Past Pupils in the Salesian Family

European meeting PPDB. Valdocco, 22-24 January 2023

Good afternoon.

My warmest and fraternal greetings to each of you, provincial delegates and regional presidents of the beloved Past Pupils of Don Bosco Association. I am also a past pupil from the Salesian House at Terrassa (Barcelona). I have always felt at home among the Past Pupils. And when in contact with them I usually say, “you will always find an open door in the Salesian house and a weakness in your former teachers: the weakness for their past pupils.” You know very well that it is about mutual affection.

I. The mark that is the "Past Pupils of Don Bosco"

You asked me to reflect on the Past Pupils in the Salesian Family. Let me begin by referring to the Past Pupils as such.

And I do this by asking a fundamental question, starting from my experience as a Salesian: how do we describe the mark, the trace that the Salesian house leaves on the youngsters and older youth who attended it?

I’m not just talking about schools. I think of the Oratories and Youth Centres, the parish environments, the Works expressly dedicated to taking in the weakest (who have always been around, but today they are certainly more abundant). I think that dedicating an opportunity for remembering what we have experienced, both as Salesians and as young people, will help us, at this point in our meeting, to gain a sense of our Association and awaken new energies for the present moment.

Among the many, here are some particularly descriptive anecdotes that I have experienced in my Salesian life:

- My childhood companions, there in Terrassa: “The Salesian house was one of the most beautiful things that happened to us in life.”

- My fellow aspirants and novices who have taken other paths in life: “We are extraordinarily positive about the formation we received and what it has meant for us; the Salesian spirit has accompanied us in the different circumstances of life.”

- My first years as a priest in a suburban neighbourhood of a city (Mataró): “What is it with you Salesians that you all seem to be like Don Bosco?” one female leader asked me.

- Rector at Andorra, 25th anniversary of the house. More than 300 Past Pupils came together once more for the celebration. The people in town said, “What is it about these already mature young people that they value their years at school so much, and those from other schools do not?” Answer: “We felt loved, and this is deeply felt.”

- Sarrià (Barcelona). A school of 2,000 students, with a great tradition, especially in the field of vocational training. Three well-deserving brothers died in my years there. There were hundreds of young students and past pupils who wanted to be there as we said goodbye to them. But the same thing happened when two lay teachers died. An expression of pain and affection for the emptiness that those people, so important to them, had left in their lives.

- Sarriá again: Past Pupils came every week to meet their teachers and share their successes or ask for guidance in their difficulties. And more than a hundred companies, many of them run by past pupils, were competing for students finishing their vocational training.

- Let's go back to Andorra. Celebrating the Eucharist on the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, Patroness of the Andorran police, at the moment of giving the sign of peace, I greeted the French Ambassador to the country: “Moi aussi, je suis ancien éleve,” he told me.

- Later I was responsible for the Schools in the Province. One day, three lay principals of our schools told me: what can we do with the students who leave us? Every year a good group of them asks us: “What do we do now? Can't we keep in touch with the school?”

We could all go on adding to this list of facts and anecdotes. Each of these is revealing of something that has deeply shaped our lives, both as young people and as Salesian educators. The common denominator of all this is affection.

An affection that is expressed, above all, by those who have most felt the need for it. An affection for real people that has gone deep. But an affection that is addressed to the whole house (school, youth centre, parish or social education platform). People leave a mark. But also the affection that is generated and nourished in a sincere, open, familiar environment. Affection towards the Salesians and affection towards lay staff, and towards all the people who in one way or another have contributed to growth and formation. Finally, affection for the Salesian house in which one grew up and matured.

What is valued most over time are not so much the studies carried out, but the environment, the context, the relationships maintained, that is, everything that shows affection, closeness, unconditional appreciation, help in difficulties, joy at so many shared moments... Affection is undoubtedly, in its various degrees, the mark that the Salesian house leaves on people’s hearts. Don Bosco made it clear in the “Letter from Rome”: “It is not enough to love, it is necessary that young people feel they are loved.” That is to say: “the fact of feeling loved unconditionally.”

When this happens, this is the best indicator to realise the motto that Don Bosco left to the Salesians: 'Strive to make yourself loved'.

That's true. There are degrees of experience of this affection. It is possible, as your Statutes write, that for some the Salesian house was ***a mere unimportant event*** in their lives. Others end up discovering it as ***a grace***. They are those who, over time, have generated a sense of inner joy from this relationship of affection, of personal satisfaction, appreciation for the experience they have had, a sense of gratitude for the people who accompanied them and who often continue to be an important point of reference in their lives.

But for a large group, a sense of responsibility was also generated in order not to lose the values of lived experience and to show that they were willing, when the time came, to take on commitments of help and solidarity, in addition to those of family life, profession, civil life and church life. Their lived experience has led them to understand their life ***as a mission*** wherever they are.

And not a few, moreover, have made this mission real in ***a life project***. It is you and your companions in the Association who feel called to make Don Bosco’s charism present in society and to collaborate as much as possible in actual projects on behalf of young people. (Statute 2)

This is the meaning of the words “the education received” in your Statutes or our Constitutions. In my opinion these words refer not only to the education you have received from your Salesian educators, but also to the education that Salesian educators have received from their pupils. Perhaps if we educators felt a little more aware of this latter, the value of the past pupils would be greater, because we too are indebted to their positive influence. Without them we would not be ourselves, nor would the Salesian charism have developed so strongly. (Pope Francis used the word “co-founders of the Congregation” referring to the young people at the Oratory in Valdocco. How right he was).

II. The “Past Pupils of Don Bosco” in the Salesian Family

And, I believe, here begins the meaning of the Past Pupils Association and the place it occupies in the Salesian Family. *It came, we know very well, from the impact that the educational relationship with Don Bosco provoked in the hearts of his boys, and from the impact that the affection of that first handful of past pupils* (and in time of the hundreds of past pupils who came to thank Don Bosco for his work), *provoked in his heart as a father.* Dr. Sergi Rodríguez helped us enter that experience with details of a story, the story of Carlo Gastini and his companions, reconstructed through the testimonies that have come down to us.

Don Bosco did not found your group in the same way that he founded the Salesians, the Sisters, the Association of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators. You were generated by the “*Salesian charism in action*”, that is, by what Don Bosco and the Salesian tradition have called the “Preventive System”. You are the fruit of Don Bosco’s fatherly love and the filial spirit of his students (whom he always called “my children”). The Association took shape from the encounters where his fatherliness and your filial spirit were involved. For Don Bosco, those encounters were a source of great satisfaction; and for his children, an opportunity to show him their affection.

The Salesian charism used these two loves to shape a relationship that would later become the Association. Its bases: revive the education received, strengthen the commitment of mutual assistance among the members, be open to civil and ecclesial commitment on behalf of the most needy.

You are members of the Salesian Family from the first steps taken by your Association: from the meeting of Gastini and companions with Don Bosco, even before there was talk of a “Salesian Family”. And also thanks to the commitment of Fr Philip Rinaldi, who was able to realistically imagine the enormous potential of such an Association. In fact, he spared no effort to accompany the process of creating Local Unions, Regional Federations and the World Confederation. An Association with a clear objective: to live the spirit of Don Bosco and to spread his influence in society. “*It is a work of perseverance*,” Fr Rinaldi told the Salesians to encourage them to look after the Past Pupils: “*we sacrificed ourselves for the young at the time they were being educated. This is a sacrifice that should not be lost*.”

The story speaks of a shared experience of great intensity and, in the case of many Past Pupils (those who have understood their life as a mission and have made this mission real in a life project) with great commitment. The Association is, by definition, part of the Salesian Family. You are very aware of our Constitutions and the Charter of Charismatic Identity

III. A new time for the Past Pupils in the Salesian Family

Well then. The passage of time, and above all the constantly changing world in which we find ourselves, forces us to ask ourselves a new question: what kind of Association for these new times? We do not wonder about the meaning it has in itself (which is complete), but about the mission that the Association is called to carry out. How do we deal with the present moment? How do we face this immediate future? These are questions that your current Six-Year Strategic Plan seeks to answer.

The answer, or answers, can come, in my opinion, only if we start from the same foundations that generated the Association 150 years ago:

a) If we start “from the affection generated by the experience of the young generations in Don Bosco’s houses”;

b) If we start "from the new situations of our world and from the needs of young people facing adult life";

c) If we start from the “spirit with which those who have understood that their life is a mission, and make this mission real in a life project linked to the Association.”

Let us take up each of these:

3.1. The affection generated in young people in a lively Salesian environment

The lively Salesian environments of yesteryear were above all the boarding houses and schools where a large number of Salesians shared everything with their students for many hours. “Affection comes from contact” we say. So it was. But today these environments no longer exist in the same way.

However, there is no doubt that in today’s Salesian settings, affection is generated, and sometimes very much affection. Thus in Oratories and Youth Centres, in vibrant and dynamic schools, in vocational training centres, in Social Education Platforms, in the Salesian Youth Movement, in Volunteering of various kinds...

In all these environments the Salesian spirit is alive: Salesians who try to be a “sacrament of presence” among the young; many lay educators who have opted for Salesian education (and feel called to be professionals, many of them past pupils themselves); Their Salesian pedagogy seeks to make young people feel that they are the protagonists of their own education; current approaches emphasise cooperation, education for life, emphasise the values of a new humanism. One of the most repeated slogans is Don Bosco’s phrase “education is a thing of the heart”.

How do we connect with these living Salesian environments? Cultivating relationships without conditions is the first step of every son of Don Bosco. Even for past pupils. Looking after the relationship with people who are in contact with young people, whether they are Salesians or lay people. Reflecting together among qualified members of the Association, Salesian or lay directors, pastoral coordinators, young leaders. It is important that the steps taken are included in the educative and pastoral projects of the works and that a close relationship is maintained with the teams. Positive experiences in some places can shed light on the way forward in others. It is about believing in the strength of the charism and in the potential of young people.

3.2. The new situations and needs of young people entering adult life

Perhaps it is easier to think about the “situations” in which they find themselves than the “needs”. Perhaps we feel more inclined to think about difficulties than possibilities, critical issues than values, stereotypical judgements than concrete analyses that lead to transformation. Don Bosco’s contact with the young people at the Generala will always be a paradigm for us that leads us to “*analyze so we can let ourselves be touched*”, to “*reflect (and pray) in order to understand*”, to “*decide, in order to transform*”. This is the method by which Don Bosco made decisions, however risky they may have been.

Here too it will be important that analysis, reflection and efforts are not made alone but in groups, among people close to young people and with young people more sensitive to the situations and needs of their peers, as I mentioned earlier...

The Salesian Family, in this regard, makes it possible to weave an extraordinarily fruitful and complementary network of alliances between the Groups in the same area (at the local, regional or national level), especially with the lay Groups, but not only those. We know best practice in this regard. Past Pupils have so much to offer from their experience and knowledge! Fields such as vocational training and work, social education, the family, civil service, health, migration, social and cultural associations, cooperation... offer a large number of possibilities. To band together for a cause with other Groups of the Salesian Family or to collaborate so that the other Groups can carry out their mission, can be decisions for the future of an Association whose fundamental purpose is the mission to youth and ordinary people.

I make no secret of the fact that rethinking the Association’s mission, also starting from the situations and needs experienced by today’s young people and the working classes in general, may mean important changes in the Association. But it is about making it more open, participatory and inclusive as indicated in the Strategic Plan over these years. We note that these are words that are not at all foreign to Don Bosco's thinking and practice.

But neither do I hide the fact that only a living, current, creative, effective, fruitful, motivated Association can speak a credible word and be a significant sign for the younger generations around the Salesian presence and for the entire Salesian Family.

3.3. The spirit of people who have linked their life project to the Association.

The Association has moved forward in history with people of great Salesian spirit and human and spiritual competence. They have been people who have linked their life project to the Association.

They are people with the joyful conviction that something great has happened in their lives: in the person of Don Bosco something infinite has struck them. And from this experience, they have felt an inner call to reciprocate, helping others to have a similar experience. They are people who spread enthusiasm, who open perspectives, who accompany other on the journey, who add willingness that is not self-focused, but focused on a project: the charism of Don Bosco.

This is the spirit of the most aware and committed Past Pupils. (And it is the origin, moreover, of all the Groups of the Salesian Family, in whose ranks we find many Past Pupils). Recognising this conviction, responding personally, entering into communion with those who have the same experience, is the way to “be mission”, “it is the way to feel Family”, “it is the way to be part of the Family of Don Bosco”.

Let me list some traits that the Charter of Charismatic Identity develops when thinking of the Salesian Family as a whole, and which I believe are particularly suited to the Past Pupils of Don Bosco. Keeping these in mind helps you to feel and be Family:

*a)* *Unity and diversity*

Members of a family share the same spirit (origin, tradition, values), but they are different. A family grows and develops through the unity of its members and the diversity of their commitments. One of the specific features of your commitment is “humanism”. The Charter invites you to put your soul, life and heart into promoting a “new humanism”. (The invitation comes from Francis de Sales.) A valuable contribution that you can give to the entire Salesian Family.

b) Feeling part of Don Bosco’s mission

Don Bosco did not educate with theories, but began with real life. Salesian education looks up and beyond, but its feet are on the ground. And today’s reality is stark. Being part of the mission with Don Bosco’s mindset leads to accepting the gift of women; responding to the cry of solidarity; promoting the culture of gift; letting oneself be touched by the marginalisation of young people, exploited peoples or forced migrations; purifying social communication from lies and abuse; looking after the beauty of the family; being formed to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue... These aspects are all listed in the Charter of Identity and particularly concern the specific contribution of the Past Pupils to the Salesian Family. It is about reacting to the realities of life with Don Bosco’s mindset.

c) Personal Responses and Structural Responses

Situations of poverty and injustice have concrete, real causes. Most of them are structural in nature, based on cultures and philosophies of very low human, cultural or even religious profile, which can only be addressed with alternative cultures based on the noblest people. What did Don Bosco not do to offer different perspectives of life to young people and the ordinary peoples of his time? There are many Past Pupils around the world with a considerable degree of social, cultural and political influence. What would Don Bosco not do with them to help purify and renew the structures so that they are at the service of humankind? In today's social, cultural and political world, Don Bosco is to be largely found among Past Pupils. The potential of the Association is enormous.

d) Alternative paths for a fraternal world

Pope Francis is leaving valuable clues for a future according to God, not only to Catholics, but to all humanity. They are clues that he explains in words with simple and clear depth; and he explains it through his own concrete gestures (gestures of blessing that help open the eyes of sensitive people; and gestures of opposition from those who feel denounced for being complicit in what should not be).

*Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si’* are a true navigational chart for today’s world. I think of how Don Bosco clung to the words and gestures of the Pope to give new impetus to his mission on behalf of young people and on behalf of a new humanity. How he would encourage collaboration, cooperation, humanitarian movements, civil commitment, social and political action, fair trade, the ethical bank, integral ecology, art... in his past pupils! As he also would support so many humanitarian initiatives that today's world generates, windows of great hope for the future of humanity...! What does the parable of “the pieces of string” tell us, the one Don Bosco used referring to the Cooperators? *Vis unita fortior*. A new motivation for banding together for a cause with other Groups of the Salesian Family and with the initiatives promoted by the Church for humankind's growth.

e) Energy comes from“above” (or from “the depths”): the Spirit of God

When we talk about goals (or objectives) we must distinguish between final objectives and instrumental objectives. The former indicate the objectives to aim for. The latter refer to the steps to be taken. Don Bosco had clear goals, but what made him suffer were the steps he had to take. The “*da mihi animas”* is the goal. The “*cetera tolle”* is the price to bear. Everything worthwhile in life has “its price.” On the way to the goal there are valuable moments of intense joy, as was the case for the apostles on Mount Tabor. And there are also tough moments which fill the heart with bitterness, such as the time when a large number of his followers abandoned him: “Do you want to leave too?” he asks the Twelve.

Difficulties can be expected. As a boy, John Bosco was aware of this from his early childhood. “*Where*, *by what means*?” he asks the character in the dream he had. It is the same question that Mary asked the Angel in Nazareth: “*How will this take place*?” “*I will give you a Teacher*,” the character tells young John. “*The Spirit of God will come upon you*,” the angel says to Mary.

Strength comes from above or from the depths. Energy comes from the Spirit of God. We know Don Bosco’s moments of intense prayer. And we also know the testimony of those who lived with him: “When did Don Bosco not pray?” Everything in him was prayer, that is, an intimate dialogue of friendship with Christ and with Mary, his two pillars.

Past Pupils must also have strength from above, like all members of the other Family Groups. The Charter of Identity reminds us of experiences that are both simple and profound with which to nourish the spirituality that gives strength to the Salesian heart: to feel we are collaborators with God; to live as Christ; to listen to the Spirit of God; to feel we are in communion with the mission of the Church; to contemplate daily reality with God's eyes; to nourish passionate and joyful commitment in what is done according to one’s own possibilities; to have a predilection for young people and the people in general; to practise Salesian love, optimism and joy; work and temperance; the spirit of initiative and sufficient flexibility; the prayer of life; to welcome Mary Help of Christians into the home…

I'll stop here. “The Past Pupils of Don Bosco in the Salesian Family” was the title. The imprint of Salesian affection experienced in Don Bosco’s house (by Past Pupils) has united us with many others who have had this same experience – with us who make up the Past Pupils Association. An Association that branches out into the world and introduces us to the great tree of the Salesian Family. It is not a simple story of a glorious past, it is a life open to a generative future. It is, like everything to do with Don Bosco, part of God’s dream for young people. Making it present fills one with joy. Letting ourselves be moved by its energy makes us leaven for the new humanity. It is a matter of faith and hope… and so much love, as Don Bosco knew how to lavish.

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