# FROM ‘PHILOSOPHATE’ TO ‘POSTNOVITIATE’: Growing in the Salesian Consecrated Vocation

*Seminar on the postnovitiate for the Africa-Madagascar region,*

*Nairobi, 8-11 March 2019*

*Ivo Coelho, SDB*

Why did we think of having this seminar? Fr Chavez once said to me, casually, after the last general chapter: pre-novitiate, novitiate, post-novitiate: the change in names was not casual. The *Constitutions* describe the postnovitiate as continuing the formation begun in the novitiate. To help make the shift – not only in name but in reality – from philosophate to postnovitiate, we thought of calling for this seminar, or for the series of regional seminars (Asia, Africa, Europe, America) on the postnovitiate phase of formation.

Why is it so important to make this shift? Because GC27 was about deepening the consecrated dimension of our vocation, and because it is probably this dimension that tends to be neglected or somehow sidelined.

* Mission – or better, mission reduced to “working for young people” – tends to take the centre stage in many of our lives, and that has consequences.
* To do youth work is not the same as to be engaged in the Salesian mission. And to be engaged in the Salesian mission is not the same as to be a Salesian consecrated person. All this needs to be clarified. These are, in a sense, theoretical issues, or theological ones. But they do affect the way we live and work.

My job here is to pull out what the Salesian magisterium say about the postnovitiate: *Constitutions and Regulations*; the commentary on these that is the *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*; and the *Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco* (2016).

Art. 114 of our Constitutions says:

The first profession is followed by a period of religious maturing which continues the formative experience of the novitiate and serves as a preparation for the practical training phase.

The deepening of the life of faith and of the spirit of Don Bosco, together with an adequate philosophical, pedagogical and catechetical preparation that interacts with the prevailing culture, disposes the young confrere to a progressive integration of faith, culture and life.

In addition, there is art. 95 of our Regulations:

Immediately after the novitiate all confreres must continue their formation for at least a two-year period in formation communities, preferably studentates.

During this period the general philosophical and pedagogical formation is given, with an introduction to theology….

Let me just highlight three aspects: (1) the postnovitiate as continuation of the formation experience begun in the novitiate; (2) the postnovitiate as preparation for practical training; and (3) the intellectual dimension of formation in the postnovitiate.

## 1. “Continuation of the novitiate”

1. The postnovitiate is a period of religious maturing. It is part of the period of temporary profession, the goal of which is described by C 113 as completing the maturing process with perpetual profession in view, and as developing the different aspects of our vocation as lay Salesians or as candidates to the priesthood.

It is a period that continues the formative experience of the novitiate (C 114) – which C 110 describes as the beginning of the Salesian religious experience.

It aims therefore at deepening the Salesian religious identity – which was the main goal and objective of GC27, as we can see from various remarks made by Fr Chavez, both in his letter of convocation and in his opening address, where he speaks of 4 rather than only 3 thematic areas.

We remember that chapter 2 of the FSDB regards Salesian identity as both the starting point and the goal of formation. It is interesting that this chapter begins by citing C 196, the last article of our Constitutions – “Our living Rule is Jesus Christ… whom we find present in Don Bosco” – and goes on to say:

This statement of our Constitutions *sums up our Salesian vocation: we are to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ and spend our lives for the young, as did Don Bosco*. All our formation, both initial and ongoing, consists in acquiring and actualizing this identity in individual persons and in the community.” (FSDB 25)

The postnovitiate, as *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* says, is a period of *discipleship*.

2. The postnovitiate is a period of religious maturing that is characterized by an integration of faith, culture and life.

How is this done? By a deepening of the life of faith, lived according to the spirit of Don Bosco, and by an adequate philosophical, pedagogical and catechetical preparation that interacts with the prevailing culture.

There are several elements here:

* deepening of the life of faith (faith: the dominant horizon)
* lived according to Don Bosco’s spirit
* an intellectual preparation that “interacts with the prevailing culture”
* and that has a philosophical, pedagogical and catechetical aspect.

All these must come together in living unity: a progressive integration. Don Bosco is our model, and he was a splendid integration of nature and grace (C 21). The grace of unity (C 3) is part of our vocation.

## 2. “Preparation for practical training”

The postnovitiate also serves as a preparation for practical training – and, in general, as “formation to youth pastoral ministry” (FSDB 410-411).

The FSDB talks here not so much about acquiring skills as about acquiring certain attitudes needed for being educator and pastor. This is done in two ways, according to the FSDB:

* above all by progressively striving to integrate faith with life and culture.
* And also by taking part in educative and pastoral activities, carried out as far as possible in group and in a Salesian institution, or in missionary work. The purpose of these activities is:
  + To acquire an educative-pastoral mentality
  + To have an exposure to the Salesian mission
  + To engage in the animation of young people
  + To learn to work in a team. (FSDB 411, 417)
* We need to add, especially as we prepare for GC28:
  + To work with and even under the direction of lay people and members of the Salesian Family.
  + To attain the planning mentality familiarity: how to formulate the PEPS within the EPC.

This means that it is the whole postnovitiate formation experience that prepares the young Salesian for practical training.

* Study, community (and individual) reflection, and personal spiritual accompaniment help the Salesian interpret history and culture in a Christian way. (FSDB 410) Once again, the dynamic of learning by experience, and the importance of *pastoral accompaniment*.
* According to Appendix 1 of the FSDB the Formation section of the Provincial Directory
  + must lay down norms regarding pastoral experience.
  + Ensure the Salesian pedagogical and philosophical character of studies, especially if a non-Salesian study centre is being frequented. (FSDB 569)
* “The *pastoral perspective*, the viewpoint of *inculturation and communication* and other aspects should constitute a constant feature of intellectual formation rather than just being translated into topics or particular courses.” (FSDB 580)

## 3. The intellectual dimension

The three aspects mentioned in C 114 are philosophy, pedagogy and catechetics. R 95 speaks of an introduction to theology instead of catechetics. An obvious question is whether we give enough place and importance to pedagogy and catechetics. Philosophy is required of all candidates to the priesthood; pedagogy and catechetics is peculiarly Salesian. The Brother-Salesian will need some general culture and much pedagogy and catechetics. (FSDB 569: “To make sure that there is a formation curriculum for Salesian brothers that is serious but flexible and adaptable both to the specific nature of the different roles and to the concrete possibilities of the candidates which takes account of the many varied ways it is possible to live the consecrated lay state in the Congregation.”)

1. *The pastoral aim*. “*Our Salesian mission orientates and characterizes at all levels the intellectual formation* of the members in a way that is original and unique. Therefore the programme of studies must preserve a balance between serious and scientific reflection and the religious and apostolic dimensions of our way of life.” (R 82 cited in FSDB 131) Philosophy, theology, pedagogy, the human sciences are at the service of human existence, and ultimately of the mystery of Christ. (PL 773) *Veritatis Gaudium* is abundantly clear on this point, citing the conciliar document *Optatam Totius* 19: “The pastoral preoccupation must permeate the entire formation of the students.” (VG 2)

Intellectual formation is itself a preparation for pastoral discernment. “Intellectual formation prepares one to deal with historical situations, especially with the youth situation, and consider them from the educative and pastoral point of view; it makes one capable of pastoral discernment and able to guide persons, plans and processes in conformity with the objectives of the mission.” (FSDB 132) It must therefore initiate to the methodology of apostolic action. “This is an interaction between theory and practice and can be put into a nutshell with the words ‘reflection on experience’.” (FSDB 132) C 98 speaks, in fact, of “learning by experience” as central to the formation experience.

We need to note, however, that intellectual formation, far from being ‘merely academic,’ needs to touch the experience of the person and the group, and that intellectual formation itself aims at the deepening of the life of faith according to the spirit of Don Bosco – certainly in the catechetical and theological aspects, but also when concentrating on disciplines such as philosophy and pedagogy, given that these have for us a formative finality.

Here also we keep in mind FSDB ch. 3.3 on intellectual formation. The basic choices that govern our intellectual formation are: the Salesian complexion, interaction between theory and practice, unity and comprehensiveness, continuity, and inculturation. The subject areas: basic culture, theology (for deepening the faith), philosophy (for a coherent outlook on the human being, world and God), the human sciences and the sciences of education, and Salesianity.

When a non-Salesian centre is frequented, special care must be taken of the Salesian orientation of studies. (FSDB 180)

Even when we have our own study centre, ‘salesianity’ cannot be reduced to the courses offered in the centre. FSDB 145 speaks also of the overall formation plan, good relationships in the centre, in the community, and between centre and community, with due autonomy guaranteed to the centre.

1. *Inculturation*: We do not forget the aspect of inculturation, strongly affirmed and required by the FSDB (135-136), following the insistence of PDV 55 and VC 79-80. Since then, we have *Fides et ratio* (1998), the letter of Fr Pascual Chavez (“Inculturation of the Salesian Charism,” AGC 411 [2011]) and *Evangelii Gaudium* 115-118.

“The concern for inculturation must be present in all the aspects of formation. In fact, inculturation bears on the relationship between the person, his roots and cultural make-up, and his vocation; its aim is to incarnate the charism and realize the educative and pastoral mission in different situations.” (FSDB 135)

Obviously the Ratio does not enter into details, but speaks rather about the theological basis (the mystery of the Incarnation and Christian anthropology), and about the possibility of a “healthy pluralism” which is not the same as juxtaposition and syncretism, but rather “a new incultured synthesis.” Christianity, as EG 117 says, is not monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, “the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural.”

Inculturation must be the criterion and mechanism of every pastoral reflection and methodology. (FSDB 136)

The Salesian charism and spirituality must themselves be inculturated. There are, as C 100 says, “different ways of living out the one Salesian vocation.” We remember also that the PEPS is “the historical mediation and the practical instrument” for the inculturation of our charism. It is specified and realized in every Salesian work by the educative and pastoral community (EPC). (GC24 5)

Speaking of inculturation, we must not forget the most significant global cultural innovation today: the digital revolution. The new information and communication technologies, the era of the internet, the digital continent, and the social media are contributing to a change of culture and of ‘anthropology’: our way of understanding ourselves; of relating with others, with the world and with God; of thinking and of learning, of obtaining information and of communicating, of our way of inhabiting space and time. There has been a shift of language, from the word to the world of images, both static and moving. Along with this there is the relativization of authority and of morals, a shift from the vertical to the horizontal, where all available opinions are valid and everyone becomes an author and an authority.

All this, in a progressive integration of faith, culture and life that is part of the process of religious maturing and deepening of the Salesian religious identity.

The aim is to arrive at a Christian culture (which is another way of talking about the integration of fatih, culture and life).

"Thus we can speak of **Christian culture** in the measure that ‘el sentir común’ of the life of a people has been so penetrated from within that the gospel message lies at the *base of its thinking, the fundamental* *principles* *of its life, its criteria of judgment and its norms of action*."[[1]](#footnote-1)

This description can serve as a very useful point of reference for understanding what the article of our Constitutions says about *culture*: we try to get the young Salesian to **learn** **to make of the Gospel** (or, in other words, of the person of **Jesus Christ**, as in article 98 that we mentioned above: "Enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel") **and of the Salesian charism the basis of his thinking, of** **the** **fundamental** **principles** **of his** **life**, **of his criteria of judgment, of his norms of action**. And this from the fundamental perspective of our charism: the Salesian **gradually becomes a pastor and educator of the young** (C 98).  It would, therefore, be very dangerous, because reductive, to say that this time is dedicated "to the study of philosophy." Philosophy must be a *means and an instrument* – no doubt very important, and even indispensable, depending on the context – to reach this objective, which, properly understood, can be characterized (according to what we said earlier) as **the** **acquisition** **of a *Salesian culture***. The Salesian who studies philosophy is not called (except for some valuable exceptions) to become not a *philosopher* but an **educator**, according to the prophetic vision of Fr Juan E. Vecchi in his letter of 15 September 1997: “‘For you I study…’ (C 14). Satisfactory preparation of the confreres and the quality of our educative work.” [AGC 361 (1997)][[2]](#footnote-2)

## 4. Gathering the threads

4.1 How to strength the process of religious maturing, or deepening of the Salesian consecrated identity? How to achieve the progressive integration of faith, culture and life?

* A great tool is the *local formation plan* and the *personal plan of life*.
* As part of the local formation plan, should we look at a *scheme of conferences* and other inputs – especially, but not only, when we frequent a non-Salesian centre?
* Should we take the Constitutions as the framework of the plans, rather than the 4 dimensions of PDV?
* The accompaniment of experience. C 98 speaks of “learning by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation.” One of our core skills as formators is to help our young confreres learn by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation. The experience in question may be of community, of relationships, of prayer; it may be pastoral accompaniment and intellectual accompaniment; etc.
* There is personal spiritual accompaniment, but also group accompaniment of various kinds, and community accompaniment.

4.2 How to strengthen the preparation for practical training and for Salesian youth ministry?

* Ensure better attention to pedagogy (the Preventive System), catechetics and Salesian studies in the study program / formation plan.
* *Pastoral accompaniment*: not enough to engage in pastoral activities; it is important to reflect and learn from them.
* Pastoral activities in the context of a good educative and pastoral community (EPC) would be extremely helpful.

4.3 What can be said about the intellectual dimension of formation?

* Balance between philosophy, pedagogy, catechetics
* Ensure the overall pastoral aim
* Try to link philosophical studies to life experience
* Could there be something like *intellectual accompaniment*?
* The possibility of “association” with the Faculty of Philosophy of the UPS.

\*\*\*

1. CELAM, final document *Nueva Evangelización, Promoción Humana, Christian Culture*, Santo Domingo, 1992, citing the Inaugural address of John Paul II, n. 24. Note that ‘el sentir común’ does not correspond to the English ‘common sense,’ but indicates rather the whole way of thinking and feeling of a people. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. José Luis Plascencia, “The Salesian Constitutions: Art. 114: The postnovitiate.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)