the proposal of God wanting them to become the parents of his Son, Mary and Joseph had already chosen to create a family (Lk 1:27; Mt 1:18). For his parents embracing God meant giving him space in the profoundness of their mutual and intimate relationship and forgo a common life project already begun.

Both Mary and Joseph had to pay a price to become his family, although in different ways, since their personal involvement and roles within the family loved by God was diverse. They did not avail themselves to be a family. Never did they deserve it: one does not aspire to become the family of God who chooses, but one becomes the family whom God offers it to. Yes, the family of Jesus paid a price to be a family, as a consequence of having God as a son.

The Gospel tradition, with much discretion and honesty, did not hide the facts. From his birth but especially during the period of public ministry, Mary's relationship with Jesus became increasingly difficult and distant, a situation, even for us today continues to surprise us, that Mary could have misunderstand: it did not leave her any other possibility but to "keep everything in her heart" (Lk 2,19.51).

To get her consent and transform her into the Virgin Mother of his Son, God sent Gabriel with an irresistible proposal (Lk 1.32 to 33: "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High, the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever"). When Mary gave birth to the Son of God in Bethlehem and "wrapped in swaddling clothes laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk 2,7), she had to be instructed by unfamiliar people, by the shepherds to whom God had sent his angels (Lk 2:17). Forty days later, having completed the time of purification, when his parents presented the child to the Lord in the temple, following the law of Moses, an old man foretold a fearful future to them (Lk 2.35 to 36: "He is here for the

fall and the resurrection of many in Israel, and will be a sign of contradiction and upon you a sword will pierce your soul "). A nice way for God to pay for services rendered!

Still a teenager

Crucial for understanding the ambiguous position of the adult Jesus regarding family life is the story of the loss of Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2.41 to 50), a curious event that Luke, the only evangelist who speaks of it, situates at the end of his adolescence. More than a family incident, which it was, the loss of the adolescent Jesus in Jerusalem represents for the evangelist the ideal presumptions on record that recounts the public mission of Jesus.

By itself the incident could go unnoticed as a normal occurrence. The parents, the narrator considers real parents, they did not see anything special in their son ... until, once lost, they found him again. After having found him they find themselves with their son who knows himself to be Son of God: "Why did you search for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" It is the first utterance that Jesus, as an adolescent, speaks in the Gospel (Lk 2:49).

The anecdote, of biographical character, aims to ensure the identity of Jesus in his filial relationship with God. The narrative structure is clear: the action takes place in the context of the annual festival in Jerusalem (Lk 2.41 to 42), where, inexplicably, Jesus gets lost (Lk 2.43 to 45). The parents' reaction, logical and immediate (Lk 2.46 to 48), shows their response as very surprising (Lk 2:49), as the evangelist accurately records (Luke 2:50).

The story, which opens by identifying the parents of Jesus as a pious family (cfr. Lk 2:27; 1 Samuel 03:21; 02:19), that goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, focuses immediately on the age of Jesus on that occasion: he was turning thirteen and about to enter adulthood. This record is decisive: it was not yet an obligation to go up to Jerusalem; but it was a paternal duty to accustom children to fulfill the law, especially now that soon, becoming an adult, he would have to live subjected to it (cfr. Bill II 144-147). So his family was preparing him to assume, as an adolescent, his responsibility before God and men.

⁴⁶«After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, ⁴⁷and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers.

⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.».

The absence of Jesus in the return party is, in a first moment, unnoticed. And the story remains unexplained. Neither the reason for the stay of Jesus

in the temple is said. After three days of agonizing research, the parents succeed to find him. His parents found him in the temple, and not among relatives and acquaintances, but sitting among the doctors, as one of them: listener and speaker in a meeting of masters (cf. Lk 5,3; Mt 23.2; 26, 55). The astonishment is general (cfr. Lk 4:22), given the capability of the adolescent to understand and interrogate (cfr. Is. 11.2; 1 Chron. 22:12, cf.. Wis. 8.10). The wisdom that filled him is now clear (Lk 2:40). He knows the will of God, without having learned it from the rabbis.

To the surprise of those present the amazement of the parents is joined. And it is the mother who takes the word (Lk 2:48), which is unusual given that the father was present. Instead of sharing in the admiration of those present (Lk 2,47), the mother is saddened by the actions of his son. She does not rejoice in having found him again; the bewilderment is what is being focused on. She does not hide her feelings. Her carefully chosen words look for an explanation. She continues to treat him as a child, addressing him as a favorite son ("Teknon" Lk 15,31; 16,25) and speaks to him about the distress of his father. She does not dwell on her concern, but underlines that of her husband ("your father and I are distressed"). It emphasizes their painful perplexity: "Why have you done this?". It suggests, implicitly, that such behavior. He could understand if it was lost in the big city; not that I would find to talk to writers, amazed at his knowledge.

⁴⁹ «And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them.»

The prophecy of Simeon has come a little late since it has already begun to be fulfilled (Lk 2,35a "and you yourself a sword will pierce your soul"). In fact, it was not she who had lost his son, he had been the son, and consciously, he had left his parents; It was not an occasional loss; He had voluntarily absented himself (cfr. Lk 2,49b). Now he has no other occupation than that of his Father.

For the mother, and for the modern reader, the answer of Jesus is even less comprehensible than his behavior. He speaks for the first time to state, privately, who he is and what he has to devote himself. With emphasis, with the two questions, he answers the questions of the mother. In fact, he responds by asking in turn. He does not criticize the anguish of his parents but the reason: they did not have to look for him; "They should" have known that he is not subject to any human authority, for those things that are sacred; he had to occupy himself about his father. "Taking care of his things" is his priority, his personal mission.

Rather than defend himself, Jesus explains. It was not a whim or a coincidence, but it was his duty that separated him from them. He did not do what he wanted, but what was wanted from him. He does not

understand well, then, why her parents were complaining. He acted, not for simple convenience, but driven by the inner need which dominates him and what it takes from him to live according to the will of the Father.

If the difficult amazement of Mary is based on devotion due to the parents, according to the commandment of God's law, the action of Jesus is born from his filial devotion to God. His life does not predominate his family, but his Father. His parents have a child, who in reality is not theirs, as they know very well themselves (and the reader of the Gospel; cf. Lk 1,31-32.35; Mt 1,20-21). And what is even less excusable, they would not have to forget it. The Son of God must be for the Father, and is not lost when dealing with his concerns.

Jesus the adolescent reveals to his parents his divine filiation and his exclusive mission affirms that as the son he has to take care of that which concerns the Father. It should not go unnoticed that it is "Father", an epithet addressed to God, which is the first and last word of Jesus in the third Gospel (Lk 2:49; 23:46): his whole life is consciously understood as an experience as son. Jesus, as a young boy affirms his need to serve the Father before all things, a need that arises from his conscience as son: divine sonship and evangelizing mission go together. Knowing himself as son, without any other occupation than that of the Father and his concerns is the reason of his wisdom. The reason why he lost, momentarily, his parents was because of his obedience as son to God.

The family drama is in clear opposition between "the parental program and that of the son: the will of the parents has something to do with the law; the will of Jesus, with revelation." There is nothing extraordinary, therefore, that they did not understand of what he says (Lk 2: 49, "not a word!"). In contrast with the intelligence of Jesus (Lk 2: 40.52) is his shortcoming to his parents (Luke 2:49). Only they know the true origin of Jesus (cf. Lk 1: 32,35; Mt 1.18 to 24). However, neither the gift of a virginal motherhood, nor the birth in Bethlehem celebrated by angels and shepherds, nor Simeon's prophecy, nor a daily contact, have made Mary and Joseph understand their son. For Mary there is still a long way to understand his son (cfr. Lk 8,19-21; 11,27-28).

⁵¹ *«He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.»*

Divine sonship, claimed so early by Jesus, does not free him of paternal authority: he goes back with his parents in Nazareth and there, to a life of obedience. It may seem normal, but to the parents of Jesus it means living an unnatural situation. This return, after an expression so compelling about his identity, makes the most ordinary extraordinary: the subjugation of the Son of God to his parents who actually were not. It is not what one might expect after the voluntary loss and his motivation. The fact was that

knowing himself to be the Son of God did not exempt Jesus from living subject to his parents in Nazareth his whole life.

The confusion increases when in Nazareth his parents had to live with him who belongs to another father. All that has happened, and not only the response of Jesus, is what Mary treasures in her heart (Lk 2,51b "all things"). And even if she does not understand, she will not forget: it is in her heart, the center of the person, home of consciousness and the will more than feelings, where the memory of what happened is preserved (cfr. Lk 1,66), and she searches for the hidden meaning between what she saw and the comments of Jesus. Listening to God without understanding is the Marian way of not losing it (cfr. Lk 2,19; 8,19-21; 11,27-28).

A normal event in the life of a mother constrains her to become a better believer: she loses her son in the temple forever, even if he comes back as a son to her home, subject to parental authority. He grows before her as a son and with him she has to grow in her faith. She brought her son in her womb until she gave birth; she will have to bring him in her heart so as not to lose him (Luke 08:21; 11:28). The maturation of the heart must follow the maturation of the flesh, both possible only through faith. The first requires faith to be realized; the second, so that it does not get lost.

⁵² *«And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.»*

Luke adds a brief note with the intention to cover the entire youthful period of Jesus until his appearance, already as an adult, into the wilderness to be baptized by John (cfr. Lk 3:21) "he grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and man" (Lk 2:52). The marginal note, though short, is beautiful: it provides all the information we have about Jesus' childhood until the beginning of his public ministry.

The commentary that begun with an infant in the arms of Mary thus comes to its natural end (Lk 2: 12.16), he becomes a child (Lk 2, 17.27-40) and her son (Lk 2:43) and ends as the son of God (Lk 2:49): on the first twelve years of Jesus, and the remaining twenty, Luke has nothing to say. Loved by all, the Son of God grows, maturing as a man ... for thirty years in the bosom of his family.

Already an adult

With the exception of the stories of the infancy, the evangelical tradition is silent on the figure of Joseph, father of Jesus (Lk 4:22; Jn 6,42). Knowing, therefore, the relationship of Jesus with his family during the years of public ministry rests solely on centering on his mother and his brothers.

It is surprising that the four Gospels devote little attention to the family of Jesus, formed by Mary, who is usually identified, almost always, as "the mother of Jesus" (Mt 13:55; Jn 2,1.3; 19 25 ; Acts 1:14) and by his brothers,

James, Joseph, Judas and Simon (Mark 6,3; Mk 3.31 to 35; Mt 13:55; Galatians 1:19; 1 Corinthians 9.5). It attracts more attention that the mother of Jesus, as the Gospel account goes on, always appears less (Mc 3,31-32; Mt 12.46 to 47; Lk 8.19 to 20; 1 John 2 -11; see. EvTom 79.1-2). And if it does, it has little to say (Lk 11,27-28; Jn 19,26-27; cfr. Acts 1:14).

The picture that emerges from these data is that of a relationship of Jesus with his family which, seen only at the beginning after the birth of Jesus, has become less frequent during the period of public ministry and had just a few contacts in the final moments, during the week of his passion and resurrection. From a strictly historical point of view, it must be presumed that this stage has been the most enduring - and most difficult - of Mary's life: the longer the child lived, the less he belonged to her. On the other hand, it is like any mother.

In fact, the evangelical tradition, frugal as it is in the transmission of news on the family of Jesus, presents us with an episode, just at the start of the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, where Jesus himself publicly opposed his closest relatives to his new followers (Mc 3.31 to 35; Mt 12.46 to 50; cf. Lk 8,19-21. Jn 7: 3-5). Jesus has already decided on an itinerant life and has left Nazareth, his hometown (Mark 6,1; Mt 13,54) and his house (Luke 9:58; cf. Mk 1.14 to 39), making Capernaum his place of residence (Mt 4,13; 9,1), where he had, it seems, his home (Mt 13, 1:36; Mk 2.1; 3.20; 9.33).

The incident, written by the three Synoptics, is narrated in such a way as to show a clean break between Jesus and his family: the family (Mk 3,20-21.31-35) and enemies (Mark 3.22 to 30; cfr. Mt 12, 22-32; Lk 11.14 to 23) are put together in exclusion. The family of Nazareth, with undoubted interest in the person of Jesus; the scribes of Jerusalem, with the coldness of a theological reasoning. To Jesus only his disciples remain with whom to share his teachings, cause and feelings.

The scene takes place in three acts: the first (Mc 3,20-21) serves to place the action in a house and to insinuate that the issue of public rejection of Jesus begins within his family. In the second (Mk 3.22 to 30) Jesus defends himself from the accusation of collusion with Beelzebub (Mark 3: 22.30) with a parable discourse (Mk 3.23 to 27), which closes with a solemn position: he will not pardon those who reject him (Mark 3.28 to 29). The third (Mark 3.31 to 35) focuses in defining what is, for Jesus, his real family. The text is fundamental: it is not only situated some time after Jesus left Nazareth (Mark 1.9), but, above all, implies a serious and public affront that Jesus makes to his family, when it was present.

²⁰“He came home. Again [the] crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat. ²¹When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

Jesus, who had just formed the group of the Twelve on a mountain (Mk 3.13 to 14), returns home in Capernaum (Mk 3,20). The new location, a house frequented by him, served to introduce the subject of the true family of Jesus. It is supposed that his disciples were accompanying him, recently chosen, although to the reporter it only reports the massive presence of the crowd (Mk 3,32): many were those who accompanied him that could not even eat.

Presumably, it was not the number of people, but rather the amount of work that did not allow Jesus to be free (cfr. Mk 6:31).

The trouble to whom it is subjected reaches the ears of his family. They can not understand the reasons what pushes Jesus to lead such a life. The narrator is not interested to note how they knew him. He prepares for the next meeting (Mark 3:31), implying that they left Nazareth to search for him. They reach him after a bitter argument with the scribes of Jerusalem (Mk 3.22 to 30; cfr. Mt 12.22 to 32; Lk 11.14 to 23; 12,10). Their intention was to bring Jesus with them by force, make him return home and distance him, as well, from what he was doing.

In fact, it is a difficult judgment to say that the feverish activity of Jesus is caused by them "He is unstable, "he is beside himself." Such opinion could hide the belief that Jesus was under the dominion of the devil (cfr. Mk 3.24 to 26). If this is not, at least the statement reveals the lack of understanding that Jesus, from the beginning of his mission, has found in his own family (cfr. Jn 7,5).

The news, too painful to have been invented by the Christian community (in fact, both Matthew and Luke omit it) reflects well the pre - Paschal situation: many, including family members, did not believe in the personal mission of Jesus (cfr. Jn 7, 3). The Gospel tradition is unanimous in noting the removal of Jesus from his family during his public ministry. The fact is entirely plausible: fully engaged in the things of the Kingdom, Jesus was able to give the impression to those closest to him of not having a sound mind: full of God, out of himself; committed for the kingdom, he could not find time to take care of himself.

³¹ «His mother and his brothers arrived. Standing outside they sent word to him and called him. ³² A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers [and your sisters] are outside asking for you." ³³ But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and [my] brothers?" ³⁴ And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ³⁵ [For] whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.»

The mother and brothers of Jesus reappear soon after the controversy over the demonic possession of Jesus. As a result, at Mk 6.3, the narrator mentions Mary because of her relationship not for her name. The family

chooses to stay outside the house where Jesus is speaking, and calls him to take him by force (Mk 3:21), presumably in the family home (Mk 6,1-6). Her intention, though understandable, makes her distant: they do not seek Jesus, they request for him; they do not follow, they want to be followed; they do not enter into his home, they want to come back to the family home. They remain outside the house of Jesus ... and from his concerns.

The news of the arrival of his family reaches Jesus while he was in the house (Mk 3,20), surrounded by a crowd of listeners seated around him (Mk 3,32). It alludes to the difference in attitude toward Jesus, the relatives have to search to see him; his listeners live around him. He who goes for him does not have it; he who listens remains in his presence.

The reaction of Jesus prior to the announcement of the presence of his family, involves an affront, severe being public. Asking himself in public "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" (Mk 3,33), he claims to disown those who come and do not accept their claims on him. Given the above thought (cfr. Mk 3,20-21), a reason appears that would explain the behavior of Jesus, and that of his family: they did not succeed to understand what he was doing and were wrong in judging him.

To the public disavowal Jesus adds contempt (Mk 3:34): he recognizes more as family those in that moment stay seated around him to hear him. He observed them, before speaking: he wants that his heart identifies them, before his words in public. He proclaims, as well, in front of his earthly family, who is his new family. The break with his family could not be more obvious, much less reckless: "until that moment Jesus could be considered a good Judeo-Galilean, son of a family and an honorable brother. From this moment begins a 'new adventure' of creating a family. This is the key moment of his decision. "

The new family of Jesus is not born from blood (cfr. Jn 1:13). Not even Jesus can choose it himself. It is not born because he says so, or for those his heart prefers so. Those who do the will of God are his own (Mk 3:35). With such an emphatic assertion Jesus diminishes somehow the family conflict. He does not directly oppose the family to his disciples; The disciples were not even present at the scene. Neither does he attack his earthly family: it can become so really, if it's the will of God. Jesus does not opt for a particular group, but for all those who take it seriously, who undertake to sit and listen to him and do the will of God.

But it is no less obvious that he distances himself from his family and from his adversaries, from the first because they believed they had rights over him, even if it is about the rights of the heart, and from the other because they believed that he was serving Satan, presumably relying on what they knew about God. In both cases, they are his adversaries, because they are opposed to the project of God. There is only one way to get the love of Jesus,

to do the will of his God. Becoming familiar with the will of God gains the 'love of Jesus.

Those who now hear the statement of Jesus should not envy neither the disciples nor the relatives of Jesus: to do the will of God is 'Gospel', good news for those who want to be followers of Jesus, because it makes him one of his disciples, his real family, not the one that was given to him by God, but those who, like him, choose to "engage themselves in the things of the Father" (Lk 2:49; cf. Mk 3:35; Mt 12:50; Lk 8:21).

The new family of Jesus

"Among the difficult and guarded details of the life of Jesus is the fact that he left his place in the family and in the village." Renouncing the family today has difficult imaginable consequences." Family life being decisive in the daily lives of individuals and essential for their survival, "the greatest poverty consists in being without the support of a family, and not the lack of economic resources." He who renounced his family accepted social ostracism and a personal stigma. Even if one was considered a prophet, if he left the house and the family he fell into public disgrace, that caused to seeing himself excluded from family solidarity and social recognition (cfr. Mk 6,4; Mt 13,57; Jn 4, 44; EvTom 31).

So, in the patriarchal world and in the peasant society in which Jesus of Nazareth lived, the attitude he had with his family clashed very much (Marco 3,20-21.31-35; 6,1-6a; Jn 7,3 -5) and, not least, the obligation imposed on its followers to leave their homes and break their family life (Mc 1,19-20, 10.28 to 30; Lk 9.58 to 62, 10,52- 53; 14,52). Because one thing was personally opt for social exclusion, away from their families, measuring itself against unusual and culture, and another, very different, impose on those who shared life and causes, this one's lifestyle, uprooted and marginal, as a result of the break with his family.

It is true that not to all of his supporters did he ask them to leave home and family. Only a few, those he personally chose, he called them so they could lived with him and would be sent by him (Mk 3,14-15; 6,7). To follow was not simply to learn from him while living with him; to follow him did not have a limit, nor time, it was not a temporary employment, neither local, it implied the abandonment of their homes, family and livelihoods.

Jesus did not impose on his closest followers anything he himself was not living. He invited them to share his personal project and wanted that they cooperate with him to achieve it (Mk 1,16-18.19-20). When he spoke of leaving everything (Mt 19,21), he had already left everything (Mt 8:20). He said that being disposed to break with the family was needed (Luke 14:25), when he was no longer living with his family (Lk 8.19 to 20), nor, remaining unmarried, having a wife or children (Mt 19:12). He warned them that they had to be willing to give their life (Mk 8:34), immediately after announcing

that he was going to do it (Mark 8:31). He did not demand to give up what was objectively wrong. What he asked to abandon was really good: material goods (Mk 10:21; Mt 19:21; Lk 18:22), family ties (Mc 10.28 to 30; Lk 12.51 to 53), their lives (Mk 8:35; Mt 10:39; Lk 09:24). But always, and only, if it demanded the Supreme Good, God and his kingdom (Mk 8:35).

To follow him and live with him, and like him, at the service of the kingdom is the absolute priority (Mt 12:30; Lk 11:23). There is no other duty how sacred it may be, that equals it, not even to bury one's father (Mt 8.18 to 22; Lk 9.57 to 62). He and the kingdom of God are to be preferred more than any other good. Jesus could not bear placing oneself at the service of God together with any other enslavement (cfr. Mt 6,33), however noble it may be. Placing oneself at his disposition and of his cause was without reservation nor delay. His cause, the kingdom of God, was always the first place: it was non-negotiable and could not be postponed (cfr. Lk 9.59 to 62). Once discovered, one is obliged to give up any other occupation or project that would interfere (Mt 13.44 to 46).

If the renunciation of one's family took Jesus and his closest disciples to a social situation of material poverty, social dislocation and definitive abandonment, sharing with them the life and the cause was possible because Jesus took them to live in a new family where everyone were brothers, and God the father of all (Mt 13.50; 23.8 to 9). The radical transformation that implied this new form of family life was the result and the proof of the coming of the kingdom of the Father (cf. Lk 11,2), which is realized when children "deal with the things of the Father" (cf. . Lk 2:49). In Nazareth it was the will of the Father who gave to His Son a family (Luke 1,26-27; Mt 1:18); at Capernaum (Mark 3:20) it was listening to the will of God, proclaimed by the Son, and his realization is what founded his new family (Mark 3:35).

4. Conclusion

Wanting to save us, God became incarnate, "born of woman" (Gal 4,4), "made in human likeness" (Philippians 2.7). So it was that he saved us, "Just like that it shows us what saves."⁴ The Incarnation therefore is not only salvation already realized as salvific fact, it is also the method of salvation, the path that God showed to us to give to us.

1. A consequence of the decision of God, who wanted to become like us to save us, was to give himself a family. It was not enough for God

⁴ BENEDETTO XVI, "Discorso nell'udienza alla Curia Romana in occasione della presentazione degli auguri Natalizi" (22.12.2005): *L'Osservatore Romano* (23 dicembre 2005), 6.

becoming one of us, he did not want to be without us. Made man, God wanted to learn to be like us, had to mature as a man within a family, "the cradle of life and love, where in man is "born" and "grows."

For the Christian the family, this "school of humanity that is complete and rich", is not - in the first place - a strategic choice to defend in today's society, as far as this can be urgent. It is 'above all' good news' to live it before announcing it, Gospel witness. And 'the family experience of God man is what converts the family life in the place of learning of the believer where he matures in humanity and wisdom as he grows in the awareness of the son of God (cfr. Lk 2.49 to 52). Consequently, it is not left to the discretion of the Christian to live his fidelity to God in the family; nor is the promotion and the defense of family life in the society in which one lives optative.

2. Having said this, we must add that the believer can not make family life an absolute non-negotiable, this record is due only to God the Father. God has given a family to his son: the gift is never greater or better than the Giver. So Jesus lived as such, and has asked this to those he has called.

Jesus had not yet reached adulthood, when he dared, and publicly, to lose his family being the son of Mary and Joseph, to discover himself again in the Temple of God as His Son, dedicated to the things of his Father. And when already an adult, he devoted himself completely to God's kingdom, not only left his village and family, but he recognized the family in all those who shared his life and because, by knowing and doing the will of his Father.

The family of Nazareth was a priceless gift that God gave to His Son to grow up as a man. Now in its human and filial maturity, Jesus freed himself of the gift to devote himself entirely to the Giver. The family, though it may be Christian, is not master of the children; It was put at the service of their growth "in wisdom, in stature, and in favor before God and man" (Lk 2:52). In this is his glory.

3. The God of Jesus finds his children among those who seek his will. Jesus himself, and in the presence of his natural family, is the one who considered brother, sister and mother the person who has made himself brother to him in an effort to seek the will of God and put it into action. The believer in God incarnate constructs his family, past and present, on the basis of obedience to the Father. Such was the case of Jesus, that "being Son, he learned, suffering, to obey" (Heb 5,8). It is like that of the mother who begun to be the mother of God as soon as she considered herself as servant (Lk 1,38.42).

The decisive factor to become part of the family of God is obedience to God, not from a sacred duty nor from the deepest affections. If a person opts for the kingdom and has thus become an orphan, choosing God has given him back a family. It is about presenting himself, with no other details, to his disciples as the true family. Not even - 'of course! – did he disown his own family because they were not close to him during his evangelizing mission. Jesus declared, before his earthly family, the way to become his family: he who does the will of God is he who conforms himself to His will. The servants of God are his brothers, his sisters and his mother; Jesus maintains with them close and indissoluble relationships, like those that occur among those born from the same womb.

4. It is important to note that that Jesus, who dared to challenge the values of kinship and of family life, imagined his followers as a new community in which persons lived together, without having ties of consanguinity, living together as a family, that is, as inspiration and goal, having relationships of kinship that is within a family, in which there is only one father (Mt 23,9) and where all are brothers (Mark 3.31 to 35, from 10:28 to 30); where the filial relationship with God, confident and consistent, is always inspired (Lk 11.9 to 13); and imitation of the Father, ordered (Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36); where adults must become like children (Mk 9.33 to 36; Mt 18.3 to 4; Lk 9.46 to 48) Mk 10,13-16) and the children be welcomed with preference (Mk 9.36 to 37; 10,13-16; Mt 19.13 to 15; Lk 18.15 to 17); where there is mutual service (Mk 9.34 to 35) and fraternal care (Mt 5.21 to 24; 18,15.21-22) are inculcated and rivalry or the quest for power, absolutely advised against (Mt 20.20 to 28 Mk 10:35 to 45; Luke 22:24 to 27); where there is no concern for clothing or what to eat (Mt 6,25-34; Lk 12.22 to 32) and even less anxiety to accumulate assets for tomorrow (Mt 6.33 to 34; Lk 12: 33-34).

If, in the end, I had to summarize what I have said in one statement, I would say that "the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word in a family reveals to us" not only "that this is a privileged place for the revelation of God to man" but the acceptance of God revealed as Father leads one to take a new way of living in the family, where the children have to deal first with the things of the Father. Everywhere where the Father is present, there his children find their home and their brothers.

*Juan J. Bartolomé, sdb
Tlaquepaque, 24 October 2016*

YOUTH MINISTRY AND FAMILY

Heritage and Guidelines for the Future

FABIO ATTARD, SDB. GENERAL COUNCILLOR FOR YOUTH MINISTRY OF SDB

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1. INTRODUCTION

The theme that was assigned to me - *Youth Ministry and Salesian Family* - is for us members of the Salesian Family a clarion call that in these moments of history appears above all as a great challenge and a great opportunity. It is a theme that requires us to deal with a very specific pastoral attitude, enlivened by the prophetic dimensions founded on faith in Christ, a pastoral attitude full of hope nourished and brought forward by love. We are aware or at least we should be, that we can fall victim to the mentality of the lamentation, which will end in condemning the darkness rather than committing to light a candle. Our times are times of a joyful and a optimistic missionary spirit.

As the Salesian Family, in the experience the Church, we take the Pope's invitation to feel "the need to offer a word of truth and hope. (We believe that) the great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence" (*Amoris Laetitia* n.57). We are convinced that today, more than ever, we as the Salesian Family have a word to share, a plan to propose and a pastoral experience to offer. This perspective explains the second part of the title: *heredity and the guidelines for the future*.

For this, I wish to start from a simple but central question: From where do we start we, members of the Salesian Family? What do we carry in the haversack of our history?

Definitely we are not starting from the scratch. We have a history, therefore we are heirs of a journey: we are involved in a pastoral experience which is now spread all over the world with its various presences, with several proposals serving the young, especially the poorest. Let us also recognize that in recent years we have made a very rich pastoral reflections and we have shared them with the whole Church.

For this reason, we list very briefly **some points that condense the framework of our heritage and of our proposal**, because starting from our past, with its rich dimensions - human, Christian, charismatic - we feel encouraged to continue the journey in this new social and cultural domains, with the young people, with families and with the protagonists of the history.

1.1 Identity

We can say that **the Salesian Family is the custodian of a Call with a precise identity: to evangelize and educate according to a plan of integral**

growth. Since evangelization is a complex and a multifaceted work, we understand it as an animated experience from an integral concern within the educational processes. Through the commitment and attention in these processes we help and accompany the young people towards an integral growth.

For the Salesian Family, education is the human setting where the Gospel is present and where it acquires a typical physiognomy. We have some areas for action that put us in the pleasant situations marked on the one hand by a healthy and integral humanism and on the other by the transcendent dimension.

The Salesian identity has a goal: every young person is accompanied towards the building of their personality, which has Christ as the fundamental reference. Our present is true and beautiful to the extent that our identity - evangelizing by educating, educating by evangelizing - continues to get stronger and nourished on this deep and inseparable relationship of educative actions with the evangelizing actions.⁵

1.2 Charism

Our identity does not articulate itself through the words and phrases of situations. It does not know improvisation suspended in the air. **Our identity is a charismatic identity.** We educate and evangelize through a life inspired by the Preventive System. **Don Bosco has left us a heredity called preventive system.** It is an educational plan for integral growth - reason, religion and loving kindness - that highlights the humanistic wealth together with essential religious soul of the system within an environment that breathes charity - *agape* - *Evangelical*. The Preventive System is for us sons and daughters of Don Bosco a method for action, characterized by the centrality of reason, reasonableness of demands and rules, flexibility and persuasiveness of the proposals; of the centrality of religion understood as developing the sense of God inherent in every person and the power to bring the beauty of the good news; the centrality of loving, educative love that enables growth and brings mutual understanding.

St. John Paul II, in the year 1988, the centenary of the death of our Father and Teacher, in the letter *Iuvenum Patris* captures the essence of the charism reminding us that this is a gift for the whole Church. Ours is not a responsibility

⁵ DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *New Education*, Letter published in AGC n. 337, 1991

for preserving it as a private property, but for the universal Church. So he writes:

For St John Bosco, founder of a great spiritual Family, one may say that the peculiar trait of his brilliance is linked with the educational method which he himself called the "Preventive System". In a certain sense this represents the quintessence of his pedagogical wisdom and constitutes the prophetic message which he has left to his followers and to the Church, and which has received attention and recognition from numerous educators and students of pedagogy,⁶

1.3 Comunity

Another fundamental aspect and I would say also a founding aspect of our educative and pastoral heredity is the **community**. Don Bosco is not a solitary pastoral adventurer. From the beginning he tried and managed to build around him a **community of educators and pastors**. This is a theme that is present in various forms and at various times during this discussion. Don Juan Edmundo Vecchi very clearly summarizes its importance:

When we think of the origin of our Congregation and Family, from which salesian expansion began, we find first of all 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**. Among those making their way there through interest or curiosity were eminent persons of the civic and political world, fervent Christians and ecclesiastics who saw in it a religious revival and bishops from round the world.

Such a community gave rise to a new culture, not in an academic sense but in that of a new style of relationship between youngsters and educators, between laity and priests, between artisans and students, a relationship which had its effect on the area and on the city itself. And if we can believe what was written at the time, it was a culture that caused raised eyebrows which eventually caused doubts to arise about Don Bosco's mental health.⁷

Community, home, culture - are words that constitute even today as a treasure, a heritage and also a challenge particularly for the future guidelines. These words help us to translate our identity and charism in the concrete experiences where the young people we meet on the street, thrown and abandoned, without the present, and consequently without the future, can find acceptance, accompaniment and sense of direction. They are words that we need today to propose spaces and environments for the parents and families who feel lost and

⁶ SAN GIOVANNI PAOLO II, Lettera *Iuvenum Patris*, 31 gennaio 1988, n. 8

⁷ DON JUAN EDMUNDO VECCHI, *Ecco il tempo favorevole*, Lettera pubblicata in ACG 373, 2000

without capacity to communicate with their own children. This is our road to Jericho. And we are not allowed to look the other way, and move on!

1.4 Proposal

The fourth element that completes our heritage is the **proposal**. Where the Lord sends us, wherever we find ourselves with our presences, where we come to the community and create welcoming environments, **we have a word to offer and an experience to propose**. That is our proposal that supposes the previous three elements - identity, charism, community - and translates them into a **journey of integral growth**. We do our best so that young people we meet, personally and as a group, discover the beauty of believing, the joy of looking up with the conviction that life is a gift given, a divine space.

We are called to help young people to grow in their educational potentials, the ability of mind and hands. We offer them and their families a place wherein, apart from someone not feeling lonely, every person, young and adult, discovers to be the protagonist with others in the various experiences of groups and associations. Finally, today we seek to lead every young person to the point of that beautiful but challenging question: what is my life plan? What is my calling in life, my vocation?

Enclosed in these four dimensions - *identity, charism, community, proposal* - we find our heritage in its great lines. We also find the foundation to discover, how in the journey of the Church we have a gift to treasure which is also a gift to deepen in dialogue with the challenges and opportunities that knock on our door. For this reason, the call of the Church on the family for us today is something very serious and profoundly important. This is not to make cosmetic operations, some adjustments to our times, a few conferences to new or old groups. Here we are all called to put all our ability to dream, all our pastoral energies so that our young people and the family together feel welcomed, accompanied and formed protagonists.

2 PASTORAL JOURNEY OF THE CHURCH AND THE FAMILY

Having trekked this concise journey of our treasure with all the perspectives that are presented to us, we come to reflect on the theme of the family starting with the journey of the Church. **It is important to clarify immediately that the theme of the family is neither a commercial advertisement** nor something that has lately become fashionable. For this reason, let me make a short trip on how the Church in the reflection of the Second Vatican Council has taken seriously the theme of the family.

We can not lose the connection with the journey of the Church in order to understand how the history unfolds and where the Lord is calling us. Otherwise we run the risk that, after so many fine words we say and we say about the family, everything will be like the famous Italian proverb, a lot of smoke, but little roast!

2.1. *Gaudium et Spes*

In the framework of the Council's Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) we see how the two parts of the document treat in the first place, *The Church and the vocation of the human person* (Part I), and then *some urgent problems* (Part II). It is significant to note that the first topic dealt within Part II has the following title: **Fostering the Dignity of Marriage and the Family**

Without going into the various points that develop the theme, we highlight the first challenge and the first concern that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have identified, is that of marriage and the family. And here it is important to mention that **in GS the family is an active subject which has a mission to accomplish** and which should be helped by all components of the society. GS does not speak of the family as if it were a problem or a patient who needs care. We must never forget this aspect.

In its dialogue with the world, which is the fulcrum of the GS, marriage and family are the first challenge. Only after this, other topics such as *the promotion of culture, economic and social life, the life of the political community and the promotion of peace and the community of nations* are discussed.

2.2 The Journey of the Synod

If we look at the developments that have occurred in the years that followed the Second Vatican Council, there is a growing attention to the theme of the family given by the Church. Just to note that after the two synods of the 70's, one on evangelization with the apostolic exhortation **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, and the next one on catechesis, from which emerged the apostolic exhortation **Catechesi Tradendae**, we find that immediately followed the synod on the family, which was followed by the publication of the apostolic exhortation **Familiaris Consortio**.

This development of the Church's journey is a witness to the fact that from the time when the Church recognizes itself as the bearer of good news, it immediately looks to marriage and family. Because with it "the well-being of the

individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked" (GS, n. 47). The Church considers the family as the privileged place where "the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, **is the foundation of society**" (GS n. 52).

In recent years, again, we see a similar pastoral journey, within which recurs as a priority attention to the family. Following the Synod of the **New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith**, 2012, we received the Apostolic Exhortation **Evangelii Gaudium**, as a pastoral program for the Church which opens the way to the **two synods on the family**: *The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization* (October 2014), and *the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world* (October 2015). The Apostolic Exhortation **Amoris Laetitia** is the map that helps us to trace the pastoral guidelines in the coming years.

Two short notes on this journey experienced by the Church in the last 50 years: **the first** is that **the family is always presented as the first pastoral challenge of the Church**. This repeated return to the family is a clear indication for us that such a pastoral challenge is not a passing theme. This is not a fad. We are faced with a permanent call that as members of the Salesian Family ask ourselves deeply. **The second** note: **the post-Second Vatican journey is characterized by a gradual pastoral enrichment process**: the family as the protagonist, the family as an accompanying experience. In this unfolding of time and history, the Church becomes ever more present with the humility of pilgrims.

The line of Second Vatican Council and of how this has matured in the journey of the various synods should serve as light and as a paradigm. In fact, Pope Francis asked us to consider the family as "absolute necessity" in his letter to the Rector Major in the bi-centenary of the birth of Don Bosco:

Today more than ever, in the face of what the Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly referred to as "educational emergency" (*cf. Letter to the diocese and the city of Rome on the urgent task, January 21, 2008*), I invite the Salesian Family to facilitate effective educational alliance between different religious and secular agencies to walk with diversity of charisms for youth in the different continents. **Particularly I repeat that it is an absolute necessity to involve the families of young people. There can not be an effective youth ministry without a valid family ministry.**⁸

⁸ PAPA FRANCESCO, *Come Don Bosco, con i giovani e per i giovani*, Lettera del Santo Padre Francesco, al Reverendo Don Angel Fernandez Artime, Rettor Maggiore dei Salesiani nel Bicentenario della

3 VALDOCCO –FAMILY AS THE PASTORAL PARADIGM

Revisiting the early years of pastoral experience of Don Bosco at Valdocco, we notice that the family was not considered as a real pastoral subject as we consider it today. We see, rather in the wider understanding of what we now call "**the collective pastoral ideal.**" And it is this way of understanding the family that serves as the base for the educative pastoral proposal of Don Bosco. **The experience of Valdocco had the family as a pastoral paradigm.**

Commenting on the first choices of Don Bosco about the formation of young people, Peter Braido says that the formative proposal was closely linked to the impact of education that a particular type of environment could offer. The oratory was an environment. The Valdocco oratory triggered the integral education processes that were rooted in the paradigm of the "family" .

In his community inspired by Christianity, those who do not have families found the sweetness of a **home**, the security of **fatherhood** and **brotherhood** in the person of the director and of the educators, the joy of **friendship**, the perspectives of significant integration in the society with a culture and with a **dignified and remunerative work**; together with a general style of cheerfulness guaranteed by infinite expressions that the educative genius knew how to invent: games, theatre, picnics, music, songs. For this Don Bosco spelled out "the plan of life" in cheerfulness, study and piety.⁹

Starting from our origins, it will be more enlightening to do the necessary bond between the **charismatic proposal in their origins and the experience of Don Bosco in his family at Becchi.**¹⁰

Braido insists on revealing how "the family, **«schola gremii materni»** (school of the maternal bosom), **is the primary matrix of the personality of Don Bosco.** His life in the family was conditioned by premature absence of his father, died when he was not even two years old, by the presence of a step elder brother by seven years and paternal grand mother. In the midst of all this, he finds the presence of a determinant mother of enormous human and spiritual firmness, a true 'fatherly mother'.¹¹

Nascita di San Giovanni Bosco, 24 giugno 2015.

⁹ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, vol. I, Roma, LAS 2003, p. 233. (D'ora in poi *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*)

¹⁰ P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, Roma, LAS 1999, pp. 138-139. (D'ora in poi *Prevenire non reprimere*).

¹¹ *Id.*, p. 138.

If we speak about the pedagogical elements, the person of Mamma Margaret remains as fundamental in the growth of her son.

Margaret Occhiena is the first educator and teacher of 'pedagogy'. After almost 60 years he wrote about her, that "her greatest care was in instructing religion to her sons, making them busy with obedience and things befitting to their age." In the family, he learned first of all, the habit of prayer, duties, sacrifice; at the same time, led by the mother, the practice of the sacrament of confession at the age of reason. Side by side he also started to read and write.¹²

In a similar way, Don Egidio Viganò, in one of his letter expresses the theme of family when he delves on the relationship between the growth of the charism of Don Bosco in Valdocco and the experience of family.

This genial 'family' style has its origins in the life of the Founder himself, in his experience in his own family under the guidance of Mamma Margaret. Her heroic move to Valdocco served to permeate the environment of those poor boys with the same family style, from which has sprung the substance of the preventive system and so many of our traditions that go with it. Don Bosco knew by personal experience that the formation of his own personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and kindness ("self-giving") of his family at the Becchi, and he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities at the Valdocco Oratory among those poor and abandoned youngsters.¹³

It is helpful to recall a reflection of Aldo Giraudò in his article "The model of family in the vision and experience of Don Bosco"¹⁴, because, he brings out more the relationship between the experience of Valdocco and his original family. He writes:

It emerges clearly the bond between the work of Don Bosco and the family, including the specific mission and the Salesians on two levels. First of all the *Memoirs of the Oratory* makes us realize that the educational experience and relationships experienced by John Bosco became a resource and inspiration for the work of the Oratory, for its method and its relationship style: positive mother image, but also the traumatic loss of his father, which engraved in Don Bosco a more acute awareness of

¹² P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere*, p. 139. Vedi anche P. Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*, vol. I, p. 321, specialmente nota 75: P. Cavaglià – M. Borsi, *Solidale nell'educazione. La presenza e l'immagine della donna in don Bosco*. Roma, LAS 1992, pp. 91-103, *Realtà e simbolo di una madre. Margherita Occhiena nelle Memorie dell'Oratorio*.

¹³ DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *Nell'Anno della Famiglia*, Lettera pubblicata in ACG n. 349, 1994; c'è anche da ricordare la riflessione offerta da DON PASCUAL CHÁVEZ nella Lettera pubblicata in ACG 394, 2006, che porta il commento della STRENNA del 2006: *Assicurare una speciale attenzione alla famiglia, che è culla della vita e dell'amore e luogo primario di umanizzazione*

¹⁴ A. GIRAUDO, *Il modello familiare nella visione e nell'esperienza di don Bosco*, in <http://www.donboscoland.it/articoli/articolo.php?id=2140>

the importance and the role of the father figure; and uniqueness of family relationships, the atmosphere of welcoming and intimate trust, the spirit of adjustments and belonging that characterize a human family became a resource and inspiration for the educative family of the Oratory (inspiring model of every other Salesian).

Secondly, the work of Don Bosco was born in a specific historical context and in relation to a historically connoted family type to compensate the absence of a family or to support and complement the role of the family in the care of the basic needs of young people, in their need for affection, human and cultural education, religious education and moral and spiritual development in order to help them achieve their personal vocation and prepare them for life and to participate in society and in the church as active and useful members. This bond is not only a fact of life, but it is a constitutive and important for the identity, the fruitfulness of the Salesian presence and its mission in history.

This reference to the understanding of the family in life, in the mind and heart of Don Bosco gives us a starting point to discover the inspirations that enlighten us today as we live the new challenges in these new pastoral areas.

4 STARTING FROM 'EVANGELII GAUDIUM'

We can not let ourselves be led by Amoris Laetitia if we do not start from Evangelii Gaudium. Offering us the *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis Pope has called us for a clear effort, although challenging, towards that goal which he calls the "pastoral conversion":

I am aware that nowadays documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and that they are quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences. I hope that all communities will **devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are.** "Mere administration" can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be "permanently in a state of mission". (EG n. 25)

Starting with this invitation, we ask ourselves: what are the choices that we have to consider that support us in our pastoral journey? Where do we start that our response is not a poor and weak photocopy of action that does not say anything new in our day? Briefly we point out two aspects that accompany this journey: the history as a challenge, and the model of our pastoral response.

4.1 The History as a Challenge

The Lord sends us to live his love and to witness to the good news of the gospel "today", "here" and "now." The history that we are called to encounter and embrace is this and not another. Ours is an epoch where everything is an institution or institutional and is going through **major and rapid changes** never seen before; "the family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds" (EG n. 66). At this juncture living the **pastoral conversion** means acting in order to make it possible for so many people we meet to taste "a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds... we Christians remain steadfast in our intention to respect others, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6,2) (EG n. 67).

In these two points, the epoch-making change and the invitation to convert oneself pastorally, we have a synthesis of the challenge that we accept with realism but also with determination and intelligence.

It is not the time of lamentation but of pastoral courage. The trap of 'doleful laments', being always there, but we must avoid it with dignity and nobility that characterize of those who believe that this present time is the time of God, of which we are bearers of a proposal which is the fruit of a missionary creativity and the response to the call of God (cfr. AL 57)

4.2 A pastoral response

Here arises a question in our hearts: how to face this challenge? How to live this vocation in a changing and liquid society?

In the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis offers an extensive reflection on the **social dimension of evangelization**. The chapter is very interesting not so much for not ignoring the historical events that the time and history contain but on the contrary, it is precisely in the human experiences where one can find the division between the past and the future, the old and the new, known and unknown, where we are called to be present with the Gospel that is liberative. We the members of the Salesian Family in this historical phase are present with the proposal of integral education.

***Evangelii Gaudium* in number 236** offers us the model of polyhedron through which we look and interpret the historical events and offer the valid proposals that shed light and offer future:

The polyhedron (prism) is the model:

- Which reflects **the convergence of all its parts**, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.
- Pastoral and political activities seek to gather in this polyhedron **the best of each**.
- There is a place for **the poor** and their **culture**, their **aspirations** and their **potential**.
- Even **people** who can be **considered dubious on account of their errors** have something to offer which must not be over-looked. (EG n.236)

In the above points, we have the vocabulary that helps us and accompanies us for the reading of *Amoris Laetitia*: **convergence, synergy, poor, excluded**. These words compel us to come out of our *comfort zones* where “we are made always like this”.

- i. The persons we meet in search of convergence with all their history and wounds, but also their small or large riches
- ii. The synergy that we can favour between individuals who are involved in the place for the good of the young and family, where everyone carries the best of himself or herself.
- iii. The welcoming door for those who are poor, for those who feel alone and abandoned, but it does not mean that they have no dreams and plans;
- iv. The capacity to see the good hidden in the heart of every man and woman, boy and girl, also people who are hard, people who seem to be outside the social, cultural and religious frame work.

Though they are not uniform, precise and well formulated, yet these lines build together the pastoral polyhedron.

If we look carefully at the proposal of Don Bosco at Valdocco, we notice a similar pastoral preparation. Towards 1862, writing of the oratory youth, he sees as he himself says, “in three classes: unruly, dissipated and good. What appeals to us is to see how in front of difficult cases, towards the unruly, today we call them ‘discarded’ of the society, Don Bosco succeed in giving a compassionate look, offering an inclusive space and assuring a possibility of future. In everything he facilitates an environment where the heart of a good shepherd, a heart without

prejudices and without exclusions, can blossom the good hidden in the heart of every human being.¹⁵

5 AMORIS LAETITIA

With interpretations of *Evangelii Gaudium*, let us try to read the *Amoris Laetitia* through the filter of the Salesian charism. Here there are three features that can help our pastoral journeys, considering fully the presence of various groups of the Salesian Family in different social and cultural situations, with typical pastoral approaches and methods of each group.

The three features are like three directions that aim: first, to examine the **points of departure**, that is our pastoral attitudes; second, asking us to examine what are the **criteria and objectives that support our pastoral vision**; Third, to study well what are **the choices we make in our actions** because our right pastoral attitudes along with the criteria and objectives we have set, obtain the desired goal: the good of the young and the family.

5.1 Pastoral Attitudes

In front of the pastoral challenges that all of us are likely to encounter, it is essential to start with the question: How are we interpreting the challenges? What is our basic attitude in this scenario: closeness or distance? Listening or judgment? Empathy or rejection? Compassion or sense of superiority? Readiness to serve or readiness to be served?

In the second Chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis indicates **few challenges of our journey**. But what impresses more is 'how' he offers these challenges. His intention is to help us to see the challenges as windows towards opportunities that await us.

¹⁵ The good ones stay that way and make marvellous progress in goodness. The restless type, those already accustomed to wandering around not doing much work achieve some success through a trade, with assistance, instruction and by being kept busy. The undisciplined ones mean we have a lot to do. If we can get them to gain some taste for work we can mostly win them over. By the means already indicated we can obtain some results which could be explained thus: 1. That they do not get worse. 2. Many improve in common sense, so can earn their bread in an upright manner. 3. Those who seemed to be insensitive under vigilance over time become more pliant if not completely, at least to some extent. We leave it to time to profit from the good principles and know how to put them into practice.," in "Cenni storici intorno all'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales", in *Fonti Salesiane*, Roma, LAS 2014, p. 40.

a. First of all, we must be ready to **read the panorama** that it presents us “the principal tendencies in anthropological-cultural changes” are leading “individuals, in personal and family life, to receive less and less support from social structures than in the past”.(n 32), together with the “growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds” (n.33). Here lies an inevitable task of every one called to assume pastoral commitment. We need to read the history of places where we are sent. Listening to the pulses of the place is a sign of affinity and interest that we would like to be pilgrims with the young and the family. The absence of this reading where God sends us, is already a primary sign of anxiety. Instead, through our attitudes of listening, openness and availability, we manifest a strong sign.

b. As pastors and educators of young people, we must avoid a **superficial pastoral reading** which is likely to lead us into a blind dead-end of pessimism. An important element of our Salesian education is the ability to facilitate "a personalization that points out authenticity rather than reproducing already set behaviors." We bear and live the great proposal that brings young people to noble goals, a personal discipline that allows them to mature the best in themselves: “the freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others” (n. 33). A superficial pastoral reading makes us to lose the whole perspective of human fullness.

c. Beside this pastoral attitude that favours a healthy reading of the situation, the Pope suggests **the courage of witness and words**. It exhorts us to not be disclaimers. As people who are called, the challenges are to be taken with intelligence and management with pastoral creativity: “as Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer”(n.35). **Finding the balance does not mean making compromises**, but paving the way in people's hearts, a heart that is in search of authentic witnesses of who live what they believe.

d. In relation to the courage of witness and words, the Pope does not speak of a militant attitude, least of crusades. While it is right to condemn on one side, on the other the journey before us does not follow the logic of "imposing rules with the power of authority" (35). In this historical moment "we are asked

for a more responsible and generous effort that consist in **presenting the reasons and motivations for opting in favor of marriage and the family**, so that people are more willing to respond to the grace that God offers them" (n. 35). And this is a demanding task that requires a lot of reflection.

e. The paragraph 40, asks us to increase our capacity to find the **right language for the young**. We can boldly call this paragraph as **the 'salesian paragraph'**, because it pushes us to recognize the need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage (n 40).

Apart from the words said in the paragraph, it is making a pastoral vision mature with the process that "**speaks of the young and speaks to the young**". Here, we do not go to search for the vocabulary for them. Here the vocabulary is already found in the way we meet the challenges, the way we read and the way we respond. Here the vocabulary we must learn within our authenticity and also from our humility to put ourselves on their wavelength. If we are physically far from the young, we are not only "effectively" far, but probably also "affectively" far. Here the discussion on the vocabulary of the young touches the realm of salesian assistance that continues to be a genial secret and much more a concrete secret of Don Bosco.

f. Here then is the final challenge that Pope Francis comments several times in various parts of the exhortation: the challenge for a **missionary creativity, with no laments, but hope and prophecy**:

The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in self-defensive lamentations, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, "the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope... The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence".

With this healthy optimism rooted in the call, the difficulties that we find are "invitation to revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions and creative forms of charity" (n 57)

For all of us as groups of the Salesian Family, before taking any step to formulate a proposal, it is an urgent and indispensable to find a space of **reflection** and of **prayers** in order to **purify, verify and strengthen our pastoral attitudes**. with these deep rooted choices, these pastoral attitudes, we live and address our

vocation in the light of the parable of sower (Mt 13,3-9), (being) our task of cooperating in sowing: the rest is the work of God (n 200)

Only with this logic, as Church we shall reach “the families with humily and compassion, with the desire to help each family to discove the best way to overcome any obstacle it encounters” (n 200). Prayer and reflections are for knowing how to embed the logic of God but also in the history of the people. Reflecting to respond in a way that overcomes a certain common and dangerous pastoral superficiality, because " It is not enough to show generic concern for the family in pastoral planning (n. 200). On this, however, we'll be back later.

5.2 Pastoral Criteria

Such attitudes lead to a series of criteria which in turn give rise to pastoral proposals. In this part we offer some pastoral criteria dealt **in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 of *Amoris Laetitia***. As the Pope suggests at the beginning of the Apostolic Exhortation, it is desirable that this document will be considered as a **tool for study and reflection as it is not a manual of answers, but rather an invitation to dedicate ourselves to listening and service**.

a. The fruitfulness of love that generates

The first pastoral criterion is to start from the understanding of love in the **logic of fruitfulness in the broadest possible sense**. Love creates, love makes fruitful wherever one accepts to live it. Let us ask ourselves: In our educational and pastoral processes what it means for us to interpret our action and witnessing in the logic of love that generates life? What does it mean for us, pastoral workers, make our own challenge to " to appreciate the purely gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us" (n. 166)? How do we reflect in our pastoral plans " the primacy of the love of God, who always takes the initiative, for children “are loved before having done anything to deserve it? (N. 166) What kind of pastoral imagination needs to mature to meet " many children who are rejected, abandoned, and robbed of their childhood and future from the first moments of their lives. There are those who dare to say, as if to justify themselves, that it was a mistake to bring these children into the world.(n.166).

These are questions that should be heeded within the various educational and pastoral processes and towards which we must at least respond. Our pastoral

criteria need to be nurtured with ideas and strong convictions and allow themselves to be challenged by questions that may seem uncomfortable. Otherwise we run the risk of doing many things, without knowing neither "why" nor "where". The logic of fruitfulness and the understanding of love that is generative give meaning and direction to our pastoral choices of both short and long terms.

b. Responding to the absence of fatherhood and motherhood

A second criterion that must enlighten our pastoral reflection is the following: **to understand and respond to the "absence of fatherhood and motherhood."** And here we let ourselves be questioned by the challenge of the lack of models for which, on the one hand, our young people and children are seeking to overcome their being orphans, while on the other, we find the disorientation of many parents who find themselves without a vocabulary with which to connect with the world of their children.

What does it mean for us today to find ourselves in these defective directions, in this land of convulsion and disintegration? What are the answers that we can offer through processes and educative pastoral proposals? Here comes the need of a profound reflection that while encountering and interpreting this sense of emptiness and research, will also be a reflection that offers paths and pastoral decisions.

c. The family is the pastoral subject

Getting to the crux of our pastoral experience, in light of what is shared so far, in-depth study of **Chapter 6 of the Amoris Laetitia**, will help us more to start from the third criterion of paramount importance: **the families are the main subjects of the family ministry:**

The Synod Fathers emphasized that Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate, above all through "their joy-filled witness as domestic churches". Consequently, it is important that people experience the Gospel of the family as a joy that 'fills hearts and lives', because in Christ we have been 'set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness' (n. 200).

This call is a pastoral criterion of importance, if we really want that our consistent pastoral proposal is **true, certain and meaningful**. To the extent that we imagine the family as the protagonist, then we overcome the already mentioned pastoral superficiality, in order to go further, in building and witnessing of pastoral processes.

Rightly, then, Pope Francis warns us that "it is not enough to insert a general concern for the family in the big pastoral projects. **Enabling families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for "an effort at evangelization and catechesis inside the family"**(n. 200).

And here the Apostolic Exhortation, no. **201**, calls us to the "missionary conversion" in which we understand that "one is not content to proclaim a merely theoretical message without connection to people's real problems". Here **three orientations** are very clear that can serve both as personal and community examination of conscience and as serene and sincere evaluation of our pastoral proposals:

- i. **Pastoral care for families "needs to make it clear that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person:** a response to each one's dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness
- ii. It is also "highlighted the fact **that evangelization needs unambiguously to denounce** cultural, social, political and economic factors
- iii. **Dialogue and cooperation need to be fostered** with societal structures and encouragement given to lay people who are involved, as Christians, in the cultural and socio-political fields (n. 201).

These three orientations - **Gospel, denunciation and synergy** - in a clear pastoral criterion see the family as the protagonist and are not drained in pious exhortations, even less in the specific events. Here it is a process that should be thought about, reflected and shared among all those who are part of the presence or pastoral experience: young people, animators, teachers, catechists, parents and all those who are involved in the educative pastoral plan. We will comment further on the implications that this entails with it.

d. The gradualness in pastoral care

Finally, the fourth criterion, **the gradualness in pastoral care** (n. 293), we find it analyzed in **Chapter 8** through the trinomial "accompanying", "discerning" and "integrating." The chapter begins by presenting this pastoral criterion with the following words: "as members of the Church, they too need pastoral care that is merciful and helpful"(n. 293). The question we ask ourselves is the following: within our pastoral proposals how does this criterion enlighten us? What is the meaning and how is the trinomial "accompanying", "discerning" and "integrating" is translated?

And here we are called to reflect carefully on how our proposals and our structures really give signs of closeness especially to those families who are in the periphery not only in religious and ecclesial dimension but also social, cultural and economic dimensions. The challenge for us is to translate the trinomial "accompanying", "discerning" and "integrating" into an educative and pastoral vocabulary which can take the following forms: "welcoming", "involving" and "forming."

- i. **welcoming (accompanying):** to provide a listening space where people, young and adults realize that the work and the presence is a "home" where all the pastoral agents are sisters and brothers ready to share the journey, without prejudices and without exclusions;
- ii. **involving (discerning):** proposing opportunities and processes where young people and parents are encouraged to be active members, protagonists, everyone according to his or her abilities and possibilities. In other words, that the presence with the educative and pastoral proposal is an experience where the frontiers of participation are widened according to the aptitudes of people. In the logic of concentric circles, there are no restrictions placed by pleasure, by prejudice or arbitrary self-referential to those who are called to be servants.
- iii. **forming (integrating):** communicating a pastoral vision that does not limit in offering a product to our young people and our families, but it goes beyond. A vision that enables, forms, make witnesses and multipliers of very people who are welcomed and involved, and when due time comes they become not only disciples, but also apostles.

5.3 Practical Choices

We come to the last part of this reflection: the practical choices. And here we get back to the first part - *identity, charism, community* -, that is we start from our roots to look at the future with hope, joy and optimism.

a. Community

The Salesian Family finds the pastoral heart of Don Bosco in the memory of the beginning of Valdocco. The sign of a participative pastoral proposal, especially in relation to the great potentials that the family now gives us, we are called to reflect on how the style and the paradigm of the Community of living the Salesian charism is the Salesian form of animation in each educational reality.

As we have already commented before, contemplating the origin of the Salesian charism, **we meet Don Bosco as one who builds around him a community-family**, where a experience of healthy and valid protagonism was communicated to the young and was announced for a healthy experience and valuable leadership. The Oratory continues to be for us today a reference point for a proposal with clear objectives, lived in the convergence of roles well defined for the young. The charism of Don Bosco finds its *humus* in this educative pastoral experience. The Congregation and the Salesian Family were born from this community-family. From this same source we continue to nourish ourselves.

In light of the pastoral opportunities that emerge, living and fulfilling the mission of Don Bosco today do not ask us to create new structures in addition to other existing bodies and participation in the different works or pastoral environments, but rather a **renewed thinking towards a greater communion that keeps alive the different gifts and charisms** as complementary realities, in mutual reciprocity, at the service of the same mission.

If evangelization is the fruit of a collective journey, a mission of the consecrated and the lay, who unite their strength in collaboration by the exchange of gifts, despite the differences in the formation, tasks, charisms and degrees of participation in this mission, then the Salesian Family today must work to ensure that our pastoral actions move from actions of individuals towards greater coordination of the various interventions, a search of understanding and complementarity between all, a search for collaboration, an effort of organic planning.

Our presences and our proposals are to be a continuation of what our Father and Teacher lived in the beginning: **a community of people, oriented to the education of young people**, who can become for them an experience of Church and open them to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

b. Plan

A community of educators oriented to the education of young people propose an educative pastoral plan. Improvisation is only to bring confusions. A first challenge that we have already learned and that Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*, as well as in *Amoris Laetitia*, invites us to take seriously, is that of a pastoral conversion: **a reconstruction of a mature sense of belonging and also**

a renewal of attitudes in our way of thinking, to evaluate and to act, to face the problems and the style of relationships: with young people, among educators, the pastoral ministers and families.

We must make our own a profound conviction that the **initiatives and the most significant pastoral proposals are organized as a network**. All the protagonists, educators, youth, families collaborate at different levels in the development of the proposals and pastoral journeys. The experience of a community or group that proposes is the center of convergence where they concretize: a) **the communion of criteria** (attitudes); b) **the convergence of intentions** (goals) and, c) **the organic unity of interventions** (shared responsibility, discussion, research, evaluation).

This **planning attitude** is and will be a great challenge as well as a gift for the whole Salesian Family. Because within this planning attitude two sides of the heart of Don Bosco will grow: the "**pastoral charity**" and "**pedagogical intelligence**". The world of youth asks us for a renewed commitment lived in constancy with continuity and concerted nature of the different educational agents and to each other. It is a requirement that all recognize each other and committ ourselves around the unified proposal. The pastoral individualism and fragmented pastoral proposal have no future because they are a counter-witness for today.

Therefore we need a plan that is capable of continuing the "tradition" and at the same time to incorporate the "new". It is no longer acceptable to start over continuously from the scratch with every change of the responsible persons and of the team.

Planning is an attitude of mind and heart, which becomes a concrete action. Planning is a process rather than a result. Planning is of a pastoral aspect than one of passenger's act. Planning is a path of involvement and unification of forces.

And this is where lies the heart and at the same time proof of the response that we as the Salesian Family will give to the Church and to the world in relation to the family. If we engage around the **creation of a community that is present with young people and for young people with the heart of the Good Shepherd**, if we as a community, together, carry out an educative pastoral project that is credible for and with the family

Within the Plan we recognize the family as the first and essential educative

community, we recognize it in its truth, in its potentials: the cell of a society and of the Church, the first person, not only in the transmission of life, but even more in the educative mission, an irreplaceable and inalienable subject.

c. Accompaniment

A community that lives and proposes a plan feels the need not only to accompany, but also to be accompanied. **The community that lives a plan is a living organism which exists to the extent that it grows and develops.** For this, it should not only take care of its organization but also to develop his life. We can identify three levels in relation to which we have to take care of this accompaniment:

i. Accompaniment of Environment

The environment is where the Salesian educative pastoral experience is accompanied. As it is a living reality, **every environment is built.** It is in it where young people feel at home in an atmosphere of support, flow of ideas and affections. And if we speak of young people, the same must be said for all those who take the education of children, primarily the parents

The environment must be understood and perceived in its potential where young people and adults feel welcomed and involved. In this perspective, the environment offers young people and families, spaces and processes with which they can identify themselves. An environment that is taken care and accompanied certainly **engender the process of permanent formation of quality** and at different levels: human, spiritual, Christian and Salesian.

ii. Accompaniment of a group

To all those who come into contact with a proposal of life and of Salesian spirituality we must think of offering the **experience of a journey.** Marked by respect, of gradualness and contrast, these itineraries recognize and respond to two major dimensions: the dimension of **belonging** and that of **identity.** The experience of the group has to meet the desire of research, being protagonists, to feel oneself in the journey with others. In connection with this dimension, the group gives identity, trigger initiatives and processes, gives rise to signs of vitality that enable young people and families to get in touch with proposals of human values and of faith that in the end are vitally assimilated.

How many of young people and families we met have rediscovered their faith or even have discovered, by having an experience in one of our presences,

participating in some group or experience carried out in our presences! The groups in these environments, each with its own particular experience and all the groups connected, must let themselves be attracted by this climate of shared belonging and of mutual support. In this way the Salesian family can be a promoter of a real experience of community, namely the Church.

iii. Personal accompaniment

A third task that is present before us: personal accompaniment. It is the most challenging, and consequently, has a crucial importance.

Those who have a pastoral responsibility within the Salesian Family groups, can never forget that " if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14). **Growing in human and Christian maturity and then knowing to enlighten and to guide others, is not a luxury, rather it's an emergency!** An atmosphere that is authentically Salesian comes to propose to walk where the person is given the opportunity to be reached in his individuality, "face to face."

Salesian activities want to wake up in the young, but also in families, an active and critical collaboration, measured on their abilities. The time needed for these experiences of personal growth are not the same in all and the situations and decisions before which the young people and families find themselves are not the same. Here the pastoral creativity together with prudence and respect for persons have a decisive character.

Among these, there is **the spiritual direction**, during which one consolidates the faith as life in Christ and as a radical meaning of existence. It helps to discern the personal vocation of each one in the Church and in the world, and to grow steadily in the spiritual life till holiness

Here we enter a sphere clearly that is well thought out, reflected and programmed. If, on the one hand, we are all convinced of the urgent need of people ready to listen and to accept in confidence with respect, on the other hand, we are also aware that we need people who have the gift of listening and accept the educational responsibility to assist the youth and families in their efforts to grow.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with a quote written twenty-two years ago in 1994. In that year, dedicated to the family, Fr Egidio Viganò wrote a letter¹⁶ that in light of what we are experiencing today has a very strong prophetic character:

The matter of the family is too important for us to allow it to finish with the ending of this particular Year. We must rather consider 1994 as a window opening onto vast horizons which touch on the relevance of our charism and suggest many new and urgent aspects of our mission of New Evangelization.

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 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**.

We have to ask ourselves: can an educator at the present day form the person of his youngsters without deepening, clarifying and reliving family values? Is a new evangelization possible in the Church without taking up in depth 'and in new ways the themes of sexuality, marriage and conjugal life?

To this question that wakes us up to a living pastoral vision, Fr Viganò pushes the discourse on the side of pertaining pastoral proposals:

It is my sincere impression that we are all convinced of this evangelical relationship with the families. The problem lies at the present day in the demands of the New Evangelization which gives the family pride of place among the objectives of our pastoral care. We need to give special attention to a revision of this sector of our commitment which touches vitally on our educative activities, the care of lay people in our associations and our collaboration in the pastoral priorities of the local Church.

Arriving at the end of this reflection, I wish and pray that if, in 22 years, it might bring back the theme of the family to the Day of Salesian Spirituality, one can say that we have walked a long way.

Thank you!

¹⁶ DON EGIDIO VIGANÒ, *In the Year of the Family*, Letter Published in AGC n. 349, 1994

Church, family, education: A Salesian reading of *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love)

Andrea Bozzolo, Doctor in Theology

INTRODUCTION

The changes that the family is going through in the current cultural situation press for the attention of the Church in different ways, proposing very complex pastoral and educational and sometimes unprecedented challenges. For this reason, since the second Vatican Council, the ecclesial community has developed a very broad reflection on marriage and the family, recognizing in this matter one of the key hubs for its life and for its mission. The celebration of three Synods dedicated to this theme is an evident sign of the attention given to it: that of 1980, resumed in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), and the two recent Synods, the extraordinary of 2014 and the ordinary one of 2015, the results of which were included in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016).

The particular concern of the Church towards the family comes, on the one hand, from the perception of the crisis that this institution is going through in our society, especially in the Western world. As is known, this crisis is manifested in the growing number of separations and divorces, in the popularization of cohabitation outside marriage, in the practice of moot affective customs, in different forms of closure towards life, in the marginalization of the elderly, and more recently also in the establishment of actual anti-family ideologies. This state of affairs gives the impression that, in many cases, there has been raised a wall of non-communication between the emotional culture of today and the Christian message. By reflecting on the family over and over again, the Church shows that it does not wish to resign and that it does not fear the changes of history, but rather that it wants to understand and live them, to make the word of the gospel resonate within the emotional culture of today in a fresh and compelling way.

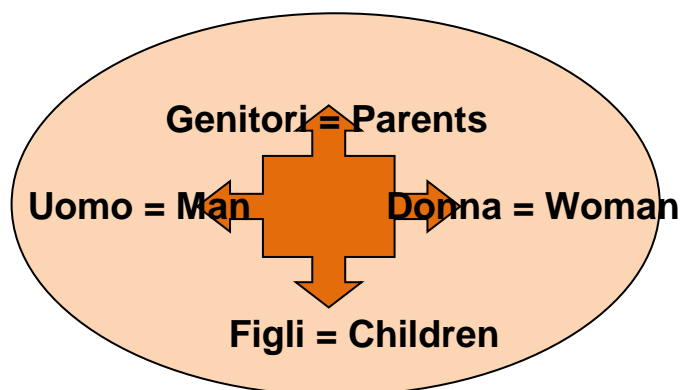
The second reason why the Church dedicates so much attention to family ministry is the renewed awareness that it has about the leading role that the family can and should have in the transmission of the faith. Electing to give the post-synodal document a positive and joyful title as "Amoris Laetitia" (AL) indicates a willingness to deal with the subject of the family mainly from the constructive side. This perspective helps us understand that despite the difficulties of the present, the family is not primarily a problem to solve, but an energy to be activated, a source of Christian life which can and should best express all its potential. Looking positively to the family, therefore, the Church invites us to free ourselves from the clericalism that can sometimes affect our pastoral reasoning. Reflecting on the pastoral care of families does not mean that priests and pastoral workers have to "solve" the crisis of the family, but that God's people, interwoven via families, are called to rediscover together the freshness and the beauty of living the conjugal covenant in the light of the presence of the Risen Christ. The joy of love is a gift of the Risen Lord to his Church, a fruit of the Holy Spirit to be welcomed with joy and to witness with strength and energy. This joy is also, as we know, one of the key resources to achieve the educational action.

With this year's Strenna, the Rector Major has invited the whole Salesian Family to be in tune with the rest of the ecclesial community in seeking the best ways of offering guidance to families and to contribute specific resources resulting from our educational charism. The reflection that I propose attempts to accomplish, as I was asked to do, a Salesian reading of Amoris Laetitia. I will not do, of course, a concrete presentation of the document, which by now, a year after its publication, we all know, but I will try to highlight some aspects that, I think, are most relevant to our charism. I shall present my reflection in four events dedicated respectively to: (1) define the elements of the family, (2) propose some interpretations of AL, (3) bring out the underlying intention of the document, (4) suggest some possible areas of "Salesian" welcome from the Pope's indications.

1. THE FAMILY BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents the family in these terms: "A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children form a family. This institution precedes any recognition on the part of public authority; It is considered the normal reference point, in function of which the different forms of relationship should be evaluated" (CCC 2202). From the text of the Catechism there clearly emerge the constitutive elements of the family experience: conjugality and procreation. The first element implies sexual difference and the personal alliance. The second is the generativity and social integration. Divided according to the two axes of gender and generation, the

family has no doubt an architectural role in the human world. In the intersection of these two axes, in fact, there lies the core of all anthropology.



This is because conjugality and parenting are rooted in that which in humankind is more "natural", that is, the conjunction of sexuality and fertility. But it occurs in forms that are always entrusted to the freedom of individuals and the mediations of "culture". Thus it takes place in more plastic and changing forms, which vary according to the times and places, and never attains a gain which can be considered automatic and permanent. This should be taken into serious consideration to not give a generic and abstract speech about the family, but to try to find the most appropriate interpretations for different cultural situations.

In some eras and cultures, the vertical axis of parenthood prevails over that of conjugality: the family then is primarily intended as a place of generation of children, until it becomes "functionalised" into this. This may occur in moderate forms, but also in more pronounced forms, which can have serious consequences on the way of understanding; for example, the role of the woman and her call to motherhood. In these cases the Community dimension (the tribe, the clan, parents, sometimes even the state) may prevail over the personal one; overly seeking fecundity can lessen the significance of the marital relationship, even to justify polygamy; there may be forms of educational neglect towards their children; Christian virginity can be rejected as a meaningless behavior and so on. In other eras and cultures, however, the horizontal axis of the conjugal alliance can prevail over the generative: the family is then understood primarily as a "couple" as an experience of emotional gratification, even to "functionalize" the presence of children to the emotional understanding of the man and the woman.

In this case there are considerable anthropological distortions as well: the private and subjective dimensions prevail over the social and institutional; procreation becomes a mere eventuality, postponed along the years; the sense of public responsibility involved in choosing to establish a stable relationship between a man and a woman becomes lost; it can get to, as is happening now

in the West, weaken the sexual difference, on the demand of assimilating homosexual unions to the family. It is clear that the best situation is when the two axes are well matched with each other, and when their relationship with society as a whole is neither one of subjugation nor of marginalization.

Reflecting on this aspect is important so as to understand that the family is neither a static nor an "immutable" reality, in the sense of being "devoid of historicity". It is, as all the components of human experience, a plastic and changing reality, inhabited by a profound dynamism that leads her to develop into a fruitful and radiant way, but also exposes it to times of difficulty and crisis. This applies above all to the individual family within itself (from the time when two young people get to know each other, get engaged, until they get married, have children, and later grandchildren) and it applies to the family universe within the social system, with changing the forms of its symbolic and legal recognition, and with the change of its roles and structure. Since the Salesian charism has spread in many different areas and cultures, it is important to try to understand what are the characteristics, the potentials and challenges of the family experience in the context in which one works.

2. KEY ISSUES IN AL: THE SHAPE OF THE TEXT AND THE LOGIC OF ACCOMPANIMENT

The brief reference to the historical complexity of the family in different contexts allows us to appreciate one of the fundamental traits of AL, which is also the first clue that I suggest you take to interpret the document. This is the choice that Pope Francis has made in speaking of the family through a "big story" and not through a "big treatise". All the commentators on the exhortation have highlighted the text style, which strikes in its great capacity to adhere to the quotidian. On the occasion of the official presentation of the document, Cardinal Schönborn was able to affirm:

For me *Amoris Laetitia* is first and foremost a "language event", as has already been *Evangelii Gaudium*. Something has changed in the ecclesial discourse. This change of language was already noticeable during the Synod. Between the two Synod sessions of October 2014 and October 2015 one could clearly recognize how the tone has become richer on esteem, as they are simply welcoming the various situations of life, without judging or condemning them immediately. In *Amoris Laetitia* this has become the continuous linguistic tone. Behind this there is, of course, not only a linguistic preference, but a deep respect in front of every man who is never, in the first place, a "problematic case" in a "category", but a unique person, with its history and its journey with, and toward God. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis had said that we should

take off our shoes in front of the other's sacred ground (EG 36). This fundamental attitude runs through the entire Exhortation.

The linguistic register used by Pope Francis to speak of the family deserves to be deepened because it is not only a question of form, but also of substance.

Amoris Laetitia, in fact, speaks of the beauty of the Christian family not as "alongside" or "above" of its human foundation, but delving itself fully in the story articulated in its relations. In this regard, the pages of chapter IV are exemplary. The Pope comments on the hymn to love of 1 Corinthians 13, referring to everyday situations of married and family love, as well as the paragraphs in which he describes with wonder what a woman experiences during pregnancy, recognizing it as a space of a precious spiritual experience (AL 168-171).

At the basis of this style of expression is the recognition that the "flesh" of man, the fragile reality of his personal existence, is the space in which one meets the Mystery of God, the place to discern the passage of the Spirit. It is an attitude that intentionally avoids the spiritualistic and moralistic shortcuts that lead to present marriage with idealized formulas and artificial languages (AL 35-37).

But to do this, it requires of "the whole Church a missionary conversion: it is important not to stop at a purely theoretical announcement, cut off from the real problems of the people. Family ministry must help others to experience that the Gospel of the family is a response to the deepest expectations of the human person: for his/her dignity and the complete fulfillment in reciprocity, in communion and fruitfulness. It is not only about presenting legislation, but to propose values, responding to the needs that they see today, even in the most secularized countries" (AT 201).

In this way, the Pope offers a great pastoral lesson: we cannot pretend to know how to communicate the Gospel of marriage just because we sing the praises of and use the best images the Scripture offers. When detached from the humble contemplation of daily life, even the richest expressions could become rhetorical formulas and empty symbols. The real and imperfect analogy which exists between the conjugal covenant and the covenant of God with his people, Christ and the Church (Eph 5), as well as the claim that the family is the "domestic church" or "Trinitarian image", cannot be used as if they were simply definitions ready for use. They are the culmination of a thorough understanding of family dynamics that cannot be bypassed in any way and which, as the Pope teaches, go through the narration of life. Developing in this narrative, the images can convincingly express the potential meaning they

carry and become a light to discover the mystery that inhabits the conjugal love.

The choice of this expressive style, which aims towards depth but avoids idealisation, corresponds with the choice of a pastoral style that favours the initiation of processes of accompaniment ("It is not enough to show generic concern for the family in pastoral planning" but an effort must be made "to help each family to discover the best way to overcome any obstacles it encounters" AL 200) rather than a logical application of schemes and standards ("time is greater than space", that is, we have to "generate more than dominate space" AL 3 and 261). This is the second interpretation on which I would like to stop briefly. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis had spoken extensively of accompaniment:

An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time. Faithful to the Lord's gift, it also bears fruit. An evangelizing community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds. The sower, when he sees weeds sprouting among the grain does not grumble or overreact (EG 24).

This is not, in any way, a renunciation to propose the truth of the Gospel so as to avoid countering contemporary sensibility or to satisfy worldly ideologies (AL 35). It is in fact Jesus' attitude and his awareness that people, with their troubled past, cannot be reduced to fit in a universal norm. Faced with the most difficult and debated issues, the Pope shows the need for a change in approach. Some answers may never be found unless we are able to revise the manner in which to formulate the question according to the Gospel. The claim of normative solutions that should only be applied to individual cases, or the superficiality of a permissive goodness which is unable to grasp the differences and enlighten about responsibilities, are, in fact, just the other side of an abstract view of marriage, whose clarity is all the more clear the more distant it is from reality.

However, when the logic behind the thought is full of personal content, and when one lands down from the universal plan to individual circumstances, it is necessary, according to the authoritative teachings of St. Thomas, to exercise the practical wisdom that bears the name of caution: a wisdom that does not limit itself to deduction, but is the evangelical art of discernment. All

shortcuts are alien to this pastoral style: as are the flight of ideas which lose touch with reality, and the "simple recipe" of a pastoral practice which tries solving problems briskly, without the trouble of accompanying.

3. THE UNDERLYING INTENTION: A MORE FAMILIAR CHURCH

Once these two keys elements have been identified, we can now try bringing out that which seems to be the underlying intention of *Amoris Laetitia*. As previously mentioned, this does not entail giving a new normative approach for the solution to some of the problems, but rather indicating the roads along which to activate the new processes. These processes can be summarised in that they must essentially converge in favour of a more "familiar" face of the Church. Thus affirms AL in no. 87:

The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches. "In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this standpoint, reflecting on the interplay between the family and the Church will prove a precious gift for the Church in our time. The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church. The safeguarding of the Lord's gift in the sacrament of matrimony is a concern not only of individual families but of the entire Christian community".

This means that, on one hand, the Ecclesial institution must further reach out to the needs of the family, so as to better achieve its objective of being "the people of God" going through history; on the other hand, families must discover in the Church community the vital space within which to live their own story, surpassing the strong cultural temptation of private withdrawal. Thus, this is a dual movement - the ecclesial community towards the family and the family towards the community. We must now define the meaning of this movement.

With regard to ***the first aspect***, the different ecclesial institutions should make every effort to rectify their tendency to structure themselves as "religious services agencies", in which qualified and generous operators spend their energies. If the parish or other church institutions become useless structures - out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group - though services may be efficient, the spirit of communion, encounter, and witness, which is the sign of the presence of the Lord and the action of his Spirit, lacks. This "reform" of the *forma ecclesiae* which all our structures are encouraged to undertake, cannot take place around a table, nor can it only be the result of decisions taken by the Pastor or a religious community. In order to be truly set up for the benefit of families, it must be accomplished together with them, involving their understanding, taking their needs into account, delving into their languages.

We become aware that putting the family at the center of the Church's attention is a much more demanding and complex task than the mere search for solutions in the most difficult cases of conscience or the most delicate situations. A renewed global approach of how the Church relates to families is, in fact, the fundamental condition for delving deeper into the difficulties and problems that weigh on them and finding, through serious and patient discernment, the evangelical forms and spiritual styles of companionship. The process which the Pope invites us to, is thus concerned with the need to recover "domestic" Christianity, which inhabits our homes and gives shape to our relationships: Pope Francis' insistence on the alliance between generations, on the treasures which grandparents can pass on to grandchildren, on the care we need to have for the weakest and the most fragile goes precisely in this direction. He affirms that, "Emotional maturity can't be bought or sold and it is the greatest endowment of the familial genius. It is precisely in the family where we learn to grow in the atmosphere of emotional maturity. Its "grammar" is learned there, otherwise it is very difficult to learn it. And it is through this language that God makes us all understand. (*Catechesis* 2nd September 2015).

Faith can either be further renewed through that network of relationships which is essentially bound in the covenant between man and woman, or else it tends to be merely reduced to an idea, an inspiration, a message, but not welcoming divine life as a gift "circulating" amongst us. It is for this reason that the Church cannot fulfill its mission without including families; more so if it does not take upon itself the traits of familial communion.

The second aspect, which mirrors the first, is the need for the church *community to courageously and attractively invite families to come out of the isolation* permeated by the individualistic culture in which we are immersed, helping them to open up to a sharing, welcoming, and communal experience. An isolated family, is in fact, a weakened family. In Western societies, the family is experiencing a strong push towards marginalization. It is no longer acknowledged as the foundation of society, but is being represented as an affective subsystem, in which everyone lives in privacy. The family is thus stripped from its task to start reading reality, to realise the traditional process of culture and faith. Initiation rites which, in the traditional society, were implemented through listening to the experiences of the elderly, are nowadays largely effected through the several forms of media communication, the latter weakening and disturbing many families. Furthermore, postmodern society is organised in a manner which favours maximum individual autonomy in gaining access to information and to decisions.

An individualistic lifestyle seems successful when compared to the dynamics of work and the economy. If the family gives in and retreats into

privacy - thinking "for itself" only, as a happy couple romantically dreaming only of its own well-being - it is already defeated from the start. Its vocation is however to "introduce fraternity into the world" (cfr. AL 194). Families should be helped to build communities, to interact with other families, to be open towards the suffering and needs of others, to promote practical forms of help, and to be witnesses in the various spheres of social life. The love that circulates within the family must eventually be put at the service of others: only in this way is it preserved in freshness and truth. The channel through which the single ecclesial institution becomes less of a "services agency" and more of a community, and the path in which the family becomes less made of "private couples" and more of a network of families in communion with each other, can only be achieved when working together. When AL affirms in AL 87: "The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church", it does not simply wish to use a formula, but it collects in a striking summary the core of this dual movement.

Consequently, our work consists in obtaining a good understanding of these articulations and translating them into clear pastoral choices. Regressions are possible and they are decisive. For example, let's think about what the Church-family bond means for those undergoing preparation courses for marriage. In the collective imagination, these continue to appear as what a religious agency offers to those couples who live in a very "private" manner the path that leads to marriage. A pastoral conversion involving reflection, creativity and a generous effort is needed so that the whole Christian community becomes the true "womb" of the families which are born from the sacrament of marriage, and not only in the context of the preparatory course.

4. ACCOMPANYING FAMILIES IN THE SALESIAN STYLE

The pastoral guidelines of the Pope about the accompaniment of families are undoubtedly very close to our Salesian pedagogy, which lead us to meet the persons, allowing them to experience freedom, so as to help them walk in the light of the Gospel. The logic behind "church processes" mentioned by the Pope is ultimately an educational logic. On the other hand, the issue of education is explicitly addressed in AL, in particular in Chapter VII entitled "*Towards a better education for children*". I feel it is not necessary to discuss this Chapter now. It seems more useful to highlight some elements which allow the Salesian Family to put the suggestions of AL into practice.

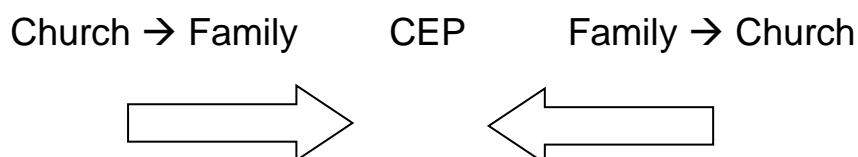
4.1. The educative and pastoral community as space and subject

The first element cannot but be a convinced assumption within our environments of a familiar figure of the Church, which the Pope urges us to have. The Salesian Family has to be a space in which the Church institutions

reach out: accompanying the people of God; where families can find community meeting centers; in communion of faith and prayer; where educational networks and proposals of evangelization can be constructed. I think that, for the Salesian Family, working at the service of the family according to the typical manner of our charism means, first of all, facilitating within our environments the dual movement which we have spoken about earlier. The educational nature of our charism undoubtedly lends itself as a suitable space in which this dual movement occurs. Many families already come forth, entrusting their children, their stories, and their problems.

The achievement of a dynamic of true encounter and involvement is, however, never automatic. We too can risk providing services without meeting the persons; to offer space, but not promote communion; ideating projects for others, but not with others. Within our works, we need fraternal communities of disciples and witnesses, in which the different states of life come together to witness the presence of the Lord for the benefit of young people. This is precisely the correct ecclesiological vision of the CEP (educative and pastoral communities), as a mode of implementation of the People of God gathering around a charismatic proposal, and not simply as an organization structured to optimize its performance. The CEP should be the space in which we think about our service to the family. The members of the Salesian family should be the driving force to build the CEP as a living body, so as to facilitate and welcome all the families within this dynamic communion which achieves within space the face of the Church and makes its mission possible.

A CEP exuding a joyous evangelical climate and a communion of action needs time and energy to be built. It can only be the result of energies stimulated by the force of the charism, that is, by the power of the Holy Spirit that makes present within us Don Bosco's style of holiness. This is the gift that many families expect from us: that of having places available for them, as well as people ready to accompany them. The CEP, is therefore the space and structure of our companionship to families.



The pastoral subjectivity of the family, already sensed by the Vatican Council and compellingly repeated by AL, should be particularly assumed by lay people who form part of movements and associations within the Church, as are the several members of the Salesian Family. There are already several interesting experiences going on. They range from the most simple and popular “family friends of Don Bosco”, who gather under the banner of his charisma to

sustain themselves in faith, to others who are directly involved in family ministry within local churches. One of the challenges, and yet one of the richest pastoral potentials, is to involve families who are inserted within the different groups of the Salesian Family to build family networks in our institutions.

In this regard, we can also question ourselves on the contribution which the experience of married laity offers to the development and understanding of the preventive system. A dad or a mum have a sensitivity towards education that is distinctive from and complementary to that of consecrated persons. It is therefore important to ensure that the roles and charisms are not submerged. This becomes a possible risk when a corporate vision of the CEP, in which roles take a lead at the expense of a deep sharing of faith and mission, prevails. In this sense, the new ecclesiological horizon of the Second Vatican should make CEP a vitalizing experience of reciprocity between marriage and virginity, between family and the religious community.

4.2. A renewed affective and familiar culture

The crisis of the family induces an attitude of compliance and resignation in our communities. It is easy to hear pastoral workers (catechists, educators, teachers etc.) complain because families do not help in the education process, do not cooperate in the transmission of faith, and so on. We may sometimes feel paralyzed by the feeling that things are just so and nothing can be done. This psychological and spiritual attitude is very dangerous, and needs to be strongly corrected.

Formation is needed to fix this attitude. This helps the person go deeper within, in an effort to understand the reasons causing the crisis, that is, the reasons that risk making the Christian message 'foreign' in respect to today's affective culture. We all happened to meet young people and adults who cannot even take into consideration aspects that we consider very important for a good affective life.

The manner in which they value the body, sexuality, life as a couple, and marriage, seems to have almost nothing in common with the usual language of Christian preaching. In other words, their culture, that is, their set of symbolic representations regarding life, risks to diverge on several counts from the Christian point of view. This stems out of the fact that the prevailing affective culture brings with it, in addition to undoubtedly positive aspects, dangerous distortions and serious ambiguity. The difficulty derives from the fact that the Gospel seeks conversion from each and every one of us, and conversion is a source of scandal to which our heart offers resistance. We must frankly acknowledge that the difficulty also arises from the fact that the language used to express our message had been full of categories and models that made reference to a different cultural horizon which no longer exists or is much

changed. We can think of the phenomenon of cohabitation before marriage, which has become a "normal" manner of building a family in many areas in the West. Telling young people that this manner of building relationships is not morally good is necessary, but is obviously not enough. Being close to them and cultivating good relationships is necessary, but not sufficient. To achieve a true "accompaniment", we need to deeply understand the youth culture pertaining to the body, affects, sexuality, and also activate pedagogical processes and messages that make the beauty and charm of the Gospel accessible to the personal conscience.

Family difficulties are nowadays one of the fundamental expressions of the split between faith and culture mentioned by Paul VI. The journey of reflection that the Church has made from the Council to date, shows that it wishes to react through an effort of generous closeness and deep reflection, and not through complaints. We are encouraged to embark on this path, at all levels. Standing among young people, Don Bosco was able to understand their world from within, and propose faith in forms appropriate to them - through processes that valued their positive needs and prevented difficulties. We cannot expect to meet the affective challenges of our time without the same amount of courage and enterprise.

4.3. Some privileged areas

Our contribution to family life cannot but favour the typical areas of our charism, that is, the areas of education of youth ministry. We shall thus highlight a few areas in which the dynamics of family life is more evident, and which require an investment of energy by the Salesian Family.

(A) Sexual and affective education of the young.

Considering it being particularly expressive of our charism, Pope Francis recommended this topic in his address to Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians during his pastoral visit to Turin. We are all aware of the urgency to work on such a difficult and delicate theme. AL devotes some significant paragraphs to this (280-286) which we should read very carefully. He affirms that: "The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for "a positive and prudent sex education" to be imparted to children and adolescents "as they grow older", with "due weight being given to the advances in the psychological, pedagogical and didactic sciences". We may well ask ourselves if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge. " (AL 280). Affective education implies, first of all, a living testimony and an attitude of wisdom, and cannot be reduced to mere instructions offered in this area, nor to the implementation of some project. It cannot even just be the result of improvisation, or simply some good advice as necessary. The socio-cultural changes that have occurred in recent years certainly demand more; the same

assumption of sexual identity today is made more difficult by a culture that tends to present it as the result of arbitrary choices. Schools are evermore choosing sex education courses which portray doubtful anthropological orientations and values. I think that a serious cultural investment is needed from us in this delicate area to put forth the pedagogical and theological resources we have and to attempt to draw up specific proposals to be implemented at least within our institutions.

(B) Accompanying young people towards marriage

This is an area that requires much diversified attention depending on the cultural contexts. In the West, the age of entry into marriage is no longer strictly "youth". Those who attend premarital courses are nowadays often more than thirty years old, cohabit for some time and would have already had one or more children. In other societies, however, marriage continues to be a stage reached at a young age, even if this still poses pastoral problems related to freedom in the choice of spouse, the social importance of fertility, the value of the marriage coutumier and others, which solicit substantial attention. A special commitment requires education to the Christian concept of fatherhood and motherhood, reacting to the many cultural distortions that weigh on parenting. We know, for example, how in the Western world there has been a strong ideological pressure to consider motherhood as a constraint for the woman, as well as remaining a tough challenge to the father figure, emptied of its symbolic features. These themes certainly cannot be absent from a youth ministry that is qualified and attentive to the challenges of youth culture.

(C) The pastoral work with families who come into relationship with our work

Some families require our educational service motivated by a sincere adherence to the Christian and Salesian educational project; for others, contact with our work is more or less the only form of contact with the ecclesial community. In these cases, our educational proposal is a delicate bridge because family life is illuminated by the light of the Gospel: while we accompany children in their development, we also accompany the journey of their families, coming in contact with their wealth, their labours, and their dramas. We need to reflect, then, on the manner in which, through the educational service, we can contribute to the evangelization of the family, enabling these processes of inclusion and support on which Pope Francis insists so much. One of the most significant contributions that we can offer in terms of a renewed pastoral work is certainly to help families out of the isolation imposed by the individualistic culture of today, in order to build true family networks.

(D) Thinking of youth ministry

The rediscovery of the fundamental role that the family has for the transmission of the faith - which takes place not simply in terms of "belief", but also via bonding, belonging, recognition in a symbolic horizon, rooted in an experience that precedes us - requires of youth ministry to think of the role of the ecclesial community in terms of "generation". If modernity has led us to think about education first of all in terms of development (autonomy) of the individual, the family perspective remembers that education is an extension of the generative act, so it is testimony given through the quality of the links, its wise exercise of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood, is an introduction to the whole experience, and not only to its partial meanings. Checking and gauging these issues allows us to be closer to the experience of the families and even the original light of Don Bosco's charism, which is the wealth we share as a Salesian Family.