

VOCATION AND FORMATION: gift and task

“Jesus called his Apostles individually to be with him, and to be sent forth to preach the Gospel. Patiently and lovingly he prepared them and gave them the Holy Spirit to guide them into the fullness of Truth. He calls us too to live out in the Church our Founder’s project as apostles of the young. We respond to this call by committing ourselves to an adequate ongoing formation, for which the Lord daily gives us his grace.” (C 96)

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Rome, 31 March 2013
Feast of the Resurrection

My Dear Confreres,

For quite some time now I have wanted to share with you my reflections on the subject of vocation and formation. Finally today I am able to do so through this letter which is intended to throw light on the beauty and on the demands of our vocation and of our formation, and at the same time on the current situation of psychological fragility, vocational inconsistency and ethical relativism which can be found almost everywhere in the Congregation. This situation clearly demonstrates a lack of appreciation for the significance of a vocation and the indispensable role of formation in the assessment of the suitability of candidates, in the consolidation of the first decisions regarding a vocation, and above all in the ongoing assimilation to Christ obedient, poor and chaste in Don Bosco’s footsteps.

Really worrying is the high number of those leaving either as temporarily professed, during the period of profession or at its end; those perpetually professed, as well as those priests requesting secularisation in order to be incardinated in a diocese; or those

asking for a dispensation from celibacy and the priestly ministry; or indeed, sadly, those who are dismissed.

It is true that the Congregation as a whole and the Councillor for Formation in particular have made great efforts to ensure consistency in the formation teams, quality in what is proposed and in the formation programmes, a high quality and specific nature of the programme of courses of study, Salesian studies, the methodology for focusing on the individual, the formation of formation personnel, a start to work on ongoing formation. Nevertheless the problem continues to call for our attention, to require further study and reflection, and to demand courageous steps to be taken in animation and government at all levels.

I am convinced that initial formation is an essential task of the Congregation, which has the primary and ultimate responsibility for Salesian identity and for unity in the diversity of contexts, and that, in particular, fundamental formation decisions are the prerogative of the Rector Major and his Council. I am also convinced that the Provinces carry out an important role in guiding and supporting the formation communities and the study centres, especially as regards the inculturation of formation; and this implies on their part a determined investment of personnel and resources in providing a high quality service of formation.

However, I think that above all it is the ordinary lives of the local apostolic communities which in the end play the decisive role. In fact, little or nothing is served by a high quality of formation in the formation communities which helps the young confreres to grow according to Don Bosco's Project of life, if then in the local communities a style of life is being lived which does not correspond with that project, or which belittles it or even contradicts it. It is precisely this lack of a genuine "Salesian culture" which allows attitudes and forms of behaviour that are quite out of place in consecrated Salesian apostles to flourish. All this indicates that the care of *vocation* and *formation* involves all the confreres individually, all the local communities, all the Provinces, the whole of the Congregation. A serious commitment is needed, in addition to that to initial formation, to ongoing formation which can indeed lead to a change in the culture of a Province.

This is not the first time that I have drawn your attention to the delicate subject of initial formation, to the life-style, to the mentality, to the attitudes and behaviour of a Province. I referred briefly to it in the report to the GC26, and it seems to me that the situation has not changed.

1. VOCATIONAL CONSISTENCY AND FIDELITY, CHALLENGES FOR FORMATION

One of the topics on which we have focused our attention from the beginning of my term as Rector Major has been that of *vocational consistency*. On this theme the General Council carried out a reflection which resulted in the issuing of Guidelines by the Councillor for Formation.¹ The subject was taken up again by the Union of Superiors General (USG), to which two half-yearly Assemblies were dedicated.² This shows that this is a problem which is a concern for all the Orders, Congregations and Institutes - those

¹ Cf F. CEREDA, *Vocational fragility. Initiating reflection and suggesting action*, in AGC 385 (2004), pp. 34-53.

² Cf USG, *Fedeltà vocazionale. Realtà che interpella la vita consacrata*. Rome 23-25 November 2005; USG, *Per una vita consacrata fedele. Sfide antropologiche della formazione*. Rome 24-26 May 2006.

of apostolic life and those of contemplative life. The study undertaken revealed a multiplicity of causes as the basis for psychological fragility, vocational inconsistency and moral relativism.

So that everyone might be better aware of the situation I think it will be useful to give you some information about those entering and those leaving the Congregation during both initial and ongoing formation in the last decade:

Initial Formation

Year	Novices ³	Novices who left	Newly professed	Temp. professed who left	New perpetually professed	New perpet. professed clerics	New perpet. professed brothers	New - priests
2002	607	137		231	249	217	32	262
2003	580	111	470	225	254	221	33	218
2004	594	118	469	211	281	242 +1P	38	203
2005	621	151	476	237	249	219 +2P	28	230
2006	561	137	470	227	260	221 + 2P	37	192
2007	527	110	424	200	219	205	14	175
2008	557	121	417	216	220	200	20	222
2009	526	109	436	225	265	246	19	195
2010	532	125	417	222	177	161 +1P	15	203
2011	414	40	407	185	231	210 + 1P	20	206
2012	480		374	174	262	237	25	189

Ongoing Formation

Year	Perpet. clerics leaving	Perpet. brothers leaving	Deacons dispensed celibacy	Priests ⁴ dispensed celibacy	Excluded	Secularised <i>previo experimento</i>	Secularised <i>simpliciter</i>	Dismissed
2002	8	12	3	15	18	7	11	24
2003	10	14	4	11	10	3	10	25
2004	14	15	3	20	14	9	12	26
2005	11	15	1	15	10	9	10	26
2006	13	10	3	27	11	11	11	26
2007	15	11	3	18	9	12	18	24
2008	8	6	5	18	5	12	14	24
2009	12	13	2	9	6	14	10	36

³ To understand the first three columns, one needs to appreciate that the novices who enter in a given year make their first profession the following year; therefore the novices leaving constitute the difference between the novices who enter in a given year and those professed the following year. For example: in 2002, 607 novices entered and in 2003 there were 470 newly professed; therefore the difference between the novices who entered in 2002 and the novices who made their profession the following year is 137; this is the number given under “novices left” on the line for 2002. In 2012 480 novices entered; we shall know the number newly professed and also the number who left at the end of 2013.

⁴ To understand the columns regarding dispensations from celibacy, secularisations and dismissals the numbers given are with regard not to those who in a given year made a request but to those in the given year whose cases were brought to a conclusion.

2010	9	9	1	11	0	29	8	38
2011	10	12	3	11	3	17	11	30
2012	8	11	1	33	4	23	15	29

Novices according to the Regions

Year	America South Cone	America Interamerica	West Europe	Italy Middle East	North Europe	Africa Madagascar	East Asia Oceania	South Asia
2002	76	110	11	43	71	55	80	135
2003	69	111	6	27	59	84	79	144
2004	86	98	12	25	51	92	84	145
2005	97	92	14	18	71	95	74	160
2006	76	88	3	22	47	92	75	158
2007	76	97	6	22	51	94	73	108
2008	58	105	4	18	48	100	89	135
2009	64	91	8	24	40	89	64	146
2010	40	73	1	18	55	114	93	138
2011	46	46	7	15	29	94	60	117
2012	43	63	3	21	38	107	69	136
TOT	731	974	75	253	560	1016	840	1522

Taking care of vocations and of formation has always meant having to face anthropological, social and cultural challenges. This means in simple terms that nowadays we have to deal with a type of challenge that requires new solutions, precisely because we find ourselves culturally speaking, facing a new kind of young person who finds it difficult to make choices and to imagine that a choice can be definitive, with all the effort needed to persevere and to be faithful. Faced too by an inability to understand the need for a mortified life, for self-denial: the avoidance of suffering and of hard work. Today's young person feels the need for self affirmation on the professional and economic levels; he wants independence, and at the same time protection; he finds it difficult to appreciate celibacy and chastity, troubled by visual images spread by the media; and - *last but not least* - with a kind of illiteracy regarding the faith and a poor experience of Christian life.⁵ Certainly side by side with these weaker aspects young people do have much to offer and show many positive attitudes: their search for meaningful interpersonal relationships, their concern about affectivity, their availability and generosity in selfless commitment and in voluntary service, sincerity and the search for authenticity.

Formation to fidelity to God, to the Church, to one's own Institute, to our charges begins from the moment of the selection of candidates. There is a need to place much more emphasis on proactive personalities, with a spirit of enterprise and initiative, with the capacity to make free choices and to organise their lives around these, without external or internal constrictions. Added to this is the need for a form of discernment that has two reference points: on the one hand, a criterion about suitability shared by the team of formation personnel and, on the other hand the evident presence in the candidate of those qualities that foster identification with a plan of evangelical life. This requires that formation be focused more and more on the individual making it his own, and understood as giving greater depths to motivations, taking a personal stand

⁵ Cf. E. BIANCHI, *Religious life and vocations today in Western Europe*, Reflection addressed to 150 Jesuits assembled in Bruxelles 1 May 2007..

regarding values and attitudes in harmony with the Salesian consecrated vocation and good accompaniment by the formation personnel.

We have in the *Ratio* and in the *Criteria and norms* two very valuable documents the fruit of the experience and the formation praxis of the Congregation, with the contributions of the human sciences, of comparisons with the “Ratio” of other Orders, Congregations and Religious Institutes, but which unfortunately are not always well known and put into practice by all the formation teams. It is possible to make mistakes in other areas, but not in formation, since this means ruining generations of Salesians, mortgaging the mission and compromising the whole Institute. We must never forget that the identity, the unity and the vitality of the Congregation depend to a large extent on the quality of formation and of government at the various levels: local, provincial and congregational.

It is well worth recalling, and pointing out clearly once again, that formation is the responsibility of the Congregation, which entrusts to the Provinces the duty of implementing it, ensuring the necessary situations regarding personnel, structures and resources that make it possible. Therefore there is no justification for a desire on the part of a Province to have on its own all the stages of formation. Rather it should reflect on its responsibility for the formation of the Salesian that nowadays the Congregation, the Church and young people need. There is still some resistance to the idea of Inter-Province formation communities. Even though they cannot provide a good formation because of a shortage of those in formation and of formation personnel, some Provinces insist on wanting to go it alone. I repeat once again that formation falls within the competence of the Congregation, and it is not simply a Province responsibility; individuals are the most precious gift the Congregation has, and the Congregation entrusts the practical carrying out of initial formation to Provinces, groups of Provinces or Regions. From this arises the mandatory need to carefully look after initial formation communities, to establish good study centres, to prepare formation personnel and not just teachers, but also to ensure the vitality of all the communities of the Province, and in each confrere the quality of his faith and the radical nature of his *sequela Christi*.

1.1 Motivations

The starting point is often a mistaken concept of vocation; sometimes it is identified with a personal plan of life motivated by a desire for self-fulfilment, by a social sensitivity and concern for the poorest or by the search for a quiet life, without serious commitments and without a total unconditional surrender to God and to a mission in the community.

These motives are not valid ones, or at least are not sufficient in order for the gift of consecrated life to be accepted; they are not always expressions of faith, but of wishful thinking (“I should like to be a religious,” “I have decided to become a Salesian,” ...) or of a social conscience (“I feel called to serve the poor, street children, natives, immigrants, drug addicts, ...”) or a search for security.

It is forgotten that only in the light of faith is life discovered as a vocation, and that even more so that a call to the consecrated life is only possible in the perspective of faith in the Lord who calls those He wants to be with Him, to follow Him, to imitate Him, so that afterwards He may send them to preach. In this way the *sequela Christi* and the *imitatio Christi* become the elements that characterise the lives of the disciples and the apostles of Jesus. And it is precisely in walking behind Him and seeking to reproduce His attitudes that we identify ourselves with Him to the point of being fully conformed to Him.

It is true that at the beginning there can be motivations in us that are not entirely valid and therefore insufficient to justify and make possible the radical choice of a life totally centred on God, on the Lord Jesus and on his Gospel, on the Spirit. The work of a real formation process is to help to identify, to weigh up, to discern the motivations and then to purify them and bring them to maturity in such a way that they have God and His will as their supreme criterion.

This unavoidable task is a very delicate one; in fact many motivations are unconscious; this leads the candidate to speak about the motivations he has heard about and learned without being able to know and to make known the real ones. We should not forget that the Gospel speaks about someone who, after having been cured by Jesus, had expressed his desire to stay with Him. The Lord did not allow him to do so but told him: «Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you.» (Mk 5,19).

In addition to this, one has also to consider the culture which is characteristic of the new generations. The Union of Superiors General dedicated two Assemblies to this issue. In the first it tried to get to know better the profile of the young people who come knocking on the doors of Consecrated Life, the values to which they are more sensitive, the challenges they pose to formation and which can be transformed into opportunities for formation. In the second there was an approach to the subject of fidelity, which is not to be identified with perseverance; in fact, it sometimes happens that some religious persevere in the sense of remain, when it would be better if they were to leave the Institute; fidelity is not just remaining faithful externally to a profession made to the Lord, but is a commitment to live on a regular daily basis what one has professed.

1.2 Anthropological opportunities and challenges

In the USG Assembly held in May 2006 I was invited to give a reflection on the anthropological challenges to vocational fidelity in consecrated life. I think it is important that I tell you something about it. In the way a human being is understood and his potential there are some constant elements which we could say constitute the intercultural and prevailing view. Happiness and self-fulfilment, desires and aspirations, affections and emotions are opportunities and challenges. The anthropological aspects, while challenging, are essential for every consecrated life that wants to be fully human and therefore credible. They constitute the foundation for a good formation to vocational fidelity.

Authenticity

The current anthropological situation offers consecrated life the opportunity for a new authenticity. In fact today's culture, especially youth culture, appreciates authenticity. People want to see us happy. They want to see that what we say is matched by what we do, and that our words are honest because they come from a life that is coherent.

Authenticity is a real *opportunity* because it appeals to young peoples' generosity and desire for friendship, to their self-giving and enjoyment at being together which are deeply rooted attitudes and powerful stimuli for growth in genuine consecrated life and in generous selfless love. This stimulates and encourages the older members of our communities to be real models that are attractive and challenging, to live the life of love for Christ which inspired them to embrace consecrated life and to understand that they have a role to play in the formation of the younger generations. Authenticity demands

that attention be paid to the human dimension of the consecrated person and to the daily life of the communities.

Authenticity is also a *challenge* because it requires a return to the essentials, and especially the overcoming of that functionality which reduces consecrated life to a role, a job, or a profession, poisoning the passion of the self-giving to Christ and to humanity. It provokes each day the conversion and the renewal of our communities and an understanding of the evangelical counsels as the path for a person's total fulfilment. Authenticity is a challenge to consecrated life which every day is threatened by the snares of mediocrity and idleness, the danger of being caught up with and settling for the values of the 'world'.

Freedom

To be a person means to have your life in your own hands, that is to decide what you want to do with your life. Freedom is the responsibility for building it up; it is possibility, it is the future.

Freedom is an *opportunity* because it is the only way to arrive at making values an inner reality and the processes of formation a deeply personal matter and therefore to come to true maturity.

Freedom is also a *challenge* because it demands that we know how to combine self-fulfilment with the project, self-formation and accompaniment including spiritual accompaniment. It is necessary to give young people all the time they need to grow and to come to maturity, at their own pace. The canonical stages and the phases of growth in maturity and the ability to make sound personal decisions do not always coincide. Ordination to the priesthood and perpetual profession do not always correspond to a personal choice that is convinced and mature. There is need therefore for formation personnel who are capable of providing personalised formation.

Historical context

Man is a being *in fieri* and society is in constant evolution. It takes time for a person to grow; the story of his life brings together many diverse strands of experience. Telling that life story can determine his personal identity.

The historical context therefore is an *opportunity* because it helps us to see that our life is a journey and our formation is a process that never ends. Life is self-fulfilment and self construction. Life is an unending theme tune which continues from initial formation to ongoing formation. Changes in society stimulate consecrated life to a constant renewal and adaptation; they are an invitation to it to redefine itself in the language of the people of today.

The historical context is also a *challenge* because it demands that formation, in so far as it is ongoing, animates and guides the whole of initial formation; it is not enough to concentrate on the young and on their formation; what is needed is to set in motion all the communities and the Institute, encouraging all the members to live again "their first love", the vocational passion they had at the start of their consecrated life. One's own life journey runs the risk of turning back on itself in a narcissistic manner and not opening itself to self-giving. In a world that is changing and that is without a centre, it is fragmentation that rules; so formation needs to serve to give unity to an individual and focus him firmly on the essential which is the following of Christ.

Experience

Nowadays it is necessary to go beyond an intellectualist formation which attempts to rationalise life situations without having any experience of them and without integrating them in everyday life. There is a great desire for experience; the more exciting experiences are sought after; people want to experience things for themselves.

Experience is an *opportunity* because when someone learns from life formation becomes more personalised, practical and in depth. Everyone needs it, not just the young; older confreres too need to have an experience that is powerful and authentic of God, of the charism, of the poor, of fraternal and expressive relationships.

Experience is also a *challenge* because it can become an end in itself, whereas one should be experiencing values. Different experiences can be fragmentary and disjointed; therefore there is need for the help of a spiritual guide who facilitates the unification of the experiences and fosters the interiorisation of the values. It is not a question of having many experiences, but of choosing a few well-prepared ones, powerful experiences that require analysing so that the *particular experiences* become a personal *experience*.

Human Relations and affectivity

In present day culture one senses a great need for authentic human relationships. Among young people there is a great thirst for companionship and friendship, for informal and affectionate relationships; but adults too are looking for enriching and meaningful relationships. For fraternal life to be a form of prophecy it needs to have something to say about the ability to form relationships, it needs to be attractive humanly speaking and it needs to be able to create family-style surroundings.

The desire to meet together certainly constitutes an *opportunity* because the ongoing experience of a deepening in human relationships makes fidelity a more personal matter and makes it possible to invite others to share in a relationship and to experience authenticity and communication, but above all love for and a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. Fraternal life leads to greater attention being paid to ordinary daily aspects of living together. However, the need is also felt to broaden the relationships and cultivate the affections.

Fraternal life also constitutes a challenge because it demands that we focus on the conversion and the renewal of our communities. What sort of environment, from the human point of view, does the young candidate find in our communities and what level of communication do the older confreres experience? This is a challenge which introduces the problem of how to “regenerate” the communities especially when they are ageing. It is a challenge because it is not easy to find formation personnel who are well-balanced and able to make a personal approach, who know how to avoid individualism and to offer wise personal and spiritual accompaniment. It is also difficult to achieve emotional and affective balance in one’s own relationships and one’s own life.

Postmodernism

For consecrated life to be a prophecy for the postmodern world it needs to be able to elicit a certain fascination and to rediscover how beautiful it is.

In general, the comparison with postmodern culture is an *opportunity* to propose the values of consecrated life as an incentive, as a purification and as an alternative to the values of the world: for example, fidelity in a culture that boasts of its infidelity; a life of faith in a society without references to religious values; optimism and hope in a world full

of fears. It is also an opportunity to give direction to the generosity of the young, their thirst for friendship, their desire for self-fulfilment, their search for God.

The comparison with postmodern culture is also a *challenge* since the prevailing culture of the media promises a false but attractive happiness; it is up to us to offer, especially to the young, a personal and authentic experience of Christ, and to show with words and deeds that consecrated life can provide complete personal self-fulfilment. A new charismatic, prophetic and credible form of expression of consecrated life is needed; and at the same time, a new charismatic equilibrium between the freshness of its renewal and its historical expressions.

Multicultural world

We are living in a world that is becoming more and more a “global village”: from a culture of individualism we are moving on, not without a certain resistance, to the meeting together of different cultural worlds. It is a world characterised by globalisation, by the speed of change, by complexity, fragmentation and secularisation. In all of this the consecrated person sees the action of the Spirit of God Who in every situation acts how and when He wishes.

Cultural diversity is an *opportunity* because it encourages solidarity, the welcoming of the diverse, voluntary service experiences, empathy with the poor, respect for the environment, the search for peace. It also fosters an ‘international spirit’ and an experience of the universal approach of communities of consecrated life in the form of availability for service wherever it is requested. In this way the charism is enriched. In the younger generations the process of knowledge, of welcoming and of dialogue is fostered.

Cultural diversity is also a *challenge* because, for the majority of adult consecrated persons, it is difficult to enter into the multicultural experience. The need arises to think again about the language used and the way of transmitting values to anthropological worlds that are distant and alien. Formation to fidelity in a world of constant change and culturally pluridirectional, making a life of faith possible in a society basically without any reference to religious and Christian values make the task of formation which needs to be ongoing and open to intercultural experience very difficult.

Renunciation

Renunciation is an essential part of life, and therefore of consecrated life; when it is accepted in a positive manner it becomes a liberating and enriching experience. You cannot choose everything, even though the person who lives for love and chooses love, has an experience that is all embracing.

Renunciation is an *opportunity* to live our consecrated life with authenticity and to make of it a real “spiritual therapy” for humanity. It purifies love and makes it authentic.

Renunciation is also a *challenge* because consecrated life offers a fast lane for life, often sparing the consecrated person the problems and the burdens of ordinary life. Indeed the temptation of consumerism, a comfortable life, being well-off, travel and the possession of ‘personal media’, impinges on consecrated persons in all cultures. It is necessary to return to the essentials in our lives and in our organisations. For young people especially, but not only them, renunciation can be a problem. We have to help them to understand that it is not a matter of sacrificing something but of choosing something, indeed Some One: the Lord Jesus and following Him. In Him is to be found

full freedom, joy and fulfilment. This means being open and allowing Jesus to enter into our lives and to take the first place there; we are open to being free from those forms of conditioning that can prevent us from making and living this radical choice.

Fidelity

Fidelity is the obvious consequence of the option that the consecrated person makes for God, arousing in his life the fire of a passion for Him and for the Lord Jesus even to the offering of one's life for ever.

Fidelity is an *opportunity* because it makes more profound and personal the relationship with the Lord Jesus and with His Kingdom. It makes possible witnessing to God as the absolute and permanent value, which remains fixed in the turmoil of cultural changes. It enables us to see the world through positive eyes and to identify the positive experiences of fidelity in the family, in the community, in the Church, as the action of the Holy Spirit in history. It also enables us to see the meaning of the sacrifices the consecrated person is called to make.

Fidelity is also a *challenge* because it is shaken by the fragmented and transient nature of today's culture. In this way it needs to be constantly accompanied in a personal and community fashion in order to pass from narcissism to a dying to oneself in the following of Christ. On the other hand, fidelity cannot remain merely on the theoretical level; it has to be a living fidelity, a meeting with Christ, which absorbs the whole person and leads the consecrated person from fragmented "experiences" to the fundamental "experience." In addition, the fidelity of the consecrated person is a challenge that needs constant further exploration, which becomes the daily question: who am I being faithful to? Fidelity is a challenge that needs the creation of a faithful community that can generate fidelity, that can help the passage from superficiality to the profound roots of fidelity, that builds and renews charismatic fidelity and which recognises the way ahead and how its processes work. Fidelity is no longer considered something that lasts all through life but can only exist as fidelity "for the time being." For this reason in some Congregations the question often arises about whether or not to consider the possibility of incorporating some kind of temporary commitment in consecrated life. On this issue we Salesians have said that we are not in favour. To us it seems that we ought rather to undertake formation in such a way as to make the confreres capable of offering themselves totally to God for ever.

There is no doubt that the wealth and diversity of the possibilities for mankind nowadays affords great opportunities for development, as well as new formative tasks for consecrated life. This is not to underestimate the determining contribution of grace and the Spirit, which in fact act precisely through the psychological and anthropological dynamics of the individual. Therefore formation will make us careful to be open to Spirit, so as to start precisely from these human expressions and to take them to their maturity and fullness.

2. VOCATION AND FORMATION, GIFT AND TASK

The question is asked: why do we have to become involved in forming those called by God and sent to us by Him? Precisely because in the Congregation we consider them to be God's gift to the young we take such care of them and we are conscious of our responsibility to help them to rise to the heights of the vocation they have received.

Therefore we try to examine more closely the two inseparable elements of a true call, that is to say, the vocation and formation, the gift and the task, which are like the two sides of the same coin.

The first of the articles that the Constitutions devote to formation makes a fundamental affirmation, a real profession of faith expressed from the point of view of the person called: “we respond to this call [from Jesus] by committing ourselves to an adequate ongoing formation.” (C. 96)⁶

The Constitutions therefore see formation as a response to the vocation. They don't equate it with the long period of time leading up to a full and definitive involvement in the common mission, nor, even less, do they reduce it simply to religious and professional studies to which as a specific preparation for the personal mission it is necessary to devote oneself. Everything that we have to do in order to recognise, take on board and identify ourselves with the plan to which God is calling us to is formation: “*formation* is the joyful acceptance of the gift of one's vocation and its actualization at every moment of one's life and in every situation.”⁷ Formation, one might say, is that *state of life* into which someone enters who feels himself called by Jesus to stay with Him and then to be sent out by Him (cf *Mk* 3,13).

By calling us God has given us an identity. And we only respond to Him in an appropriate manner when we ourselves recognise our identity in His call.. Therefore Salesian identity is not to be equated with what we are already, nor with what we want to be; but rather it coincides with His plan, with what He wants us to become. So therefore, identifying ourselves with what God wants from us is the purpose of all formation. ‘Salesian, become what you are called to be!’ God's call which is a totally unmerited grace, precedes and motivates the effort to respond appropriately to it, in which formation basically consists, and “for which the Lord daily gives us his grace” (C. 96): vocation and formation are two ways in which grace works within us; vocation is the grace of being called, which precedes, accompanies and which needs formation; formation is the grace to become worthy of the vocation, which needs to be cultivated, maintained and constantly given greater depth.

2.1 Vocation: grace at its origin

“We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us through the gift of His Spirit and sends us out to be apostles of the young.” (C. 3)
The vocation is never a *personal life-plan* which the individual carries through with his own strength or nurtures with his own finest dreams; rather, it is a *call from Him Who*, going before and transcending him, proposes to the one chosen a goal which is beyond him and his own possibilities. In the first case, the person feels *the desire and the enthusiasm to do something with his life*, or better, proposes to himself – and believes he can do so – to make something of his life. In the second case, he feels that he is *being invited to make something of his life*, something that he can imagine and identify only if he responds to the personal call. Believing that one has been called means knowing that one has been chosen (cf *Jn* 15,16). “The primacy of love is His. The following is only a response in love to the love of God. If “we love” it is “because He first loved us”(1*Jn* 4:10,19). This means recognising

⁶ “To respond to God's call means to live in an attitude of formation” (*The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*. Guide to the reading of the Salesian Constitutions, Rome 1986, p. 682).

⁷ *Formation of Salesians of Don Bosco* [FSDB], Rome 2000, 1

His personal love with that heartfelt awareness which made the apostle Paul say: “Christ loved *me* and gave up his life for *me*” (*Gal 2:20*).⁸

Life as vocation

“*The life of everyone is a vocation* and should be understood, accepted and fulfilled as such.”⁹ Before coming to know in the call one’s own life’s destiny, before coming to recognise that one has been called in order to do something with one’s life, the believer knows that he has been called by God by the simple fact of being alive: “He made us and we belong to him,” the Psalmist acknowledges (*Psalms 100,3*).

Life, the Word of God

Life, our own existence is God’s word, and at the same time the response owed to our God. It is of this that the story of Hannah the mother of Samuel reminds us. She asks for a son, and when she is given one she feels that he belongs to God, and in fact she takes him to the temple of the Lord at Shilo in order “to bring him and present him before the Lord; and he will stay there for ever.” “This is the child I prayed for, and the *Lord granted me* what I asked him. Now I make him over to the Lord for the whole of his life. *He is made over to the Lord.*” (*1Sam 1, 22.27-28*). Calling man God brought him into existence. The person called is obliged to respond, With the life He has given, God has made dialogue the way we are to live in His presence. Being made in the image of a God Who thought of us as being in dialogue with Himself, we shall be able to live only in dialogue with this God. Life is the way God speaks on our behalf and therefore it demands that man speaks on His behalf. It is not by chance that we are born from nothing as part of a divine conversation. He Who has imagined us while conversing with Himself, was able to consider us His image because we can converse like Him and with Him.

“From the moment he has been called to life by God, the believer knows that his presence in the world is not the result of his own decision: a person lives not because of his own desire, because he wants to, but because he was desired and loved... Precisely since life is the result of the divine will, it cannot be lived outside His will: someone who is not living because of his own choice, should not be living on his own terms; a life that is given has limitations that have to be respected (*Gen 2,16-17*) and tasks that have to be undertaken (*Gen 1,28-31*). Man according to the bible, by the simple fact of his being alive knows he is called by God and responsible to Him. He is alive because God wanted him to be and to live according to His will...; he knows he is alive because he has been called by God. He knows he will live if he remains faithful to this vocation (*Gen 3,17-19*).”¹⁰

It is in this way, making our own God’s call, that we find our good and we discover our freedom: “Each person finds his good by adherence to God’s plan for him, in order to realise it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free (cf. *Jn 8, 32*).”¹¹

Life a response owed to God

⁸ CONGREGATION FOR FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE (CIVCSVA), *Starting afresh from Christ*, Rome 2002, n. 22.

⁹ *Criteria and norms for Salesian vocation discernment* [Supplement to FSDB], 30

¹⁰ Juan J. BARTOLOMÉ, “La Llamada de Dios. Una reflexión bíblica sobre la vocación”: *Misión Joven* 131 (1987) 6.

¹¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 1.

By the simple fact of living, man ought to act responsibly: since he is the only living creature that reflects God's nature of being in dialogue (*Gen* 1,26), he has to take on responsibility for creation (*Gen* 1,3-25), accept the responsibility of procreation (*Gen* 1,27-30; *Psalms* 8,6-9; *Sir* 17,1-10) and responsibility for his brother (*Gen* 4,9). This responsibility on which his relationship with God depends, and which he carries out by taking care of the world and of his brothers and sisters, is man's constant debt. He pays it in so far as watching over creation in the name and in the place of God, he remains in dialogue with Him.

The biblical person therefore lives in God's presence with a permanent debt of responding. The person who owes his life to a Word of God cannot remain silent in His presence; the believer who remains silent in God's presence has ceased to exist for God; He has imagined us speaking, and we are His image if we are in dialogue with Him: only the dead cannot remember Him, only the dead do not praise Him (cf *Psalms* 6,6; 88,11-13; *Is* 38,18). Everything that life offers us can be a reason for prayer¹² and it is a task we have the responsibility to fulfil: no human situation exists which is not worth commenting on, speaking about, sharing with God. There is no need of our brothers and sisters nor a brother or sister in need to which we do not have to respond. We recall that Cain did not want to speak about his brother Abel, in fact he declared that he did not have to respond for him because shortly before he had taken his life: the murder had preceded the refusal to speak about his brother.

The vocation, a life-time task

For the believer life is not a matter of chance or still less the result of human will: every life is willed by God; to every human life God assigns a place, a task in His saving plan. Whoever comes into existence has been willed by God: that existence has a meaning at least so far as God is concerned, and such a life achieves its full meaning only from God.

Vocation, mission from a dialogue

It is not by chance that when in the Bible there is a description of a call by God the narrative becomes an account of the conversation or dialogue God initiates with the one He has chosen: gradually revealing the plan He has for him, God lets it be known that He is counting on him to carry it out successfully.

Unexpectedly without any merit on his part, or even wanting it, the person chosen finds himself with a task that has been given to him and *a way of life imposed on him*: one involving the generation of a people (Abram: *Gen* 12,1-4) or its liberation (Moses: *Ex* 3,1-4,23), the conception of a son (Mary: *Lk* 1,26-38) or an invitation to live with Jesus (the first four disciples: *Mk* 1,16-20). The mission that is given does not correspond to the capabilities of those called, often it has no place in their plans; neither Abram nor Mary could imagine as a possibility the offspring promised (*Gen* 15,2-3; *Lk* 1,34). Normally the mission given does not even fit in well with the activity or profession being undertaken. Moses pasturing someone else's flocks and similarly the first disciples of Jesus working

¹² "All authentic Christian prayer involves the entire life of the one who prays.... You might think that the ordinary events of daily life are of little account in comparison with great social and historical happenings, but through prayer you can discern their value and become aware of the fact that these ordinary daily occurrences have their place in the designs of God. Any situation can be the topic of prayer if you convert it into a theological experience." (*The Salesian Rector. A Ministry for the Animation and Government of the local Community*, Rome 1986, 209-210)

with their nets are engaged in activities very different from the those to which they were called, that is to say leading a national liberation movement (*Ex 2,21-3,1*) or being fishers of men for the kingdom of God (*Mk 1,16.19*).

The believer in the bible, knowing that his life is the result of God's decision in his regard, can exclude chance or luck good or bad. That there is a Person who at a certain time has deliberately wanted him and at that particular moment created him can never, as long as he lives, cease to make him feel that he is loved and neither will he ever be a hostage to fate nor will the unforeseen rage against him. Nevertheless, precisely on this account since he didn't bring himself into being, neither on his own can he make his own plans about his life. He is not his own master; he remains dependent on the will of the One Who loved him so much as to want him to have life and be similar to Him. Therefore his own life shows that he is a plan of God that has to be implemented. His own existence proves the prior existence of a divine plan for him. Life is always mission, having been first of all gift; it is task and grace, since it was not an automatic inheritance nor a payment due to him.

The mission, home and reason for formation

God can very well dispose of the life of a man since it was He Who gave it to him. The accounts of the calls, significantly numerous in the Bible, clearly show this characteristic feature of the living God: God reveals to the person called that He is counting on him, sometimes, decidedly in spite of himself, and at others even against his own will. No matter how many objections he raises the one called cannot avoid the call. At least not unless God withdraws his invitation, the one sent will always be such; not even fleeing from God can he free himself from Him and from His will, as Jonah had to learn (*Jonah 1,1-3,3*). And what is even more serious, more than one of those called will feel that his life has been stolen from him, that he has been violently seized and a mission imposed on him that did not enter into his calculations nor fit in with his ability as Jeremiah shows (*Jer 1,5*) and also Paul (*Gal 1,15*).

God comes to an agreement with those He calls while conversing with them. The God who calls by speaking with someone, turns the chosen person into a questioner. In addressing the one called, God reveals to him that he wants him and why he wants him. Yet the only knowledge about God and about himself that the one called acquires is that accepting God's call consists in knowing that he is destined for others: When He calls the God of the Bible wants the person called for his own sake certainly but also for others. It is precisely in this that the surprise of the call consists: he has to try to give the response that is due to God for his vocation, by responding to those to whom he has been sent. God calls for him to stay with Him and to send him: intimate friendship with Him and the mission on behalf of others are the way of living the choice; they are its consequence and its proof. Everything one does to learn to be friends and not servants of the Lord, and to carry out the mission, to prepare oneself for it and to identify oneself with it is formation. The formation of the Salesian, of its very nature, is religious and apostolic because it is guided and motivated by the mission.

The only response which the God of the call considers valid is that which implements His call, that is to say the one he makes when he gives himself to those to whom God, when He called him by name, had in mind for him. Accepting and living out a vocation implies therefore a life of obedience to the task received: exclusive service to the young is the response God expects from a Salesian. It is not mere coincidence if we are losing a sense of our duty towards the young, when we are losing our taste and our desire for prayer. Even less should we be surprised if every attempt to free ourselves from the Salesian mission

impoverishes our community prayer and makes it more difficult. It is not that God is distancing Himself from us or preventing us from feeling Him close, it is the fact that we are distancing ourselves from the young and we are unable to be close to their problems. We believe ourselves to be abandoned by God because and when we are abandoning "our mission which is truly at home..., among the young in need."¹³

As Salesians, we are indebted to God and to the young. This debt arises from the grace received: it comes into existence and is maintained by the vocation, and it is settled by "adequate ongoing" formation (C. 96). "Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, the Salesian *learns* to meet God through those to whom he is sent." (C. 95). Formation consists fundamentally and primarily in this learning process. The goal is to meet God in the life we are living as we respond to the call; the way to success and the choices of method made constitute the formation process which every chosen person lives in person. It won't be necessary to leave the life each one is living if this is his response to his own vocation. Wherever an awareness of our doing in God's sight whatever He has entrusted to us is lacking, there cannot be any real formation no matter how much one studies nor however many years are spent in the so-called 'houses and stages of formation.'

2.2 Formation: grace as a task

Quite clearly we are not speaking in abstract terms about vocation and formation. As we have seen from the beginning both of them, vocation and formation, are faced with their own particular challenges which in my opinion are arising from the historical cultural context in which we are living and from the way in which the Church and the Congregation are present.

As far as the social context is concerned, there are some aspects that in that background "closely effect the vocation experience": on one hand the value of the individual, and on the other subjectivism and individualism; on one hand the dignity of woman and on the other ambiguity in her regard; on one hand the revaluation of sexuality, and on the other some of its distorted expressions; on one hand the richness of pluralism, and on the other relativism and weakness of thought; on one hand the value of freedom and on the other arbitrariness; on one hand life's complexity and on the other fragmentation; on one hand globalisation and on the other particularism; on one hand a grater desire for spirituality and on the other secularism.¹⁴

As far as the Church is concerned, she would like to repond to the challenges of the present age with the New Evangelisation, which in its turn requires a new evangeliser, who makes Christ the subject and the content of his preaching, the mystery of the cross the criterion of Christian authenticity, the Gospel his strength and his light. In this way he will be able to bring together harmoniously evangelisation, human development, Christian culture, and promote cultural, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

On her part, from the Second Vatican Council onwards, the Congregation has tried to update herself in order to respond to these challenges and has committed herself to the renewal of the vocation experience and her formation praxis. From this point of view, the *Ratio* is far more than just a document.

Its fundamental intuition is that which regards **charismatic identity and vocational identification**. We are convinced that if, through formation, we succeed in ensuring a clear Salesian identity, the confreres will feel themselves furnished with a collection of values, attitudes and criteria which will help them to face up successfully to

¹³ E. VIGANÒ, "Strengthen your brothers", AGC 295 (1980), p. 26.

¹⁴ Cf FSDB, 7

today's culture and to effectively carry out the Salesian mission. I should therefore like to address the subject of formation from this point of view.

God's call putting young people at the centre of our response to our vocation has obliged us to live a particular kind of spirituality, which requires a specific formation: "we believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer us the grace of meeting with Him and to dispose us to serve Him in them."¹⁵ Since we cannot understand our experience of God without reference to the young to whom God has sent us, in the same way we cannot carry out our formation without a life lived for their sake: "The religious and apostolic nature of the Salesian calling dictates the specific direction our formation must take" (C. 97).

The Salesian knows that his apostolic life constitutes the special location and the central reason for his dialogue with God: since God has given him that task for the whole of his life it is in identifying himself with it and carrying it out that he is able to respond to Him. "God's call reaches him as he lives out his mission among the young; that is often the place where he begins to follow Christ. In the mission are exercised, revealed and developed the gifts he has received at his consecration. A single movement of love draws him to God and directs him towards the young. (cf C. 10). He turns his educational activity among the young into an act of worship and a potential meeting-place with God."¹⁶

The commitment to achieve this is called formation; in fact, "*Salesian formation means identifying oneself with the vocation which the Spirit has raised up through Don Bosco, possessing his ability to share it with others, and drawing inspiration from his attitude and method of formation.*"¹⁷

Charismatic Identity and vocational identification

"Conforming ourselves to Jesus Christ and spending our lives for the young, as did Don Bosco", sums up "the vocation of the Salesian", his identity. "All our formation, both initial and ongoing, consists in acquiring and actualising this identity in individual persons and in the community." It is "the fountainhead of our formation process and its constant point of reference." Salesian identity is "the heart of all our formation,"¹⁸ its norm and its goal." In other words, *what distinguishes our formation* - which cannot be generic - *is our Salesian identity*: it spells out the tasks and fundamental requirements."¹⁹

Objectives of formation

Forming oneself implies understanding the form of life to which one is called and identifying oneself more fully with it. As has already been said, in consecrated life formation does not coincide with the period of study that precedes the taking of the vows, the priestly ministry, a time therefore, that is limited and not to be repeated. Rather it is ongoing, never finished and "must endure for a lifetime and involve the *whole* person, heart,

¹⁵ GC23, 95

¹⁶ FSDB, 29

¹⁷ FSDB, 4

¹⁸ Cf FSDB, 25

¹⁹ FSDB, 41

mind and strength (cf. *Mt 22:37*) reshaping the person in the likeness of the Son who gives himself to the Father for the good of humanity.”²⁰

“It is through formation, in fact, that we achieve our identity as Salesians and acquire the maturity needed to live and work in conformity with the founding charism. Starting out from an initial state of enthusiasm for Don Bosco and his mission for youth, we arrive at a true conformity with Christ and a stronger identification with our Founder; we embrace the Constitutions as our Rule of life and identity-card, and develop a strong sense of belonging to the Congregation and to the provincial community.”²¹

What we are called to be determines the efforts we have to make in order to become that; charismatic identity is the cause and guides the task of identification, personal and as community, which formation is. In other words, the **objectives of formation** to Salesian life are determined by the Salesian vocation itself, ultimately God Who calls us to undertake these tasks:

1°. *Sent to the young: conforming oneself to Christ the Good Shepherd.*

Like Don Bosco, the Salesian has as the first and main focus of his mission “the young who are “poor, abandoned and in danger”, those who have greater need of love and evangelisation” (C. 26).²²

It is in responding to this mission that we achieve this conformation²³ to Christ, the Good Shepherd, the fruit and natural guarantee of which is pastoral charity. Loving young people as Christ loves them “becomes for the Salesian a plan of life”; what he undertakes to represent the love of God for the young (cf C. 2: *to be in the Church signs and bearers*) will identify him with Christ, the apostle of the Father. “It is through the young that the Lord enters to take first place in the life of the Salesian, and the yearnings of Christ the Redeemer find an echo in his motto, *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*, which forms the unifying element of his whole life.”²⁴

The Salesian conforms himself with Christ in carrying out his mission, “the parameter of our identity, secure and well-defined,”²⁵ with an ‘oratorian heart’,²⁶ responding to the needs of the young with imagination and educational sensitivity. It is in our daily life and not in special or extraordinary activities, “in the reality of every day the Salesian turns his identity of apostle of youth into a living experience.”²⁷

2°. *Made brothers by a single mission: making common life the place and the object of formation.*

²⁰ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 15

²¹ FSDB, 41

²² Cf SGC, 45-49

²³ The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* speaks about a “special communion of love with Christ” (VC, 15).

²⁴ FSDB, 30

²⁵ SGC, *Presentation of the Rector Major*, 31 January 1972, page xvi

²⁶ “ Drawing inspiration from the example and teachings of Don Bosco, the Salesian lives the Preventive System as a spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral experience. His dealings with the young are marked by cordiality and by an active and friendly presence, that fosters leadership. He joyfully accepts the labours and sacrifices that his contact with young people implies, convinced that through them he will find his way to holiness.” (FSDB, 32)

²⁷ FSDB, 42.

“To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation” (C. 49). In fact, living out the mission in a community fashion is not a matter of choice for us; we are not left free in accepting it, nor can we free ourselves from it should we feel like it; neither is it a choice made for tactical reasons so as to achieve greater apostolic efficiency; “*it is one of the most distinguishing marks of Salesian identity*. The Salesian is called to live with brothers who are consecrated like him in order to work together with them for God’s Kingdom among the young.”²⁸ By vocation, the Salesian is “a vital part of a community” and “he cultivates a profound sense of belonging to it”: “In a spirit of faith and with friendly support the Salesian lives the *family spirit* in his community, contributing day by day to the growth of communion among all the members. Convinced that the *mission* is entrusted to the community, he commits himself to work together with his confreres according to an overall plan and a joint strategy.”²⁹

Since “the assimilation of the Salesian spirit is fundamentally a fact of living communication” (*Reg* 85), formation, as the identification with the Salesian charism, needs even more that communication which “has as its natural context the community”.³⁰ In addition to being “the natural environment for vocational growth”, “the very life of the community, united in Christ and open to the needs of the times is itself a factor in formation” (C. 99). Living in and for the community is living in formation.

3°. *Consecrated by God*: witnessing to the radical nature of the Gospel.

“Our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and *the practice of the evangelical counsels* are the inseparable elements of our consecration” (C. 3).

“Salesian spiritual life is a deep experience of God that is sustained by, and in its turn sustains, a form of life based entirely on Gospel values (cf C. 60). For this reason, *the Salesian embraces the kind of obedient, poor and virginal life that Jesus chose for himself while on earth ... As he grows in the radicalism of the Gospel giving it an intensely apostolic slant*, he turns his life into an educational message, addressed especially to young people, proclaiming “that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one’s whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour » (C. 62)”.³¹

Consequently the practice of the evangelical counsels, in addition to being a message and a method of evangelisation,³² “is his badge of identity and test of formation.”³³

4°. *Sharing vocation and mission*: animating apostolic communities in the spirit of Don Bosco.

“The Salesian cannot fully think about his vocation in the Church without reference to those who with him share in carrying out the Founder’s will. Through his profession

²⁸ FSDB, 33. “ “The salesian vocation is inconceivable without concrete communion in common life among the members. It is precisely the communal bond between the confreres that constitutes their living and working together as Salesians” (*The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 408).

²⁹ FSDB, 33

³⁰ FSDB, 219

³¹ FSDB, 91

³² Cfr VC, 96; CG24, 152.

³³ FSDB, 34

he enters the Salesian Congregation and becomes part of the *Salesian Family*”;³⁴ in which we have special responsibilities: “to preserve unity of spirit and to foster dialogue and fraternal collaboration for [...] mutual enrichment and greater apostolic effectiveness” (C. 5).

By the fact of being such, “every Salesian is an animator and strives always to fulfil this task more efficiently”:³⁵ responding to his own vocation makes him co-responsible for the Salesian charism which in their different ways the various members of the Salesian Family are living. “*Formation gives the Salesian a strong sense of his own particular identity, opens him up to communion in the Salesian spirit and mission with the members of the Salesian Family who live different vocations... The Communion will be the stronger ‘the clearer each one is about his own identity and the more the different vocations are understood, respected and benefited from’*³⁶... Formation to communion in Salesian values increases our awareness of the task of animating in whatever concerns our charism and prepares us for it.”³⁷

5°. *At the heart of the Church: building the Church, the sacrament of salvation.*

“The Salesian vocation places us at the heart of the Church” (C. 6): “the spiritual experience of the Salesian is therefore an experience of the Church.”³⁸ If for Don Bosco loving the Church was a characteristic feature of his life and of his holiness, for us “being Salesians is our intensive way of being Church.”³⁹

The Salesian comes to be so by growing in his sense of belonging to the Church,⁴⁰ engaged in her preoccupations and problems, working in her pastoral programmes and involving the young people in them, living in heartfelt communion with the Pope and with those who are working for the Kingdom (cf C. 13).⁴¹

6°. *Open to reality: inculturating the charism.*

The vocation of the Salesian demands “openness and discernment in the face of the changes taking place in the life of the Church and of the world, especially among youth and the working classes.”⁴² Like Don Bosco, the Salesian sees the historical situation “as woven into the fabric of his vocation,” “a challenge and a urgent summons to discernment and action... He tries to understand the cultural developments taking place in everyday life, reflects seriously on them, considers them in the light of Redemption.”⁴³ Interpreting reality in gospel terms, in particular that of the young and working class people, is obligatory for us if we want to respond appropriately to the Salesian vocation: it is an integral part therefore of the commitment to formation.

³⁴ FSDB, 35

³⁵ FSDB, 35

³⁶ GC24, 138

³⁷ FSDB, 45

³⁸ FSDB, 82

³⁹ *The Project of life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ “Our way of living our membership of the Church and of contributing to its construction consists in being genuine and faithful Salesians, i.e. in being ever more ourselves” (*The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 122).

⁴¹ Cf FSDB, 83

⁴² FSDB, 42

⁴³ FSDB, 37

“Called to incarnate himself among the youth of a particular place and culture, the Salesian stands in need of an *incultured formation*. Through discernment and dialogue with his own situation he seeks to imbue his life’s principles with evangelical and Salesian values, and to implant the Salesian experience in his own context. This fruitful relationship gives rise to ways of life and pastoral approaches which are more effective in so far as they are consistent with the founding charism and with the unifying action of the Holy Spirit (cf VC 80).”⁴⁴

Formation methodology

“Responding to the invitation of Christ who calls personally means to make the values of our vocation become real and alive.”⁴⁵ Considering the century-old Salesian experience from Don Bosco to our own days, the theoretical identification of the charismatic values can be considered today a goal sufficiently reached. The greater challenge that formation faces nowadays consists rather in the method of formation, in how to make the vocational project a personal plan of life, how to move on from values that are appreciated to values that are lived, how to transform the Salesian charism into a daily reality

Inspired by a vocation that is gratuitous, formation, before being a methodological process, is a lived experience of grace, a gift gratefully received and a responsibility that has been taken on, through a personal dialogue with God that is not transferable: it is, and in this order, “grace of the Spirit, a personal attitude, an education for life.”⁴⁶ The Spirit of God is ultimately the author of the call and the only true ‘formator’ of the one called: He initiated a dialogue with his project and He is capable of sustaining it with His power. In this way formative activity remains open to the idea of the mystery of God and of the individual person; without this interior dialogue nothing is guaranteed; only too well does our personal lived experience demonstrate this as does our experience as educators.

From the declared priority of the Spirit in the formation process,⁴⁷ from Salesian educational experience, from the guidelines of the Church and of the Congregation, and from an analysis of the situation regarding formation, in these last few years some choices have been made which “appear indispensable for attaining the objectives of the process of formation, and continually fostering the growth of a vocation.”⁴⁸

1°. Reaching the individual in the depth of his being

Formation, “the personal assimilation of Salesian identity,”⁴⁹ takes place in *being like* Don Bosco, rather than in *working like him*. This obliges us to concentrate our efforts in formation as a priority on the **interiorisation** of the experience without limiting ourselves to the acquisition of new knowledge, or repeating patterns of formal external behaviour which don’t really express the values we are called to live and are just forms

⁴⁴ FSDB, 43.

⁴⁵ FSDB, 205

⁴⁶ FSDB, 1

⁴⁷ “ Docile to the Holy Spirit he develops his talents and his gifts of grace in a constant effort of conversion and renewal” (C. 99). Cf CRIS, *Los elementos esenciales de la enseñanza de la Iglesia sobre la vida religiosa* (1983), 47.

⁴⁸ FSDB, 206. Formation “is certainly a gift of the Spirit but it is also helped by a proper pedagogy.” (FSDB, 209).

⁴⁹ FSDB, 208

of adaptation to the environment.⁵⁰ Without interiorisation there is a two-fold danger. On the one hand formation is reduced to mere information, when the assimilation of values is taken for granted solely because they are often spoken about. On the other hand, information is reduced to a simple arrangement, when a style of life is imitated without its real motivations being appropriated.

The interiorisation of charismatic values necessarily implies the existence of profound personal **motivations** and it becomes unattainable if one does not succeed in making charismatic values become personal convictions. Only by having strong reasons for becoming what we are called to be can we discover as values those elements which together form Salesian life, have experience of them and take them on board to the extent of making them into a co-natural way of being. It is in this way that a person is reached in the depth of his being and his transformation occurs.

In addition to this, one particular aspect of Salesian education can be pointed out which is that it **starts from the actual person**, from his personal history, from the progress he has already made in the various personal aspects, avoiding the temptation to make everyone the same or put them on the same level for practical purposes, without having respect for the rhythms of different peoples' maturing process. This brings with it the task of helping the person to know and accept himself, to become aware of his convictions and subject them to discernment, as an essential condition for building on the truth and on the acceptance of himself. It also implies a precise knowledge of the person's needs and the drawing up of a suitable itinerary. Finally it implies a clear proposal for the project of Salesian life, with all its demands, without any room for facile enthusiasm and passing emotions.

Self-knowledge, which is already a value is directed towards the formative experience of the examination of the person in relation to the vocational identity he wishes to take on. In this way a profile with which the person wishes to identify himself can be produced (Christ, in Don Bosco's way, paraphrasing Saint Paul's expression: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ") and starting from this profile, a plan of spiritual growth can be drawn up which favours the developing identification, which as is logical, has no end and is suitable for the whole of life.

The one with the **primary responsibility** for this interior identification is the person called. It is not a task that can be delegated, nor deferred: no one else can undertake it in the place of the one called, nor can this person carry it out just when he wants to. The person called, precisely because he is called, and in order to respond to the call has to become fully involved without any reservation, with generosity and in a radical manner, with conviction and enthusiasm. Gradually he will grow in his sense of belonging to the family of which he wishes to be part, and to feel at home.⁵¹

2°. *Animating a unifying formative experience.*

⁵⁰ "The process of growing in one's Salesian identity takes place in a person's heart, at the most intimate level of his affections, feelings, convictions and motivations, and is not limited to the acquisition or transmission of knowledge and patterns of behaviour. "Formation should therefore have a *profound effect on individuals*, so that their every attitude and action, at important moments as well as in the ordinary events of life, will show that they belong completely and joyfully to God» (cf C. 98)" (FSDB, 208).

⁵¹ "Only then will formation attain its basic purpose *when the Salesian allows God to address him in the depths of his heart*, makes his very own the criteria and values of the Salesian vocation, and is able to renounce opposing attitudes, formulate a personal plan, and unify his own life around true and genuine motives" (FSDB, 209).

Formation necessarily takes place by means of a long varied process, in various different communities and with a variety of people being responsible. So that it may be an *integrated and personalised experience* it is necessary that it be understood and implemented as a **single project**, which takes place in a single process, although the practical elements and emphases may vary according to the different stages of life of the Salesian. The drawing up of the project is a community responsibility:⁵² it goes beyond individual preferences or needs and hands on the foundational charism in a way that is accessible and educationally sound.

To avoid “the risk of turning formation into a collection of disjointed and discontinuous activities left to the individual undertaking of persons or groups,”⁵³ formation needs to be thought of as a **unified and structured project** and lived out with a planning mentality. The plan includes all that objectively constitutes the Salesian charism (the general aims), and also what formation involves at each stage as well as the formative contributions with which this is to be achieved (the aims for each stage, the strategies to achieve them and methods of assessment).⁵⁴

Given that the formation process is at the service of the individual,⁵⁵ his reaching maturity requires ‘psychological’ rather than chronological periods of time. Hence, putting aside a certain opinion according to which things of the spirit cannot be evaluated, formation ought to be open to assessment on the basis of the **achievement of the formation aims**. In formation it is not a question of getting through the stages and completing a curriculum. Rather, it is a question of integrating values and maintaining a strong vocational pressure. One formation stage ought to prepare for the next. Moving on from one to another ought to be determined “more by the attainment of objectives than by the passing of time or the curriculum of studies.. *The pace of growth in vocation is maintained* without any slackening of effort and it is sustained by increasing responsibilities and timely assessments.”⁵⁶

As in every situation of education, the ‘one called’ is the one who gives unity to all the procedures, the motivations, the activities, since only he can integrate everything in a structured way with the apostolic project that Salesian life is, as Don Bosco did, who – to use the words of Don Rua – “took no step, said no word, took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young” (C. 21).

3°. *Ensuring the formative environment and the co-responsibility of everyone.*

⁵² “ *The plan* is not so much a text to be put into practice as an *expression and instrument of a community that chooses to work together* to help each confrere tread the path of his formation” (FSDB, 213).

⁵³ FSDB, 210

⁵⁴ “ The contents, experiences, attitudes, activities and key-events are all thought out, programmed and directed according to the purpose of each phase and of the whole of formation. The pedagogy used is one that overcomes the danger of fragmentation and improvisation, and does away with aimless or unfocused action.” (FSDB, 212).

⁵⁵ “*It is the duty of the Salesian* to adopt a clear approach to his formation from the very beginning, to understand the purpose of the entire process and of its individual stages, to effect the passage from one phase to the next, responsibly making his own the aims of the new formation phase, to devise for himself practical objectives and lines of action, and to assess and communicate the implementation of his personal formation plan. For their part, *those responsible for formation have a duty* to accept and implement the directives of the provincial plan and make sure that the candidate embraces the formation programme and adheres to it faithfully in his community” (FSDB, 213).

⁵⁶ FSDB, 212

“The assimilation of the Salesian spirit is fundamentally a fact of living communication” (Reg 85). As was the case of Jesus with his first disciples (Mk 3,13-14; cf *Pastores dabo vobis*, 60), and of Don Bosco with the first Salesians,⁵⁷ formation has to take place in a climate of vocational dialogue, the daily experience of living together and shared responsibility.

The **primary responsibility** clearly falls on the person called, the “necessary and irreplaceable agent in his own formation...[which] is ultimately a self formation.”⁵⁸ “Each Salesian accepts responsibility for his own formation” (C. 99). He is the one who has to come to know, accept and live out his own vocation and act accordingly. He does this as “he assumes the Rule of life as his point of reference and takes part in the daily experience and growth process of his community... One of the practical ways in which he shows responsibility for his formation is by having a *personal plan for his own life*.”⁵⁹

The Salesian ought to find in his **community** “*the natural environment for vocational growth...* The very life of the community, united in Christ and open to the needs of the times is itself a factor in formation” (C. 99). Clearly it is not sufficient that there exists a certain level of common life; the community is a proper environment for formation when it succeeds in making all collectively engaged in formation, that is to say when it is organised in such a way as to foster within itself deeper interpersonal relationships, co-responsible apostolic zeal, professional skill, educational ability, a stimulating life of prayer, a style of life that is authentically evangelical, concern for the vocational growth of each member, through a project which is his own and is shared, openness to the needs of the Church and of the young, in harmony with the Salesian Family. In particular, the community needs to appreciate its daily commitment in the educative-pastoral community considering it “the privileged space for genuine growth and intense ongoing formation.”⁶⁰

“More than a place, a material space,” communities specifically dedicated to initial formation, ought to be “a spiritual place, a way of life, an atmosphere that fosters and ensures a process of formation.”⁶¹ Above all an educational community in progress⁶² it is to be noted from the pedagogical point of view for the quality of the formation plan drawn up and agreed by all,⁶³ and for ensuring the conditions necessary to encourage the

⁵⁷ “As an educator, Don Bosco cared much about personal rapport, but he is seen above all as the creator of an environment that abounded in educational relationships and models, programmes and exhortations (events, activities, periods, celebrations, etc.), the author of a style and a pedagogy of life, the communicator of a plan to be lived together, and the animator of a community with a clear physiognomy and established reference points. The community of Valdocco, distinguished for its Preventive System, offered a setting that welcomed, directed, accompanied, encouraged and made demands.” (FSDB, 219).

⁵⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, Rome 1992, 69. Cf CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 46; CIVCSVA, *Potissimum institutioni*, Rome, 2 February 1990, 29.

⁵⁹ FSDB, 216. “In it he delineates the kind of Salesian he feels called to become and the way to achieve this, always of course in tune with Salesian values. From time to time, in dialogue with his Rector, he assesses the progress he has made in attaining his objective” (*Ibidem*).

⁶⁰ FSDB, 221

⁶¹ *Pastores dabo vobis*, 42.

⁶² Cf *Pastores dabo vobis*, 60. “In an atmosphere of shared responsibility, all strive together to adhere to certain values, objectives, experiences and formation methods, and from time to time they programme, evaluate and adjust their life, work and apostolic experiences to meet the requirements of the Salesian vocation.” (FSDB, 222).

⁶³ “To encourage everyone to take part, it seeks to get them involved in drawing up the community plan and the programme of activities, in group work, in the revision of life and in other meaningful forms of encounter and participation. Every member opts for some service that will be useful for the life in community and the strengthening of communion.” (FSDB, 223).

formation experience becoming a personal individual matter. To put the common project into daily formative practice creating a suitable atmosphere, “an indispensable condition and key strategic point” is the existence of a good team of **formation personnel**;⁶⁴ the effectiveness of their contribution will depend on their being able to be and to act not so much as individual isolated guides but as a team that represents the “mens” and the formation praxis of the Congregation and that shares discernment criteria and an educational method of accompaniment.

Within the formation team, the **Rector** of the community plays a key role, “even more demanding”⁶⁵ if he is the Rector of a formation community, given that he is responsible for animating the “growth of his confreres in their vocation.”⁶⁶ He is “*responsible for the personal formation process of each confrere*. He is also the spiritual director proposed, but not imposed on the confreres in formation.”⁶⁷ “Father, teacher and spiritual guide” (C. 55) of the community, he fosters in it a formative atmosphere through the creation of a climate of Salesian, human and apostolic values, maintaining in it an attitude of a response to God’s call and in harmony with the Church and the Congregation, considering as special occasions for making the vocation a deeply personal matter the personal chat and spiritual direction, he establishes and encourages the team of formation personal and “brings the efforts of all to converge on a common plan which is in line with the provincial plan.”⁶⁸

Quite striking for its novelty and significance, is the presentation of the **provincial community** as a “formation community but also a community in formation.” “The first responsibility of the provincial community in the area of formation is *to foster* – through a living communication - *the growth of the confreres*, especially of all in initial formation, *in their Salesian identity*. It does make a difference therefore whether the provincial community is strongly motivated or not, whether it is fervent in whatever it does or is simply tired.

The climate of prayer and witness, the sense of common responsibility and openness to situations and to the signs of the times, the fulfilment of the tasks of the Salesian mission with spiritual enthusiasm and competence, the provision of an environment that daily offers criteria and incentives for fidelity, the network of cordial relations and collaboration among the communities, among the individual confreres, among the groups of the Salesian Family and with the lay people involved in the community - all these aspects make up the provincial setting for the formation of the confreres. Such an atmosphere enables the confreres in formation to have a living experience of their Salesian identity and find support along the path of their vocation.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Cf FSDB, 222. Cf loc. cit. 234-239.

⁶⁵ FSDB, 233.

⁶⁶ FSDB, 231.

⁶⁷ FSDB, 233. “ It is his specific duty to guide each confrere, helping him to understand and make his own the phase of formation he is engaged in. He maintains a frequent and cordial dialogue with the confrere, endeavours to know his strengths and weaknesses, makes him recommendations that are clear and demanding, proposes suitable goals, supports and guides him in times of difficulty, and together with him evaluates the progress he is making in his formation.” (*Ibidem*).

⁶⁸ FSDB, 233

⁶⁹ FSDB, 227. It is clear that the real aim of these directives is to create an atmosphere in which what is presented as the ideal is in fact already lived in the formation houses, the practical expression of what was promised by public profession. The daily life of the Province, the quality of its consecrated life and the effectiveness of its apostolic mission are the indispensable requirements for the quality of the formation of a Province, while accepting the gap there can be between the ideal proposed and the reality as lived experience.

This mission of formation of the Province “is not a pure state of mind nor only a matter of good will... [but] is a principle that organises the life of the Province and embraces its whole reality. Starting from the requirements that flow from an awareness of the Salesian vocation and from shared responsibility for the mission on the part of everyone, it takes the form of a structured **Provincial Formation Plan**.”⁷⁰

4°. *Giving formative quality to everyday experience*

“Called to live with a commitment to formation in every situation,” the Salesian “tries to discern the voice of the Spirit in the events of each day, and so acquires the ability to learn from life’s experiences. He sees **his ordinary activities as effective means of formation**.” (C. 119). In fact “when lived with a concern for formation, daily life draws us closer to the truth about ourselves and gives us opportunities and encouragement to realise our plan of life.”⁷¹

This was the way Jesus taught his disciples: sharing with them life, fatigue and rest while on the road to Jerusalem. Don Bosco’s daily life was also an educational experience as he attributed “an educative value to every day duties in the playground and in the school, in the community and in the church (cf. C. 40), and also to the way of looking at and interpreting events and responding to the situations of young people, the Church and society.”⁷²

In spite of that, and this is undeniable, daily life is not formative *just in itself*; certain **conditions** have to exist so that it may become a practical and a day by day path for vocational identification:

- **Presence among the young:** “Meeting the young is for the Salesian a school of formation”; contact with the young and with their world “*makes him aware of the need for educational and professional competence, pastoral skills and constant updating*”;⁷³
- the youth mission requires **working together**, which is itself formative “turns out to be truly formative when it goes hand in hand with reflection, and still more, when reflection is permeated by an attitude of prayer. This is why the community creates times and spaces that make it possible to take a long, hard look, to read between the lines, and to share with others in all serenity; and the Salesian is called to confront his own basic motivations, his own pastoral sensitivity, and the awareness of his own identity”;⁷⁴
- **mutual communication**, “exchange of gifts and experiences for the sake of the mutual enrichment of individuals and of the community”. This needs to be learned. “On the part of the one who communicates, there is need to overcome a certain reserve or timidity in expressing one’s thoughts and feelings and to have the courage to place one’s confidence in the other person. On the part of the one who receives the communication, there is need for an ability to receive it without any lessening of esteem for the person, without judging him, and to appreciate the difference of viewpoints”;⁷⁵
- **Interpersonal relationships** “*cultivate and reveal the level of a person’s maturity, manifesting how far love has taken possession of his life and to what extent he has*

⁷⁰ FSDB, 226

⁷¹ FSDB, 251

⁷² FSDB, 251

⁷³ FSDB, 252

⁷⁴ FSDB, 253

⁷⁵ FSDB, 254.

learned to express it”.⁷⁶ Without an ability to love and without the willingness to forgive, genuine personal relationships are not possible;

- the **socio-cultural context** impinges on the way we live, feel and consider reality and, consequently, is a challenge to our own identity. In addition to knowing the current situation well it is necessary to know how to interpret it, starting from God, in order to respond in ways that are in harmony with our vocation and mission: “The ability to “see” God in the world and discern His call in the needs of times and places is a fundamental law of the process of Salesian growth.”⁷⁷

5°. *Giving quality to formative accompaniment.*

Formation requires **accompaniment**, which, in addition to being “a fundamental characteristic of Salesian educational method”, is “an indispensable requirement ” for a personal approach and for discernment. Accompaniment is intended “to guarantee the confrere the proper presence, dialogue, counselling and support in every moment of the formation process, and to see that on his part he is well-disposed and actively responsible in seeking, accepting and benefiting from this service, knowing full well that it can assume many forms and levels of intensity. Guidance is not limited to individual dialogue, but is a composite of relations, environment and pedagogy, something typical of the Preventive System: it goes from a fraternal presence at hand that evokes confidence and familiarity, to a group venture, to a community experience; from brief, occasional meetings to a systematic personal dialogue frequently sought; from a conversation about external matters to spiritual direction and sacramental confession.”⁷⁸

In addition to personal accompaniment, an aspect of the Salesian style of accompaniment is that *provided by the educational atmosphere*, coming from the interpersonal relationships, guidance from those responsible, and the one shared project. **Community accompaniment** plays a very important role in the living communication of Salesian values. Cultivating it “means ensuring the pedagogical and spiritual quality of their experience of community and the quality of animation and direction of the community [...]and aims at building a pedagogically animated community with a clear sense of identity and an experience of community that directs, stimulates and sustains through the ways in which Salesian life and action expresses itself every day. It is an undertaking for every formation setting, and especially for communities which are too small or too numerous.”⁷⁹

So that “it helps each one to assume and make his own the elements of his Salesian identity,” the accompaniment needs to be personalised; it is necessary to ensure that there are dedicated people involved in formation who are competent and united in their criteria. In Salesian tradition, personal accompaniment is carried out in different ways and with different people:

- The **Rector** “has a direct responsibility toward each confrere, he helps him realise his own personal vocation” (C. 55); during initial formation the Rector is

⁷⁶ FSDB, 255. “ On the contrary, “difficult relationships, situations of conflict which have not been suitably healed through reconciliation, act within a person, blocking the maturing process and creating difficulties in the way of the calm and joyful self-donation to the mission and to God.” (J. E. VECCHI, “Experts, witnesses and builders of communion” AGC 363 [1998], p. 31).

⁷⁷ FSDB, 257.

⁷⁸ FSDB, 258. “ On the other hand, experience teaches us that when there is no guidance or the guidance is superficial or discontinuous, it can undermine all the work of formation.” (*Ibidem*).

⁷⁹ FSDB, 259.

“responsible for the personal formation process.” He undertakes this service through the *friendly talk* “an integrating element in the Salesian system of formation, and a practical sign of care and concern for the person and his experience”. Carried out “once a month” (Reg 79), during the period of initial formation it is “a form of spiritual guidance that helps to personalize the formation programme and to assimilate its contents.”⁸⁰

- Another form of accompaniment explicitly provided for by the pedagogy of Salesian formation “are the *periodic moments of personal assessment* (“scrutinies”) by which the Council of the community helps the confrere to assess the situation of his personal formation, guides him and gives him practical encouragement in the process of his growth to maturity.”⁸¹
- **Spiritual direction**, which is “a *ministry of enlightenment, support and guidance* in discerning God’s will in order to achieve holiness; it motivates and moves a person to act, leading him to take some serious decisions in line with the Gospel and bringing him face to face with the process of growing in his Salesian vocation.”⁸² According to Salesian tradition the Rector of the formation community “is the spiritual director proposed to the confreres, without taking away their liberty to choose another spiritual director.”⁸³
- The **sacrament of reconciliation** in which “each confrere is offered a very practical and personalized spiritual direction, enriched by the efficacy proper of the sacrament. The confessor not only absolves sins but, while reconciling the penitent, encourages him along the path of fidelity to God and consequently in his own specific vocation too. . Precisely for this reason it is appropriate that during initial formation the confreres have a regular confessor who is ordinarily a Salesian.”⁸⁴

There are other forms of personal accompaniment and other people with responsibility that help the confrere in his formation experience to integrate educative-pastoral practice and commitment to intellectual formation.⁸⁵ “A key condition for guidance is the *outlook on formation assumed by the confrere in initial formation*.”⁸⁶ Finally, “guidance in the work of formation is *a part of animation*”:⁸⁷ it avoids imposing, forcing outside experiences on the one who is developing, and at the same time neglecting to advise, to suggest or to correct.

6°. *Paying attention to discernment*

⁸⁰ FSDB, 261

⁸¹ FSDB, 261

⁸² FSDB, 262

⁸³ FSDB, 262.

⁸⁴ FSDB, 263

⁸⁵ As a matter of particular interest, it is worth quoting what is required from the *other formation personnel*: “willing and dedicated; they must be aware that they are communicating the Lord’s action, the Church’s ministry, and the mind of the Congregation. Furthermore, certain convictions, attitudes and conditions are indispensable: a spiritual attitude and a faith perspective, the standpoint of the Salesian vocation, and therefore, a knowledge of the criteria for discerning it and the conditions for living it, a pedagogical sensitivity that fosters an atmosphere of freedom, a care for the person and his rhythm of growth, and some specific skills in the areas of human and spiritual formation.” (FSDB, 264).

⁸⁶ FSDB 265. “ From the prenovitiate onwards he is aware that the development of his vocation is, in the first place, the work of the Lord who “makes use of human instruments” (VC 66); that Salesian formation is a sincere dialogue and a sharing of responsibility with the community, the bearer of the charism; and that self-formation does not mean self-sufficiency or going it alone.” (*Ibidem*).

⁸⁷ FSDB, 266.

Discernment, spiritual and pastoral, is **indispensable for every Salesian** in order to live his vocation with creative fidelity and as an ongoing response. This is the result– as I wrote to you some time ago⁸⁸ – of listening to the Word, docile and patient. In this we can discover what God wants from us today and how he wants it [...] « From familiarity with God's word [the disciples of the Lord] draw the light needed for that individual and communal discernment which helps them to seek the ways of the Lord in the signs of the times. In this way they acquire *a kind of supernatural intuition*»⁸⁹ that gaze of faith, that is to say, without which «life itself loses meaning, the faces of brothers and sisters are obscured and it becomes impossible to recognize the face of God in them, historical events remain ambiguous and deprived of hope and apostolic and charitable mission become nothing more than widespread activity.»⁹⁰

A community that “cultivates an evangelical attitude to everything and seeks the Lord’s will in patient brotherly dialogue and with a deep sense of responsibility” offers the confreres a suitable environment in which to exercise habitually **community discernment**, that “strengthens harmony and communion, sustains spiritual unity, deepens the sense of vocation, and encourages the search for authenticity and renewal.”⁹¹

In **initial formation** discernment is “a service to the candidate and to the charism.” Therefore it is important because it is a matter of verifying the certainty of the call, the maturity of the motivations, the assimilation of values, the growing identification with the project of life, in a word, vocational suitability. “The admissions are [only] occasions of synthesis during the process. Discernment takes place in *close collaboration* between the candidate and the local and provincial community. In fact, at the basis of formation is a fundamental premiss, namely the will to carry out a process of discernment together, keeping an attitude of open communication and sincere joint responsibility, and paying heed to the voice of the Spirit and to the concrete channels through which he speaks.

The *object* of discernment are the values and attitudes required for living the Salesian vocation with maturity, joy and fidelity, namely conditions of suitability, motivations and the right intention.”⁹²

“A key point in the methodology of formation,” discernment makes the commitment and the efforts of those responsible more effective, “ensuring that its nature and characteristics are known, the means suggested are used, the specific times for it are observed and above all those who are responsible for it apply themselves to it constantly and after having received the necessary preparation”, beginning with the candidate, “the first person concerned to discover God’s plan in his regard.” He, therefore., “cultivates a continual openness to the voice of God and to the action of those responsible for his formation; he directs his life within a faith-perspective, and examines himself according to the criteria of a Salesian vocation. . He seeks to know himself in all sincerity, to make himself known and to accept himself; he makes use of all the means and instruments that his formation offers him, in particular, formative guidance and a fraternal exchange of views, the friendly talk with the Rector, spiritual direction, the sacrament of Reconciliation, the assessments, and community discernment.”⁹³

In addition to the candidate, also involved in the process of discernment are the Provincial and his Council, taking care of the “unity of the criteria”, the Rector,

⁸⁸ Cfr P. CHÁVEZ, “*Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (Jn 6,69)*. The Word of God and Salesian Life, AGC 386 [2004], p. 37-38

⁸⁹ *Vita consecrata*, 94

⁹⁰ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 25.

⁹¹ FSDB, 268

⁹² FSDB, 269

⁹³ FSDB, 270

evaluating “the progress made by the candidate in his vocation journey,” the whole community, expressing its opinion (*Reg* 81).⁹⁴ Anyone of those responsible “must assume a *vocation standpoint* and an *attitude of faith*; must show a *pedagogical sensitivity* and possess some *specific skills*”⁹⁵ on the one hand and on the other have “as its *reference point Salesian identity*, its constituent elements, and the conditions and requirements needed for living it; it is not something generic. It therefore requires a knowledge of and a conformity with the criteria laid down by the Congregation, and in the first place, with the criterion of the charism: this is in fact the basis of a genuine and faithful experience of one’s vocation; it does away with preoccupations about numbers or usefulness, shallow displays of enthusiasm, and commitments made by candidates whose suitability is fragile or untested. When one takes part in a discernment he acts in the name of the Congregation, which is responsible for the charism.”⁹⁶

Discernment implies that one is aware of the **gradual nature** of the process of formation and the specific nature of each stage, bearing in mind the unique nature of the person and his development. Nonetheless, it is not possible to agree to the beginning of the stages of formation and to take on the commitments “for which the person concerned is not suited”; equally one has to avoid “prolonging problematic and indecisive situations which do not hold out serious prospects for improvement.”⁹⁷

Given that discernment is not only a process of personal assessment but above all of listening to the voice of God, who speaks constantly and in a special way in every situation, it cannot be limited to initial formation, but on the contrary, accompanies the whole life of the Salesian. In fact, “there can be times in the life of a Salesian when he experiences the need for ... a more careful assessment of the course of his life, a review of his decisions either in order to reaffirm them or to choose his vocation anew... It is so very necessary that the confrere assume a real attitude of spiritual discernment, free of internal and external pressures, and open to dialogue. He must avoid isolating himself or taking decisions all by himself, give himself the necessary time, and accept the opportunities and means offered him. For its part, the community, through those who are responsible, will esteem, understand and guide him in a respectful and brotherly way, and have recourse to ordinary and extraordinary means to give him support in an appropriate manner.”⁹⁸

2.3 Formation: the absolute priority

In so far as it is an effort to assimilate charismatic identity, formation “is a life long task.”⁹⁹ “If, in fact, consecrated life is in itself “a progressive taking on of the attitude of Christ” it seems evident that such a path must endure for a lifetime and involve the *whole person*”.¹⁰⁰ As long as the call is not withdrawn, we are living indebted to God and to those to whom we are sent: just because “all life is a vocation, all life is formation.”¹⁰¹

Even though it is true that formation lasts a life time, its aims and its processes are not always the same. **Initial formation**, “marked by intense spiritual experiences that lead to

⁹⁴ FSDB, 270

⁹⁵ FSDB, 271

⁹⁶ FSDB, 272

⁹⁷ FSDB, 321

⁹⁸ FSDB, 276. For the accompaniment of the confreres in special circumstances, cf *The Salesian Provincial*, Rome 1987, 390-395; *The Salesian Rector*, Rome 1986, 268.

⁹⁹ FSDB, 42

¹⁰⁰ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 15. Cf *Vita consecrata*, 65.

¹⁰¹ FSDB, 520

courageous decisions,”¹⁰² is aimed at the charismatic identification of the one called, at the undersanding and the personal acceptance of the vocation. It lasts for a limited period of time and is divided into stages, which allow for a gradual process of the assimilation of the charism and of self-giving to the mission. “It extends from the first leanings towards Salesian life to the strengthening of motivations, to identifying with the Salesian project to be lived in a particular Province.”¹⁰³ Rather than a period of marking time it is a period of work and holiness (cf C. 105).

Ongoing formation consists, on the other hand, in “a constant effort of conversion and renewal” (C. 99), in order to be ““formed in the freedom to learn throughout life, in every age and season, in every human ambient and context, from every person and every culture, open to be taught by any fragment of truth and beauty found around them. But above all they must learn to be formed by everyday life, by their own community, by their brothers and sisters, by everyday things, ordinary and extraordinary, by prayer and by apostolic fatigue, in joy and in suffering, until the moment of death [...]People in ongoing formation take advantage of time, they don't submit to it. They accept it as a gift and wisely enter into the various rhythms of life itself (days, weeks, months, years) with wisdom, seeking the harmony between them and the rhythm, fixed by an immutable and eternal God which marks the *days, centuries and times*.”¹⁰⁴

In practical terms, for us Salesians ongoing formation “is growth in human qualities; it is conforming oneself more closely to Christ; it is renewing one’s fidelity to Don Bosco so that one may respond to the ever new demands arising from the situation of the young and of the poor.”¹⁰⁵ The person called through perpetual profession, engaged in living identified with his vocation, remains faithful to himself, relying on God’s fidelity and on love for the young (cf C. 195).¹⁰⁶

“Growing in Don Bosco’s charism and striving to be faithful to it: this is formation, and it is an **absolutely basic priority** for the Congregation today and for every Salesian, just as it was for Don Bosco himself in his early days.”¹⁰⁷ The process of renewal in which we are engaged while we advance towards the celebration of the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco, “depends principally on the formation”¹⁰⁸ of each Salesian. “Felt almost as a constant prodding in our GC24,” formation seen as, “an essential part of the educative ability and of the spirituality of the pastor,”¹⁰⁹ was already considered by my predecessor, Fr Vecchi, “a real priority investment.”¹¹⁰ “Investing means laying down and maintaining priorities ensuring conditions, working according to a programme which gives pride of place to persons, communities and mission. Investing in time, personnel,

¹⁰² CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 9.

¹⁰³ FSDB, 308.

¹⁰⁴ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ FSDB, 309

¹⁰⁶ “There will be newness of life only if ongoing formation succeeds in being the new way that consecrated life is lived, the new way consecrated people think. If we want there to be an end to the scandal of consecrated people who are exhausted and without enthusiasm, rigid and self-sufficient in their certainties, insensitive and cold in the face of any stimulus, ongoing formation is the only way to emerge from this situation.”

¹⁰⁷ FSDB, 5

¹⁰⁸ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 14. Cf CIVCSVA, *Directives on formation in Religious Institutes, Potissimum institutioni*, Rome, 2 February 1990, 1

¹⁰⁹ J. E. VECCHI, “ ‘For you I study...’(C. 14) Satisfactory preparation of the confreres and the quality of our educative work,” AGC 361 [1997], p. 6.

¹¹⁰ J. E. VECCHI, *ibidem* p. 25. “We must, however, not only solve the crises, but sow for the future” (*ivi* p. 36).

initiatives and financial resources for formation, is a task which is of importance to all of us.¹¹¹

Concluding prayer

I conclude this letter, which I consider particularly important since to a large extent the future of the Congregation depends on the quality of the formation of the new Salesians, by calling upon Mary. She was called by God, formed by His Spirit, and accompanied first by Joseph, and then by Jesus, so as to grow in faith and to remain faithful to God's plan for her; and precisely because she was faithful even to the death on the cross of Jesus her Son who gave her to us as our Mother.

O Mary, Mother and Teacher of all the disciples of your Son, we look to you and we see in you the first of the Consecrated ones, who knew how to respond with undivided heart and unconditional dedication to the Father's call. Well aware that only God can make possible what humanly speaking is impossible, you allowed the Holy Spirit to dwell within you and to form you so that the Son of God might be born in you

You lived to the full your beautiful role of being the Mother of the Son of God so that after having given birth to Him, together with Joseph you brought Him up so that He "increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men" (Lk 2,52). As a true mother you knew how to hand on to your Son those deep attitudes and great values which inspired you and were a feature of your life: a constant search for the will of God, the heartfelt welcome you gave it even when you did not understand it but in the meantime you treasured it, service of others, especially those in need.

It is not surprising therefore to see your son go off by himself to the mountain side to spend the night in prayer, the highest expression of his faith and the moment incomparable to come to know what His Father wanted from him to make it his plan of life and thus "although he was Son, he learnt to obey ... but, having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation" (cf Heb 5,8-9) . It is not surprising that he had no other concern, nothing better to do, no food more nourishing than doing the Will of the Father (Lk 2,49; Jn 4,34). It is not surprising that he described his life as service: "For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10,45).

O Mary you lived the fulness of charity. In you are reflected and are renewed all the features of the Gospel, all the charisms of consecrated life. Support us in our daily efforts so as to make of them a splendid witness of love in accordance with the invitation of St. Paul: "Live a life worthy of the calling you have received!" (Eph 4:1).¹¹²

You who were given to Don Bosco as mother and teacher from the time of the "dream" which gave meaning to his life, and formed in him the heart of a father and of a teacher capable of total dedication, and pointed out to him the field of his activity among the young and constantly guided him (cf C. 1.8), form also in us a heart full of passion for God and for young people. Oh Mother, we entrust ourselves to you. Oh Teacher, from you may we learn to be children of God and disciples of your Son. Amen.

Pascual Chávez V., SDB

¹¹¹ GC24, 248

¹¹² Cf *Starting afresh from Christ*, 46

