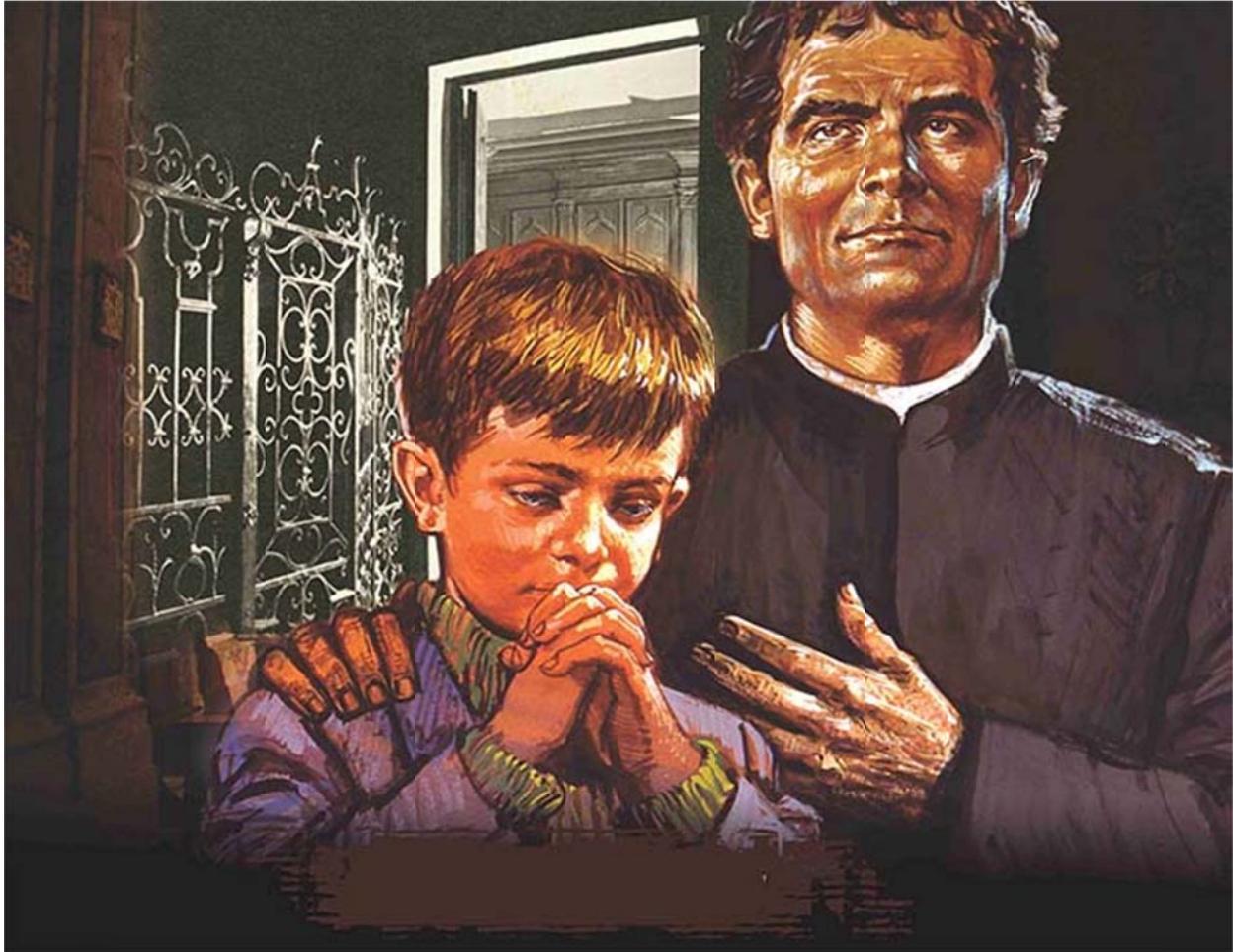


# DON BOSCO



## AND VOCATION DISCERNMENT

*Notes for a Novena of Don Bosco*  
*By Gianni Asti*



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## **A Teenager Guides his Companions in Vocation Discernment**

### **Ten years, worth a life time**

I would like to draw your attention to the touching vocational discernment that Don Bosco went through between the ages of 16 to 26 in Chieri. I hope it will be of help to our teenagers and even more their dear parents and also a confirmation of what the Church teaches us in order to support our faith. We believe that Don Bosco, because of the gifts he received from the Lord, continues to be an invaluable guide to many youngsters, teenagers and young adults even as he was during his lifetime, especially as he accompanied thousands of vocations to the consecrated life and to the priesthood. The precious Synodal document that the Pope, the bishops together with young people have given us, contains some precious suggestions on accompaniment that we want to offer our teenagers to sustain their faith during this vocational journey.

We see this reflected in Don Bosco's own personal vocational quest; in the difficulties he encountered; the help he received from those who supported him in his mission and his priestly ministry that was especially directed towards the poorest and most abandoned youngsters.

Little Johnny who, already at the age of two lost his father, felt a strong desire for paternal affection that he im-

aged could come from a priest. He confided: *"It often happened to me when I met my parish priest with his assistant walking by on the road. I greeted them from afar and as I got closer I bowed toward them. But they returned the greeting in a serious but courteous manner as they went on their way. Several times I wept and said to myself and to others: 'If I were to become a priest, I would be very different. I would want to approach children, speak kindly to them, giving them some good advice. I would be so happy if I could chat a little with my parish priest."*

Even when he was in the Seminary he would yearn to open his heart to a priest: *"How many times have I wanted to speak to them and ask their advice or resolve my doubts but they were too austere and distant. All this more fueled my desire to be a priest as soon as possible so I could be in the midst of young people to help them and be with them in all their needs."* We know how this yearning became a reality in his priestly vocation. He was always attentive to youngsters, being always concerned about them. He would truly be a spiritual father to them.

## **The Role of Parents in the Vocation of their Children**

Before that of a priest, youngsters need the paternal presence and attention of a father in order to live out their vocation fully. The deep root of John's vocation and his spirituality was already present in the educative activity of Mamma Margaret who, being widowed already at the age of 29 took on the role of both mother and father to her

children thus confirming what is stated in the Synodal document in article 72: *“The family is the first community of faith in which, despite its limitations and shortcomings, the young person experiences the love of God as he begins to discern his own vocation.”*

Of course, little Johnny, already at the age of 9 received a sign from heaven for his life through a dream that he had in the Becchi house during which he was visited by Jesus the Good Shepherd and Mary. Here is the first vocational comment from his family: *I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his own interpretation. My brother Joseph said, “You’re going to become a keeper of goats, sheep and other animals.” My mother commented, “Who knows, you may become a priest.” Anthony merely grunted, “Perhaps you’ll become a robber chief.” But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgment, saying, “Pay no attention to dreams.” I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind.”*

We think of the dreams and desires that parents have about the vocation of their children; to realize it according to the mentality of the world and rarely consider and desire what God has destined for their happiness from all eternity.

## **The Vocation passes through the heart of the mother**

It has been said that a vocation passes through a mother's heart, especially when this mother has God in her heart, as was the case with Mamma Margaret. And that was precisely how this mother prepared the heart of her son John for the sacramental encounters of his First Confession and Communion. She also recommended that he have total trust in the confessor. Given the importance of this in the education of her child it is useful to recall her recommendations to John at the time of his First Communion which we find in the Memoirs of the Oratory written by Don Bosco himself: *"Amongst the many things that my mother repeated to me many times was this: 'My dear son, this is a great day for you. I am convinced that God has really taken possession of your heart. Now promise him to be good as long as you live. Go to communion frequently in the future, but beware of sacrilege. Always be frank in confession, be obedient always, go willingly to catechism and sermons. But for the love of God, avoid like the plague those who indulge in bad talk.'"*

For those who know little of Don Bosco's life and his spirituality, one finds that these are the tips that he would later teach his boys. They seem to be useful directives for Christian parents who want to accompany their children in that vocation to holiness that they have been initiated in, when they asked for their child to be baptized.

These tendencies already manifest themselves in little Johnny as he strives to help his companions when they are

having fun and his mother courageously goes along with him. That was how little Johnny improvises as a juggler, having learned some simple tricks at the village fairs, entertaining his friends and even repeating the parish priest's sermon in the courtyard of his house.

### **How to ensure children are adequately prepared**

Thus, this mother attentively supports his vocation through the difficulties that John meets in his studies and even occasionally with his teachers. He has to deprive himself of his family in order to ease the tensions that arise with his older brother who hinders his studies. She entrusts him to a good family of the Moglia farmstead in Moncucco. Then followed a more painful detachment which first took him to Castelnuovo and then to Chieri to further his studies in view of his priesthood as she enrolled him in public schools for the year 1831-1832.

With an encouraging smile, she tells him her decision and starts preparing his kit. John knowing that his family is in dire economic straits and knowing too that pursuing his studies could embarrass his mother, he asks her permission to go around to every family in the village to ask for their donations. Margaret agrees. For John it would be a great sacrifice to beg for charity for himself but he overcomes this reluctance. That would be the same thing that he would do throughout his life when he would beg for funds to support his poor boys.

The following morning heaving a bag of flour and another of maize he set off to sell them at the Castelnovo market to make some money to buy notebooks and text books and part of it the sixteen year old used to secure his accommodation with Ms. Matta in Chieri. He pays his rent with the fruit of his work in the countryside: two emina of wheat and a half of millet.

Margaret knew that some young adults at that time took up studying at the seminary to have a secure life from an economic point of view but she dreamed of her son as a poor priest totally dedicated to his ministry.

When John experienced a moment of uncertainty whether he should stay at the friary of the Franciscans, where he had a more recollected life than one of priestly service in a parish. Not wanting to burden his mother to support his studies, he received an unexpected visit. Mamma Margaret donned her shawl and went down to Chieri to take John by surprise and she said: *"The pastor was good enough to come and tell me that you want to become a religious. Is that true?"* *"Yes, Mother. Surely, you are not objecting to it, are you?"* *"I want you above all to consider carefully the step you will take. Then follow your vocation without regard for anyone. The most important this is the salvation of your soul. The pastor urged me to make you change your mind because I might need your help in the future. But I want to tell you that in this matter I am not to be considered because God comes first. Don't worry about me. I am nothing to you, and I expect nothing from you. Remember this: I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I want to die poor. What is more, I want to make*

*this very clear to you: if you decide to become a secular priest and should unfortunately become rich, I will never pay you a single visit! Remember that well!"* Don Bosco would never forget those words. And later on, when he would need help, he would seek out his mother who, instead of enjoying the quieter life of the countryside, would give the last ten years of her life in the service of the poorest youngsters in Turin, eventually dying in extreme poverty. What lessons parents can learn from this mother who favoured her son's priestly vocation at the cost of great sacrifice! How can parents on their part renounce their dreams for the future of their children in order to support God's plan for them from all eternity?

## **The Role of Good Friends in Vocation Discernment**

In educating youngsters to the faith, parents and teachers play a primary role but an important role, especially during the teenage years, is played by friends. This takes place especially in parish youth groups and church youth movements when teenagers come to live together in a climate of real friendship, moments of prayer, Christian formation and of service to the poor.

John Bosco felt this sense of friendship already as a boy, living in a special relationship with his peers. Here is how he recalls this period in his memoirs: *“Though I was still pretty small, I was studying my companions’ characters. When I looked closely at someone, I could easily gauge what he was thinking. This gift won me the love and esteem of the boys my own age, and I was thus in demand as judge or friend. For my own part, I tried always to help and never to hurt. So my companions were quite fond of me. I would take their side when quarrels broke out. Though I was not very big, I was strong and brave enough to stand up even to older companions. Whenever arguments, questions, or quarrels of any kind arose, I acted as arbiter, and everyone accepted my decisions with good grace.”*

## Bad Companions

Mamma Margaret, like a good teacher, followed him discreetly, giving him the space he needed. In fact, John confided that his companions behaved better when he was around. Meanwhile, she taught him how to choose his friends. This explains his behaviour when he was 15 years old among his peers at school in Castelnuovo. He recorded it in his memoirs: *“That year some of my companions tried to tempt me into danger; they wanted to take me gambling during school time. When I said I had no money, they suggested stealing it from my landlord or even my mother. One of them, pressuring me, said, ‘My dear chap, it’s time you woke up. You must learn to live in the world. Putting your head in a sack gets you nowhere. Just get the money and you can have the same fun as the rest of us.’ I well remember what my reply was: ‘I fail to understand what you’re getting at. Am I to believe you’re urging me to play truant and steal? But in your daily prayers, don’t you say, ‘The seventh commandment, ‘You shall not steal?’ Anyone who steals is a thief, and thieves come to a bad end. Besides, my mother loves me dearly, and if I need money for lawful purposes she gives it to me. I’ve never done anything without her permission, and I have no intention of starting to disobey her now. If your pals are doing that, they’re evil. And if they’re not doing it but recommending it to others, they’re scoundrels. [...] Many boys’ relatives heard of it and urged their sons to associate with me. I was therefore in a position to choose my friends, who loved me and would listen to me like the boys of Murialdo.*

The same negative experiences surfaced again in Chieri where, at the age of 16 he shows an increasing maturity in his choice of friends:

*“All this time I had to use my own initiative to learn how to deal with my companions. I put them into three groups: the good, the indifferent, and the bad. As soon as I spotted the bad ones, I avoided them absolutely and always. The indifferent I associated with only when necessary, but I was always courteous with them. I made friends with the good ones, and then only when I was sure of them....As I knew few people in the town, I made it a rule to keep to myself. I sometimes had to discourage people I did not know too well. Some wanted to get me to a show, others into some gambling, and still others to go swimming. An there were suggestions that I should steal fruit from town gardens or country orchards.”*

How we would like our teenagers to open their eyes, distinguishing true friends from those who immediately manifest themselves as bad companions! How many of them, forced by their peers, are already beginning to steal from their home and their parents. These are their first experience of getting easy money for their amusements or maybe for their first puffs at soft drugs.

### **Whoever finds a true friend, finds a treasure**

John Bosco experienced the truth of this proverb, experiencing a totally spiritual friendship with Louis Comollo who was a year younger than him: *“I was so fortunate to have that wonderful boy in my life. He knew how to choose the*

*most suitable moment to warn me, to correct me or to say a word of encouragement to me. He did everything with such kindness and love that I was happy to be corrected by him. We were very close friends. I was trying to imitate him but I was hundreds of kilometres behind him. However, if I have not been ruined by very devious companions, if I have seriously been able to persevere in my vocation, I owe it to him. I have not been able to imitate him in one thing: his spirit of mortification... He endured with sweet patience rude words and cold contempt. In church and school he was precise in what he did. It seemed impossible for me to do that. More than a friend he was for me a model of virtue, a continuous stimulus to shake off laziness and to strive to be a little like him...he made me pray, visit the Blessed Sacrament, pray for the suffering, recite the Rosary, the Office of Our Lady for the Souls in Purgatory.*

*I greatly admired his spirit of charity, and put myself entirely in his hands, letting him guide me as he wished. Together with another friend of ours Garigliano, we went to confession and to Communion. We met for meditation and spiritual readings, visited the Blessed Sacrament and served Mass. Comollo knew how to invite us to these activities with such goodness, gentleness and courtesy that it was quite impossible to refuse him."*

For a teenager this is the sign of true friendship: emulating goodness, sharing beautiful spiritual experiences; this kind of real love in friendship comes from God and leads to God.

## **A very precious help to follow one's vocation**

*“So the end of the rhetoric year approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations. [...] Oh, if only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a great treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to get involved in the question of my vocation.”* We will return to this suffering of John, but in the meantime let us see how Divine Providence used his friend Louis Comollo to guide his vocation. After reflecting on entering the Franciscan Order, he was distracted by a dream to deviate him from this plan after which he decided to make a clean breast of everything to his friend Louis: *“He advised me to make a novena. Meanwhile he would write to his uncle the provost. On the last day of the novena, I went to confession and communion with this incomparable friend. I attended one Mass and served another at the altar of Our Lady of Grace in the Cathedral. Then I went home and found a letter from Fr Comollo which went something like this: ‘Having given careful consideration to what you wrote me, I advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Let him don the clerical habit. As he goes on with his studies he will better understand his vocation because aloofness from the world and earnest piety will help him overcome every obstacle.’ I followed this wise advice and applied myself seriously to those things which would help prepare me to take the clerical habit.”* Here we see the role of good friends in important life choices, especially in the delicate instance of one's vocational discernment which is a prelude to a life

to be lived according to God's plan which the teenager ought to discover.

## **The Role of the Confessor and the Spiritual Director in Vocational Discernment**

In the ambit of our Lenten journey this conversation regarding the vocational discernment of our youngster seems to fit perfectly. It is always moving to welcome the confidences of fourteen year olds when they can still manage to communicate their spiritual experiences. Here some of the reflections the teenager, John Bosco left us:

### **A trusted friend of the soul**

Notice the joy that the fourteen year old felt at his providential encounter with Father Calosso. By revealing it he tells us about his first experience of what we might call spiritual direction:

*“I put myself completely into Fr Calosso’s hands. He had become chaplain of Murialdo only a few months before. I bared my soul to him. Every word, thought, and act I revealed to him promptly. This pleased him because it made it possible for him to have an influence on both my spiritual and temporal welfare. It was then that I came to realize what it was to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of one’s soul. I had not had one up till then. Amongst other things he forbade a penance I used to practise; he deemed it unsuited to my age and circumstances. He encouraged frequent confession and communion. He taught me how to make a short daily meditation, or more accurately, a spiritual reading. I spent all the time I could with him; I stayed with him on feast days. I went to serve his Mass during the week when I could. From then on I began to savour the spir-*

*itual life; up to then I had acted in a purely mechanical way, not knowing the reasons.*

Here we see that his meetings with Fr Calosso clearly support the spiritual accompaniment of his faith and his vocation. It is the confessor that really gives the penitent spiritual direction together with vocational orientation. After his own conscience, it is to the voice of God that the young person must listen. In this regard the Synod on young people in n. 98 recalls how the Sacrament of Reconciliation plays an indispensable role growth in one's life of faith that is fraught not only with limitations and fragility but also with sin. The ministry of Reconciliation and spiritual accompaniment must be appropriately distinguished because they have different purposes and forms, even though at the beginning they may come together for the adolescent. We are following Don Bosco during these past months in our reflections as he discerns his vocation as a 16 year old teenager in Chieri. He has been in Chieri for the past ten years during which through painful discernment he has prepared himself for his priestly ministry and the mission entrusted to him by Jesus already at the age of nine. After Father Calosso, John would seek the help of a confessor for his vocation but it will not be easy for him to find one. He himself admits: *So the end of the rhetoric year approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations... Oh, if only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to let involved in the question of*

*my vocation.*" It is sad to read these expressions of the teenager John Bosco and the attitude of some priests who, in the sacrament of Confession take very little care to offer these youngsters the necessary assistance they need to help them discover their future vocation to the married state or the consecrated life.

### **Some very useful mementos for the soul**

In this regard, Don Bosco will write in a special way, in Michael Magone's life, some extremely precious pages for teenagers: *My beloved teenagers, here is some advice that I think will be very useful for your souls. Consider them a token of affection from a friend who ardently desires your eternal salvation. First of all, I recommend that you do what you can to avoid falling into sin; but if, unfortunately you do, never let the devil induce you to keep silent about it in confession. Remember that the confessor has from God the power to forgive your every sin and whatever their number.*

*My dear boys remember that the confessor is a father who fervently desires to do all the good he can and tries to remove all sorts of evil from you. Don't be afraid of losing his esteem by confessing serious things, or that he will reveal them to others. Because the confessor cannot use any of the material he has heard in confession for any gain or loss in the world. Should he even lose his life, he will not say anything, nor can he tell anyone anything related to what he has heard in confession. Indeed I can assure you that the more sincere you are and the more confidence you have in him he will be increasingly able to give you that advice and warning that will seem most necessary and op-*

portune for your soul. If ever one of you is going over your past and you come to discover some sin voluntarily omitted or that you had a doubt of the validity of some confession, I would immediately tell him: "My friend, for love of Jesus Christ and for the precious blood that he shed to save your soul, please relieve your conscience and take the first occasion to go to confession, sincerely revealing how sorry you would be were you to find yourself on your deathbed in this state. If you don't know how to express them, just tell the confessor that you have something that weighs heavily on your past life. The confessor knows what to do. Just go along with what he tells you and then be sure that everything will be sorted out.

### **Friend of the Soul**

*Go frequently and seek out your confessor, pray for him, follow his advice.*

*Then when you have made the choice of a confessor you know to be suitable for the needs of your soul, do not change him unnecessarily. Until you have a stable confessor whom you trust confidently you will always miss the friend of your soul. Trust also in the prayers of the confessor who, during Holy Mass prays every day for his penitents so God grants them the grace of good confessions and perseverance in being good. You too pray for him. However, you can unscrupulously change your confessor when you or the confessor change residence and you find it difficult to go to him or if he is ill, or on a solemnity there are many penitents to see him. Likewise, if you have something on your conscience that you do not dare to reveal to your regular confessor, rather commit a sacrilege change your confessor not once*

*but a thousand times.*" Hold on to these very precious pieces of advice. Don Bosco practiced them during his delicate teenage years and then while he was in the seminary. Concerning frequency Don Bosco suggested once a fortnight but many of his boys confessed every week. What help can young people have today who in parishes or oratories are invited to confession three times a year, with occasional confessors, not always the same ones who know the youngsters better! The new priest Don Bosco will say of Father Cafasso: *For six years he had been my guide, and was especially my spiritual director. If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life.* (From the *Memoirs of the Oratory*). Some may think that this advice is valid for those who have a vocation to the consecrated life, but experience tells us, and the Synod on young people confirms it, that teenagers and youngsters called to marriage and the vocation to form a family need the guidance of holy confessor to accompany them in their formation even more. So the most valuable advice we can offer to youngsters during these most important years of their life is to intensify their confessions; choose confessors they can trust and with whom they find it easy to always be open. This is precisely the age at which they habitually neglect if not give up prayer and the sacraments especially confession. We tell priests to make themselves more available for this particular category of penitents by creating opportunities to facilitate this encounter in confession. Call it the sacrament of Reconciliation or confession

whichever is most comfortable because it highlights the fundamental attitude required of the penitent who is not only confessing his sins but encountering how much the Father loves us in Jesus and in this context of love very beautiful vocations are born: of penitents wanting to give one's whole life to Jesus.

## **The Eucharist: foundation for a teenager's vocation**

In the joy of Easter, the most beautiful gift that the Risen Lord left us has certainly been the Eucharist. The indispensable preparation for a youngster or for any other Christian to encounter the Eucharistic Jesus is the sacrament of Reconciliation on which the summary of the previous reflections rests. So we recall the words of the Bishops in the recent Synod on young people: Number 135 reads thus: *The practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is of importance on their journey of faith. Young people need to feel loved, forgiven, reconciled and they have a secret longing for the Father's merciful embrace. That is why it is fundamental that priests make themselves generously available for the celebration of this sacrament. Community penitential celebrations help young people to approach individual confession, making the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament more explicit.*" The teenager needs frequent Confession and Communion, especially when he shows a particular delicacy of conscience. When his heart has been purified, he finds the strength to love the Risen Lord in this Eucharistic encounter. Jesus, giving himself in his body and his blood, supports them in their struggle with their passions (this prevents them from opening up to others), thus preparing them for their future vocation.

## **The Eucharist: Highway to Paradise**

So it is precisely at this point in their growth, when they are developing their ability to love, that teenagers need to receive Communion at least a few times during the week. The testimony of the fifteen-year-old Carlo Acutis from Milan, who died of leukemia on October 12, 2006, witnesses to this. He received Jesus every day and so he wrote: *“The Eucharist is my highway to Heaven... Each Eucharist brings us closer to the goal of holiness. We go straight to heaven if we approach the Eucharist everyday... The more communions we receive, the more we will become like Jesus and already on this earth we will have a foretaste of heaven;”* expressions that confirm what the Synod on Young People left us in 114: *“From listening to the Word we pass on to the joy of an encounter that fills the heart, gives meaning to our existence and a new energy. Faces light up and the journey is taken up once more with the strength of a vocational response of the mission to the community and the whole world. Without delay, and without fear, the disciples retrace their steps to reach their brothers and narrate to them their meeting with the Risen Jesus.”*

While, sadly, it must be said that so many teenagers first abandon prayer, then confession, then Holy Mass and Communion which so weakens their faith and sometimes for years abandon all religious practice. This does not prepare them well to take up their future vocation in life. That is why it is useful to know the eleven-year-old John Bosco’s experience as he was preparing himself to receive his First Holy Communion. This was his mother Margaret’s advice to him which he repeated to his boys: *“My dear*

*son, this is a great day for you. I am convinced that God has really taken possession of your heart. Now, promise him to be good as long as you live. Go to communion frequently in the future, but beware of sacrilege. Always be frank in confession, be obedient always, go willingly to catechism and sermons. But for the love of God, avoid like the plague, those who indulge in bad talk."*

That is how this mother summarized what we have said so far about the difficulties that young teenagers experience. Lack of sincerity in confession and therefore neglect of prayer and Communion has been because of the influence of bad companions. Armed with these teachings of his mother, it was no wonder that on Saturday evening the twelve-year-old John at the Moglia farmstead, asked the owner permission to go to Moncucco the following morning. He returned for breakfast and at ten o'clock accompanied Mr. Luigi and his family to the Mass. Since on the following Saturdays he asked for that strange permission, Signora Dorothy who felt responsible for the boy, wanted to see where he was going. She went to Moncucco before dawn, and from the house of a friend she saw John enter the church, approach the confessional of the parish priest, hear the first Mass and receive communion. In those days they rarely received communion. During the 'High Mass' (in which the whole village took part) Communion was not even distributed. Those who wanted to communicate had to participate in the 'Low Mass' which the parish priest celebrated very early. Signora Dorothy, walking with him back home said to him: "*From now on if*

*you want to attend the 'low Mass,' just go ahead. You don't even have to ask permission.'*

## **Frequent Confession and Communion**

While confessing to the parish priest, Father Cottino, John confided to him his desire to become a priest and also his difficulties. Father Cottino encouraged him **to make his Confession and receive the Eucharist every week**; to pray throughout the day and to trust in the Lord and his difficulties would be resolved. In Chieri, during the period we recall Don Bosco's teenage years he receives new encouragement. At sixteen he receives an invitation from his regular confessor Father Maloria from the collegiate church of Chieri to **make his Confession and receive Communion frequently**. John remembers: *"I had the great fortune of choosing as my regular confessor Doctor Maloria, canon [...] He always had a warm welcome for me. Indeed, he encouraged me to go to confession and communion more often."* This expression reminds us of what we said earlier about the need for a stable confessor and the trust one needed to possess. *I do not remember that any of my teachers ever advised me along these lines. Those who went to Confession and Communion more than once a month were considered very virtuous; and many confessors would not permit it. Consequently, I have to thank my confessor if I was not led by my companions into certain unfortunate pitfalls that inexperienced boys in large schools have to regret."*

In the five years that he was a student John always made time to receive Communion at the Cathedral in Chieri often also serving Mass and he shared the benefits of that most precious sustenance with his best friends in the Cheerfulness Society as he recalls: *“Moreover, not only did we gather in friendly meetings, but we also went often together to Confession and Communion.”* (EBM 1, 195-198)

### **The Most efficacious food for one’s vocation**

How wonderful it would be if our teenagers could associate with friends who received Communion frequently because of their own personal initiative.

The rigidity that existed about receiving communion rarely was surprising; it was the remnants of Jansenism and it had also entered the seminaries. Here is how John, the young seminarian described it: *“We could only receive Holy Communion, however, on Sundays and on special feasts. We did receive communion sometimes on weekdays, but doing so meant that we had to act contrary to obedience. It was necessary to slip out, usually at breakfast time, to St. Philip’s Church next door, receive Holy Communion, and then join our companions as they were going into the study hall or to class. This infraction of the timetable was prohibited. But the superiors gave tacit consent to it since they knew it was going on and sometimes observed it without saying anything to the contrary. In this way, I was able to receive Holy Communion much more frequently, and I can rightly say it was the most efficacious support of my vocation.”*

For a young man to skip breakfast everyday is no small sacrifice and yet for John it was a great support for his priestly vocation.

Taking up once more the comments of Carlo Acutis, and before that St. Dominic Savio, we must say that the teenager needs this Eucharistic encounter to inflame his heart for Jesus as happened to the disciples of Emmaus who recognized him in the breaking of the bread. Children and the little ones have a special sensitivity to feel the presence of Jesus and make spontaneous prayers that leave us amazed. In the presence of the Eucharist, the teenager begins to be moved with faith and love for Jesus and then he feels the need to receive communion often even if, through his sensitivity, he sometimes seems unworthy of it.

It is the Eucharist that nourishes in his heart the desire to love, to be open to the poorest and the little ones. It is in intimacy with Jesus that the teenager dreams of forming a family, of having children or of consecrating his entire life in the service of the poorest, by imitating Jesus through a life of chastity, poverty and obedience.

*“Once Professor Borel suggested that John make the Spiritual Exercises and with the aid of that retreat and frequent Communion he confirmed and preserved his vocation.”*

Thus Don Bosco realized his priestly vocation and pointed it out to his youngsters.

It is enough for us to think of Dominic Savio and recall his many Eucharistic ecstasies which were closely linked

to his daily reception of Holy Communion, but above all his weekly confession.

It was through these intimate conversations with Jesus that Dominic Savio nourished his priestly vocation as it was for Don Bosco who suggested it to him.

## **Mary in the Heart of the Teenager**

In this article I want to reflect with you how the teenager John Bosco lived his fondness for Mary, especially during the ten years he lived in Chieri (1831-1841).

Of course, his encounter with her, beginning with his dream at the age of nine made a deep impression on him but it was also fuelled by family devotions. Mamma Margaret was able to communicate to her children the sense of Mary's presence through the recitation of the *Angelus* three times a day and the daily recitation of the Rosary. John would be faithful to these *Marian moments* even when he was 12 years old and would have to leave home and go as a farm hand to the Moglia farmstead. When he moved to Chieri later, his mother recommended him to have devotion to Mary and John nourished this by going daily to the Cathedral of Chieri. There before the altar of *The Madonna of Grace* he knelt and expressed to her his filial affection. He asked her to comfort him in the difficulties he encountered in his loneliness and he asked for favours necessary to succeed well in his studies and the fulfilment of the mission that he was entrusted with.

For as long as he would be a student in Chieri he faithfully kept this Marian appointment, especially celebrating the novenas in her honour.

During those years, it was normal to celebrate novenas to Mary. They were not just expressions of trust in her, but also to obtain special favours for life and for one's vocation.

John felt it was important to particularly invoke the Immaculate in his struggle to preserve the virtue of purity, knowing the dangers that bad companions presented. He found them here in Chieri as he had found them in the past in Castelnuovo.

He asks for help for the same virtue that Dominic Savio, already at the age of twelve would have in mind when he renewed his consecration to Mary in the Church of St. Francis of Sales at Valdocco, repeating the resolutions he made at his First Communion at the age of seven: death but not sin. *"Mary I give you my heart and my soul. Make it all yours. Let me die rather than commit a single grave sin"* (and that is to be understood as a sin against the virtue of purity). We must seek her help once more for our teenagers that they may live with innocent hearts of children and express their affection like children when they address Mary. You have to get them to look for her presence in places most familiar to them, starting with the statue they see in the church, to the picture hung on the wall of their home, in places of pilgrimage, to places where she made herself known in a special way, right up to the tops of hills and mountains, where popular piety has erected statues in her honour.

## **Friends devoted to Mary**

The importance of Marian devotion practiced by the teenager's companions is significant to the youngster. Mamma Margaret in her wisdom recommended to him: *always be friends with those who love Mary.*

So, John Bosco lived these moments of Marian intimacy by himself and with his companions like Louis Comollo, Paul Braja and others in the *Society of Cheerfulness*. We recall a curious episode linked to Louis during a walk with his companions and Professor John Bosco, his namesake, in the meadows of Balermo 3 km from Chieri. During one of the games in which they had the most fun was that the rumor was spread that Comollo had disappeared. Remembering the misfortune that had happened the previous year when a companion of theirs had drowned in the waters of the Red Fountain, not far from there, they were full of fear and began frantically looking for him. They eventually found him in a nearby chapel between a bush and a pillar. When they told him how worried they were Louis replied: "I'm sorry you were so concerned but I had not yet recited the Holy Rosary and I wanted to pay this tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary."

It is so beautiful to meet teenagers who daily live this kind of a life sometimes even on public transport on their way to school, or simply having the habit of formulating some prayer to entrust their day to Mary. Certainly that was the simple, deep and trusting devotion of John. He would help his boys to live like this, telling them: "*Dear*

*young people, what a great support it is for you to have devotion to Mary Most Holy. Listen to how she invites you: whoever is a child comes to me. She assures you that if you are her devotees, she will count you among her children. She will cover you with her mantle and shower you with blessings in this world and give you Heaven in the next." Love this heavenly Mother of yours. Go to her with all your heart and be sure that you will receive many graces, as long as you do not ask for things that are a detriment to you."* He would recommend the recitation of the three Hail Marys before going to bed at night, asking for three graces: the salvation of one's soul, the escape from bad companions and the virtue of purity.

### **Mary's Face is ever new**

Our teenagers need to rediscover this kind of maternal affection, though in a different way. Certainly for Don Bosco it was normal to introduce Mary to his boys as a mother because several of them were orphans and felt the need of this affection.

Immediately after that he recommended to them the Immaculate Conception. This fascinated the teenager in a special way especially because he was so discouraged because of his falls in the area of purity, while his heart longed for pure love.

He invited them to gaze at her as a strong woman who teaches them to fight.

And finally he would present Mary as the Help of Christians and of the Church and a great help in family

problems, work and life choices. We have already mentioned the novena to Mary that he made on the advice of his friend Louis Comollo, to help him come to a decision about his vocation whether to join the Franciscans or to enter the seminary. For such an important decision Comollo suggested a novena to Mary while he would write to his uncle priest for his advice. The novena concluded with Mass and Communion at the altar of *Our Lady of Grace*. The letter of Fr. Comollo arrived with the suggestion that he should enter the seminary.

On the day of his clerical vestition, while waiting to enter the seminary Mamma Margaret said to him: *"When you came into the world I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin. When you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours. Now I say to you, be completely hers; love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary."* My mother was deeply moved as she finished these words, and I cried. "Mother," I replied, "I thank you for all you have said and done for me. These words of yours will not prove vain; I will treasure them all my life."

We know how faithfully John kept this promise, so much so that he is now famous all over the world for the spread of devotion to Mary Help of Christians.

We must recommend that our teenagers continue their vocational discernment with the help of Mary, while there are many mirages that will appear before their minds. Pope Francis in the exhortation summarizes the experi-

ence of the Synod of young people entrusting them precisely to Mary and he concludes with this wish that we make ours: *“May she renew your youthfulness by the power of her prayers and accompany you always by her maternal presence”* (*Christus vivit*, post synodal apostolic exhortation, n. 298).

## **This teenager points to the source of true joy**

Holidays for our teenagers are a time of relaxation, rest from school work, a time for generous service and healthy fun. Certainly they can also become, as Don Bosco said, harvest time for the devil: it is therefore important that we give them useful suggestions to live these days of holiday well. The years of his adolescence lived in Chieri come to our aid in this regard. Although he was burdened with economic distress, having to go from house to house to beg for what he needed for his studies and his maintenance, even though he was busy with work, we see how wisely he used his free time with his friends, without losing the opportunity to demonstrate his joy. He should have had many reasons to be withdrawn, depressed about his family affairs relating to the death of his father when he was just two years old, the poverty of his family, the poor prospects of that peasant life, having to deprive himself of so many amenities and to that vocational dream that seemed impossible to fulfill.

### **The Cheerful Society**

Instead, precisely in that context of privation and humiliation he founded the *Cheerful Society* among his companions, giving birth to deep friendships. He capitalized

on their kindness, affection and esteem and helped them in their studies and at school. In the Biographical Memoirs we recall the testimonies of his friends: *“Little by little, they began coming to him, first to play with him, then to hear his stories or to do their homework. Finally, as in Morialdo and Castelnuovo, they just came for no special reason. It was like a club of their own and they started calling it The Cheerful Society, a most appropriate name because each one was expected to bring in only those books, topics or games that would add to the general cheerfulness. Everything contrary to it was banned, especially anything not in accordance with God’s law. Whoever cursed, took the Lord’s name in vain, or carried on improper conversations could not remain a member and was forthwith expelled. John was acknowledged leader of all these boys. By common consent membership in this club was dependent upon two basic conditions: (1) the avoidance of every word and deed unbecoming a Christian; (2) the exact fulfilment of one’s duties whether scholastic or religious. (EBM 1, 194-195)*

Among the members of the *Cheerful Society* there were some who were truly exemplary in their conduct and we have already spoken of them. Already a priest, he would recall: *“Garigliano and Braje took part in games willingly but never at the expense of their school work. Both were devout and reserved and constantly gave me valuable advice. Every Sunday, after the usual church services, we would go to St. Anthony’s church where the Jesuits conducted excellent catechism classes. The illustrative episodes were so well chosen that we never forgot them. During the week the Cheerful Society met at the house of one of the members for discussion on various religious*

*topics. Attendance at these meetings was optional. Garigliano and Graja were the most diligent. We passed some time in pleasant recreation, in discussion of religious subjects, in reading spiritual books and in prayer. We advised one another and mutually pointed out personal faults we had observed or had heard others mention. Unconsciously, we were putting into practice the wise admonition: "Blessed is he who has a mentor," or that of Pythagoras: "If you have no friend who will correct your faults, pay an enemy to do so."... Moreover, not only did we gather in friendly meetings, but we also went often together to Confession and Communion." (EBM 1, 195-196)*

When our teenagers experience such beautiful friendships where they compete in human and Christian virtue and love each other so much that they can correct in one another their defects, they experience one of the most beautiful expressions of friendship and love of God. The joy of Lord that they draw from the sacraments of Confession and Communion then transpires into the games they enjoy competing in. Unfortunately, in our day, several teenagers are more drawn to live their summer holidays with their peers, regardless of their choice of friends, instead of spending time with their family. They rarely know how to organize their get-togethers and entertainments. Often left to chance or to the initiative of a group leader they can be influenced by the choice of language or entertainment which draws the so-called friends to pornography, the use of alcohol or drugs or just stunts that compete in vandalism or reckless motorbike races.

## **The Most Beautiful Choices even in entertainment**

John's choices and those of his friends were very different. Even during that most difficult time when, at the age of eighteen he was a tenant at the Café Pianta, he enjoyed his recreation with a small group of peers who met in an adjacent house, six or seven of them who were guests of Canon Joseph Caselle. Some of them later recalled: *"Practically every night," Joseph Caselle recalled, "especially on winter evenings after supper, John Bosco used to spend some time with us whenever his work allowed it. We would all wait for him in the hallway, or if the weather was good, in the courtyard. I can't tell you how happily we swarmed around him when he appeared. And he, always full of fun, would start us off laughing with a joke. Always ready to oblige he would launch out with some charming and yet edifying story; he was able to keep us entranced for several hours without our being aware of it. Sometimes he would repeat some catechism lessons or explain them. Occasionally he would ask in a nice way if we had been to confession, he was delighted, and he would encourage us to persevere in our good spirit. We were actually ready to do anything for him. No matter how late, we were quite reluctant to leave him"* (EBM 1, 219).

That was how the teenager John spent the only free hour he had in the day because at night he went back to his studies in the basement of the Cafe Pianta where he slept. He knew how to keep them happy with his jokes filled with healthy humour and edifying episodes suited to keep their attention and feed their imagination and then to share his spiritual experiences. We might ask how

many of our teenagers are capable of having fun like this? Don't they know that real friendship comes from God and leads back to him?

## **The Secret of Joy**

Little boys normally communicate joy and can appreciate simple games and enjoy clean fun. Teenagers on the other hand, live at a particularly beautiful age during which they can be open to the gift of self and true love but only when they recover that joy of the little ones and the humble of heart by just being together; that true joy that comes from God. These teenagers alternate between moments of unbridled cheerfulness and moments of sadness and closing in on themselves. They bring out the most beautiful expressions of their character and of the education they have received but also defects normally linked to pride, a pride that brutalizes them. They often live out their narcissism that extinguishes the joy of loving and of giving themselves. Serious sin takes hold of them and is seen in attitudes of vulgarity and sensuality which deform their features and their beauty. When they are with their peers they must learn to fight idleness, boredom, vulgarity by enhancing their artistic, musical and above all their physical abilities whenever they can, making it to the beach or to treks in the mountains. In particular, the mountains give them the possibilities of treks and short excursions. For more experienced climbers there are even serious treks which offer good possibilities to strengthen

their wills and endurance. Above all, they must learn to open themselves up to others in generosity. Many of these teenagers are involved in being of service to their younger brothers and sisters, and this can be a very rewarding experience as well as becoming an opportunity of making the most of their free time.

This is why our teenagers must imitate Don Bosco when he was a teenager and emulate the clever manner in which he used his free time, enjoying them in carefree joy, a joy which is a gift from God.

## **Teenagers getting used to work to prepare for life**

Teaching teenagers the value of work, helping them to discover their aptitudes and talents especially during the months of holiday can be an excellent opportunity not just to keep them well occupied but above all to prepare them for life. We are assisted in this venture by being able to look at the life that John Bosco lived as a teenager in Chieri

Let's start with the beautiful testimony of his professor a certain Ph.D. Father John Bosco, who though not linked by kinship ties was very happy to have had a pupil who honoured his name and surname so much with such a sterling character, piety and commitment to study. Here is what he himself said: *"On a beautiful spring morning, during the holidays, while going for a walk through the hills, I suddenly heard a loud monotonous voice of someone reciting something from memory and this was accompanied by a kind of rhythmic sound that seemed like a hoe being swung with strong arms. Fascinated I set off to find who this labourer was and I found the young Bosco hoeing in the vineyard of Cumino, his landlord. Having kept a book open supported by a branch he was studying his lesson. The sight astonished Professor Bosco whose esteem and affection for his dearly loved pupil only increased."*

From such clues that we put together, we could deduce that this was what John ordinarily did for several hours a day during his vacations. That was why this great educa-

tor (Don Bosco) praised manual work as a means of preserving mental and moral health.

### **Work as a means of education**

In particular, contact with the world of work and its struggles reduces the teenager's tendency towards laziness, pride and jealousy which are vices that favour a sense of superiority making a person unpleasant. Here is how John tried to contribute to the economic situation of his family while also treasuring his work experience. So, not only was he a student, but he committed himself to acquiring more skills as he had already done in Castelnuovo by becoming a tailor, a cobbler, a carpenter, as well as a stable hand. He also practiced shaving beards having learned this skill to save himself the expense of a haircut and to be able to be of service to his friends. The same was true of his ability to play musical instruments, his motive being to learn it in order to entertain his friends. He played the violin pretty well.

On entering the service at the Café Pianta in the middle of the year he was already capable of making liqueurs and jams, preparing coffee, chocolates and he knew the proportions for making all kinds of pastries, pastas, cocktails, ice creams and snacks. He was so good that the owner considered that it would be profitable for him to leave his other occupations and devote himself entirely to that profession.

However, John who did these jobs only for fun decidedly refused, protesting once more that his resolute intention was to continue his studies and become a priest. With that family he also learned to cook and without realising it he was preparing himself with the necessary skills that he would need to administer the houses of the boys that Divine Providence would soon send him, especially during those early days when he would have to prepare their meals for them.

Favoured by parents, several teenagers, like John Bosco, even today, spend their holidays making useful at home or look for holiday jobs at shops, restaurants, or family-run businesses. Some even devote themselves to learning music and perfecting their skill at playing a musical instrument. Others offer themselves to tutor youngsters with their homework.

That was how John Bosco, aged seventeen now, already in November 1832 returned to Chieri to the house of Mrs. Lucia Matta who entrusted her son to him for tuitions. She exempted him from paying his rent and she provided him food out of consideration for the fact that her son was making good progress in school. Mrs. Josephine Valimberti Radino, a widow in 1889 still remembered: *“My brother priest always spoke at home with admiration of a certain pupil named John Bosco. Although he was a professor he sent this pupil to his pupil for tuition. Our brother had this student who was last in the class of humanities and distracted and annoying. He was an annoyance to his family but thanks to the goodwill*

*and hard work of John his conduct changed completely. He became serious, studious, attentive and a lover of duty. My father was very consoled by it."*

### **Everything at its time**

During the time he lived at the house of Mr. Joseph Pianta, John never allowed himself to get involved with other rowdy teenagers even if he found the time to have fun with friends of the *Cheerful Society*. He followed the maxim he had taken for himself: Everything at its time and he never broke that rule which he had set for himself. He had set a time for meetings with the *Cheerful Society*, time for tuitions of his companions who turned to him for help; time to take care of the affairs of his guests; time that he devoted to prayer; to the Church and to the sacraments. And he did all this without losing his ardour for his studies.

Mrs. Clotilde Vergnano testified concerning John that he was never idle. He enjoyed the company of his neighbours but he was also committed to bringing water to a very elderly priest, Fr. Arnaud who was so impressed by the young man's modest and edifying life he wrote to the parish priest of Castelnuovo to find him a more comfortable and safe place. From these comments, we can draw some suggestions to help our kids organize their time well; making a schedule of things to do, being faithful to their schedules and commitments. Some teenagers are inclined to disorder from the time they get up in the morn-

ing, to carrying out their chores, their time for meals to respecting the curfew and their night entertainment.

## **The Spiritual Dimension**

Despite his many commitments John managed to go to serve Masses every morning at the nearby church of St. Anthony. The famous visits to Jesus present in churches, was what John habitually stuck to. The fact that he was able to take his friends along, was marvellous. He himself, in particular, was coaxed by his dearest friend Louis Comollo. Everyday Louis went punctually to the Cathedral of Chieri to visit the Blessed Sacrament and John went there for several months to be edified. This is how he remembered it: *“Louis usually knelt in a corner near the altar, his hands clasped in prayer, his head humbly bowed, his eyes lowered. He was completely still and oblivious of any voice or sound. Quite often after having finished my own devotions, I wanted to ask him to come with me and accompany me home. No matter how I tried to catch his attention by making motions with my head or passing close to him and coughing, he would not stir until I came up to him and nudged him. Then only would he move as though awakened from sleep, and accept my invitation, albeit reluctantly. He loved to serve Mass whenever he could, even on school days; on holidays it was not unusual for him to serve as many as four or five Masses in one morning. Weather permitting, he would attend every religious service that was held in the churches of the city. Although he was so immersed in spiritual things, his expression was never gloomy or sad, but always lighthearted and serene. His affability gladdened*

*all hearts and he often said that he loved greatly the words of the Prophet David: Servite Domino in laetitia, [Serve the Lord with gladness]" (Ps. 99, 2).*

The summer vacations can offer our teenagers the opportunity to personalize their prayer and take care of their daily Eucharistic meeting, if not at least some days of the week. We have mentioned several times that the teenager needs this personal encounter with Jesus. This is what transfigures him and even his physical deportment and makes him always cheerful. This is the most effective pointer that we recommend.

## **A Formative Ambient for our Teenagers**

### **The Religious Atmosphere of Chieri**

For the teenager, the educational environment that welcomes and accompanies him over the years is fundamental for his growth and spiritual formation.

Certainly, the education in the family is the most precious, but it must then be supported by school education to which parents abdicate the education of their children, often without requiring or at least verifying that their children have the most conducive environment.

We believe it would be useful to recall what John Bosco found when at sixteen he found himself in Chieri, a city rich in history and significant religious presences. Historians of the time tell us what the education of young people of the time was like: *“Such was the programme for secondary school students as promulgated by King Charles Felix’ decree of July 23, 1822. It was based on the principle that education should have a religious character since God is the source of all knowledge and morality. Teaching was under the supervision of the bishops. No one could apply for a teaching post or retain it without presenting every year a certificate from his own Bishop vouching for his good moral character and attesting that he had discharged his duties properly to the benefit of religion and the state. At this time, also, measures were taken to shield young people from the dangers to which today’s youth is constantly ex-*

posed" (EBM 1, 197). In another prescription we read: "At this time the sectaries had introduced and were spreading throughout Piedmont a great number of antireligious, immoral and subversive publications, but Charles Albert wasted no time in putting an end to this. In September 1831, he appointed a five-man commission to prevent the spread of such literature throughout his kingdom. His orders were zealously carried out." It goes without saying that teachers were very vigilant concerning their pupils' reading matter (EBM 1, 197)." We must therefore remember that in those days in the Schools of the kingdom it was mostly clerics who taught on behalf of the bishop. Religion was a fundamental part of education. A professor who even cracked a lewd joke or uttered an irrereligious word was immediately expelled from office. If this was what was done to professors, one can only imagine how much more severely this was used on unruly and immoral students. For the students, weekday and Sunday prayers were compiled in a book which was to be read with devotion. On feast days, the Mass, and the gospel would be explained and in the evening there would be religious instruction and vespers. Easter Confession and Communion was the admission pass to the exams at the end of the year. That was how young people had to get their certificate that they had regularly attended the spiritual retreats that had been planned throughout the year (MB 1,263-264).

## **The Fruits of Past Education**

This was how Don Bosco described the fruits of this education: *“This strict religious supervision produced marvelous results. Years would go by without hearing a blasphemy or improper conversation. The pupils were obedient and respectful both in school and at home. IT was a common occurrence even in very large classes for every pupil to be promoted. In my third year of high school all my classmates passed (EBM 1, 197)* How different are our times today with lay education which, even when well conducted thinks about the human formation of the young person without going any further. A secular training is proposed for teachers who should first be models that should inspire the students. The more serious hazards that our teenagers face is that their school environment is being manipulated by ideologies that distort historical data and insert the principles of the party. In fact they should be directed to the constant search for truth and the common good of the students. Let us try to think about what educational principles inspire those who are called to educate our youth. They are certainly very far from the inspiring principles of the past and those of Don Bosco which can be summarized for his boys in making of them *Good Christians and honest citizens.*”

## **A Necessary Revision**

A revision is necessary, looking at the fruits that we are reaping among the teenagers in our society which is so advanced; where not only the phenomenon of bullying,

but in extreme cases scholastic indiscipline comes symbolize the presence of public force in classrooms among the more agitated students which were once like breezy English school classrooms. In an increasingly secularized society, religious education seems to be banned and religious culture that the past generations acquired is being set aside and ignored. History is reinterpreted, without partisan prejudices and it no longer becomes a teacher of life. That was why when Pope Francis suggests to young people to rediscover the charms of *I Promessi Sposi* he seems to sound almost anachronistic. Yet it is a useful novel to educate youngsters to the family vocation.

Throughout the apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, the Pope reminds us that the school is the privileged place for the human person, and for this reason the Christian community should give it great attention but by training teachers and leaders and by setting up its own schools with all kinds of degrees.

Even in a state which defines itself as secular attention to the human formation of adolescents should be the guiding principle of the rulers themselves, committed to defending the good, protecting them from media bombardment that is inspired by violence, contempt for moral values, the spread of pornography and sensuality.

In our days, among groups of teenagers we often hear them talking crudely, full of vulgar blasphemies uttered by very young people who are not even aware of the offence against the One blasphemed and in the presence of

those who still have a sense of Christian moral sensibility. Often adults are bad teachers who flaunt their vulgar and crude language even on television shows and during public entertainment. The same celebrities of sports and film who are idolized by teenagers are not real models that we should propose. They are often conditioned by the corrupt world that often pushes them to end their lives miserably driving them even to suicide.

### **Real models to propose to our youngsters**

The Church has always had a precious spiritual heritage that should be made available to our teenagers. How effective this spiritual patrimony would be, were it offered to them as suggested by Pope Francis in the recent exhortation *Christus Vivit*, the fruit of the Synod on Young people: n. 229: *“These and various other opportunities for evangelizing the young should not make us forget that, despite the changing times and sensibilities of young people, there are gifts of God that never grow old, for they contain a power transcending all times and places. There is the word of the Lord, ever living and effective, the nourishing presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Reconciliation, which brings us freedom and strength. We can also mention the inexhaustible spiritual riches preserved by the Church in the witness of her saints and the teachings of the great spiritual masters. Although we have to respect different stages of growth, and at times need to wait patiently for the right moment, we cannot fail to invite young people to drink from these wellsprings of new life. We*

*have no right to deprive them of this great good.”* (CV 229) In this regard, we consider the teachings that John Bosco assimilated as a teenager during the five years he spent in Chieri as a student and then the five years he spent in the seminary preparing himself to be a priest dedicating himself entirely for the good of youngsters and their education.

## **Finding Real Joy in the Saints**

The month of November opens with the feast of All Saints which demands that we think seriously about our baptismal vocation which is our vocation to holiness.

It appropriately presents to us suitable pastoral programme which can and must be directed to our teenagers: *"You can be holy wherever you are."*

This invitation is valid for all of us, but especially for our youngsters whose hearts are still pure and innocent; who still feel the fascination of striving for high ideals; they are not made for mediocrity.

### **The Recipe for Holiness**

Don Bosco believed in youthful sanctity and proposed it to his youngsters. Remember his famous sermon: *"It is God's will that we become saints. It is very easy to achieve this. There is a great reward for those who strive for holiness."*

We know Dominic Savio's reply: *"I feel a great desire to be a saint. I absolutely want to and I must be a saint... The gift I ask for is to become a saint."* Don Bosco's recipe was simple. He told the lad that it was 'easy' to become a saint. It meant living for the love of God, doing all one's duties of study, classes, play and the most ordinary tasks well. To live continuously in a state of cheerfulness, with joy in one's heart so that others see the love that God has for

each of us. He asked Dominic to be cheerful (he knew that teenagers were like the sky in springtime: one moment peaceful and the next dark and windy...). He invited him to take part in recreation so as to become an apostle among his companions. He protected him from premature asceticism to which Dominic tended (it almost seemed that Don Bosco repeated to him what Father Calosso told him when he was 14 years old, advising him not to take on a penance that was not suitable for his age).

It became contagious. Dominic would repeat to his companions: *"Here we make holiness consist in being very cheerful."* It was precisely supposed to be a joy that comes from God and is manifested in the exact fulfilment of one's duties done well for love of God. The most beautiful fruit above all was winning the souls of his companions for God. This involved a struggle against sadness which is typical among teenagers. This meant removing the diabolical temptation that finds its way into their souls telling them that this is what happens when they let God enter their souls. It makes them sad and depressed. Before proposing these goals to his boys Don Bosco lived what he taught and that was during his teenage years in Chieri, despite the many constraints imposed on him by poverty that would always accompany him not only during his studies but throughout his life.

## **Humility, a difficult virtue for a teenager**

A teenager, especially if he is intellectually and physically gifted, is tempted to feel superior. He begins to manifest it first to his parents at home then to his teachers and his companions. He wants to assert that he is right and this causes family clashes which might be boisterous and sometimes there are violent confrontations with his everyday companions. Jealousy and arrogance prevent him from recognizing his limitations and his mistakes and he hardly thinks of apologizing, admitting that he is wrong. This attitude is sometimes driven by his family itself and for this reason he is ready to trample on others in order to dominate the scene. Don Bosco said that such a teenager makes himself so unpleasant; and with such attitudes and intelligence, jealous and proud students turn out to be seen as stupid and ignorant.

The sixteen year old John Bosco in Chieri was totally different. Here is a significant testimony of a certain doctor Carlo Allora of Castelnuovo d'Asti one of his companions at Chieri: *"In 1888 he very clearly recalled that our John during those years was never given to pride because of his talents. He never showed even a shred of affectation or ambition in his demeanor and from his person transpired, I don't know, something extraordinary and supernatural. As a student he was like a prefect over all his companions and although he had no special charge, he was held as superior because that was what everyone said. He was already a saint then!"* That was what he exclaimed enthusiastically concerning John's teenage years. Here is a significant episode concerning his humility: *"Among*

*his (John's) other virtues John manifested humility in dealing with his companions. In that same year a companion secretly stole a notebook, copied a sonnet, changing a few words, after which he sent it around to his companions attesting that it was his work. While savouring the praises that everyone showered on him, after a few days, that sheet reached John who, not claiming the honour of such a work, kept silent, reluctant to shame his friend but wrote at the bottom of the work the quote: 'Est ne de sacco ista farina tuo? [Was that wheat from your sack?] He folded the sheet and returned it to the braggart" (Giovanni Bosco a Chieri, Marco Bay, Las-Roma).*

### **To excel in the capacity to be loved**

In the school environment the desire to excel is normal among teenagers and those who do not have great possibilities in studies try to dominate the sports field or worse use vulgarity and coarseness. John Bosco emerged very differently through his capacity for friendship and kindness.

*"He was known in Chieri for his piety and gentleness, his ability to excel in studies so much so that many families sought him as tutor to their children, not just his classmates but even those in the upper classes in humanities and rhetoric.*

*We have heard it said more than once about him during those years: He was so good, he couldn't be any better!*

*Among his companions he was considered a trusted advisor, a wise guide and also a teacher in the ways of perfection." (Giovanni Bosco a Chieri, Marco Bay, Las-Roma).*

## **Intimacy with God is the fount of true joy and a prerequisite for a fruitful apostolate**

Getting our teenagers to rediscover intimacy and a deep friendship with Jesus is urgent to detoxify them from that moral pollution that fills their eyes, their thoughts and their life's ideals with spiritual smog.

The teenager John, certainly combined prayer and his commitment to study, sometimes even at night, while he waited for dawn to be of service so he could support himself.

He never forgot his mother's advice when she accompanied him to the schools of Castelnuovo: *Be devoted to the Madonna*. That was why, when he was in Chieri he went every day to the Cathedral to kneel at the altar of *Our Lady of Grace* as a tribute of filial affection and to obtain those favours necessary for him to succeed well in the mission she had entrusted to him. We know what a great help devotion to the Immaculate Conception is to a teenager living the virtue of purity. He will feel Mary beside him in his spiritual struggles and his temptations.

As long as he was an ordinary student in Chieri, John Bosco persevered faithfully in his pious practice: visits and prayer at the Cathedral, daily Masses and frequent Confessions were the source of constant joy and it was a joy that infected his peers. Doctor Gribaudo, his companion told the superiors at the Oratory: *"We were so relieved and sighed when we were able to stay with him. Because of his beautiful ways he was able to exert an irresistible charm over our*

*hearts. Whenever I or my other companions surrounded him to hear his advice, he would urge us to flee from evil and do good, encouraging us with some appropriate examples, and this made us happy.*

*He was most concerned about the poorest youngsters. On feast days he went to the squares and streets in search of them, to lead them with holy fervour to catechism. He sometimes appeared in places where the most riotous people gathered and placed himself in their midst to play their games, winning money which he promised to return provided they followed him to church. It was no wonder that he stole the hearts of so many friends.*

*Doctor Marucco of Chieri said of him: "I admired him for his modesty and meekness. I never heard him utter an inappropriate or impatient word. He was kind to everyone and was most sought after by the students of the lower classes.*

*No one could say 'no' to him. He corrected his companions, who after he had spoken, never dared to contradict him. There was always a competition between professors and companions to show him affection and to desire his company. He couldn't have been better than he was." (Giovanni Bosco a Chieri, Marco Bay, Las-Roma).*

He sought to bring his friends to God, even adults, like the sacristan of the Cathedral of Chieri whom he helped in his studies and to pursue his priestly vocation. Following some Jewish boys with their studies was his way of winning their friendship and bringing them out of the ghetto they had erected around themselves. This was the fruit of his prayer and the secret of his joy. This seems to be the

advice that needs to be given to youngsters so that they are able to live their vocation to holiness here and now.

## **Guarding their eyes to see the beauty of God**

In preparing for Christmas every child's eyes look for the baby lying in the manger. The beauty of God was manifested in that child, in that teenager and in that young man. We should help our teenagers to let their gazes fall on the teenage Jesus there in that house of Nazareth. We can imagine the captivating beauty of his face and especially his eyes, bright, pure and brimming with joy. The feast of Christmas should encourage our reflection on the importance of looking into the eyes of our children because they are the mirror of their souls. We can read in them innocence, the joy of living and purity. Pope Francis, in Panama, while addressing the young people from all over the world recalled that Don Bosco learned to look, to see everything that was happening in the city and to see with the eyes of God and we can add read them in the eyes of his boys.

### **The Eyes are the Mirror of the Soul**

Don Bosco admits in his memoirs how he made use of his eyes: *"Though I was still pretty small, I was studying my companions' characters. When I looked closely at someone, I would usually gauge what he was thinking. This gift won me the love and esteem of the boys and I was in demand as judge or*

*friend.*" (MO, 27) The eyes are truly the mirror of the soul. To look into the eyes of preadolescents and adolescents is a bit like entering their inner worlds. Some have clear eyes that reflect the innocence of the adolescent Jesus. Others already show aggression, jealous, pride and sensuality. Don Bosco also read the sins he saw there; that special gift came from above. While we share the demonstrations of young people in support of ecology and care for the environment and its defence, we hope that our young people will courageously protest against the moral pollution of creation. This starts from the media that daily highlights the evil that is being perpetrated around the world, while they are not interested in showing the good that is being done in families, by many voluntary groups, the solidarity initiatives with the poorest of the poor. While we should protect the eyes and hearts of our children, teenagers and young adults from getting dirty through rampant pornography. This is a scourge that is polluting the world, it is making their ability to love die within them. We should at least cultivate the hope of raising the eyes of our children everyday to see the light which is always around us in the good things that many Christians do in hiding, in their everyday lives, in the love that the saints have sown in the world. We should educate them to savour the beauty around us and also notice the ugliness and evil in the way they dress and their tattoos. This is the pollution that contrasts with the beauty of God and of his nature, but few have the courage to talk about it and even less to start a

campaign in defence of the spiritual creation and the true beauty that reflects that of God.

### **Christmas manifests the goodness of God**

The goodness of God our Saviour and his love for humankind appears at Christmas. Everyone feels better at least for a day. To develop this goodness in our teenagers is to help them to see the goodness of God in their actions and in their eyes. If the image of the Child Jesus anticipates that gentleness and humility that he will ask of all those who intend to follow him, we must imagine his face and his teenage attitudes. While our kids see the seeds of pride, jealousy, violence already in the family where their personality develops with their little rebellions and their provocations. In some of them the desire to dominate, to tease, to provoke fear and submission in the most timid, triggers the phenomenon of bullying which, above all in the school environment, manifests itself more easily. Already in Don Bosco's day when he was seventeen years old these things occurred, so they are not so new and they are becoming more frequent. Let's see how he reacted to these provocations inflicted on his weaker companions.

Here is how he speaks in particular of a friend two years younger than him, Louis Comollo: *"For several days now I had been observing a boy about fifteen, a student who behaved so modestly as he walked through the streets, and who spoke with such charm and courtesy to those who addressed him that it filled me with wonder. My curiosity increased when I had*

*an opportunity to observe the neatness of his work and his punctuality at school. As soon as he had taken his assigned place, he never stirred except to do something that duty prescribed.*

*“It was customary among students to joke and indulge in horseplay in the classroom while the pupils entered. The wilder ones among them and those least interested in their studies were particularly fond of such pastimes, and generally acquired quite a reputation for themselves. They would invite this gentle looking boy to take part in their high jinks but he would always excuse himself, explaining that he was not good at that, not skillful enough. Nevertheless, one morning one of these fellows approached him while he was absorbed in a book, paying no attention whatever to the uproar the others were making around him. Taking him by the arm, and shaking him rudely, this companion demanded that he take part in their horseplay.*

*‘No, thanks,’ said the youth quietly, greatly embarrassed. ‘I don’t know how. I’ve never played such games before. I would only look very awkward.’*

*“‘I don’t care,’ insisted the bully. ‘You have to join us, because if you don’t I’ll kick you and beat you until you do.’*

*“‘You may beat me if you wish, but I don’t know how’ I can’t and I won’t.’*

*“Upon realizing that the boy had no intention of giving up, the bully gripped his arm, shoved him and then slapped him twice across the face. The sound echoed through the classroom, I was disgusted at the sight, and felt my blood boil. I was afraid that the victim would give that insolent companion a taste of his own medicine for he was much older and stronger than the aggressor. But instead, the boy displayed another kind of spirit.*

*Imagine my surprise when the youth, his face still scarlet and smarting from the blow, cast a look of deep compassion on his assailant and said: 'If this makes you happy, you may go now that you have and your way. I don't care and have already forgiven you.'*

*"His heroic gesture reminded me of the words I had heard, about a saintly student who was expected in town. I asked who he was and where he came from, and then at once I realized that this boy, Louis Comollo, was the nephew of the pastor of Cinzano and the very same boy whose virtues were praised in the Marchisio boarding house." The germs of violence are also found in good young people who especially in the face of injustice feel their blood boiling and that was how it was for John Bosco. Here is his story again: "He was studying the humanities, and therefore was a grade below me." Don Bosco wrote further, "but we were in the same school and had the same teacher. From that time on we were close friends and I can truly say that, thanks to him, I began to live as a real Christian. I put all my trust in him, and he put his in me. We needed each other. He gave me spiritual assistance, I gave him physical protection. Because of his great shyness, Comollo never even attempted to defend himself against the insults of his rougher schoolmates; but they respected me, even those who were older and bigger than I, because I was very strong and not afraid to take them on.*

## **A Violent Provocation**

*"This was made all the clearer to them one day when several of these bullies planned to annoy and beat up Comollo and an-*

*other harmless boy named Anthony Candelo. I decided to intervene but no one paid attention to me. 'Whoever keeps bothering these two had better watch out,' I said loudly. Thereupon several of them more brazen and strong among them assumed a threatening and defensive stance toward me, while another dealt Comollo two resounding slaps across his face. At that I completely forgot myself. Brute force and not reason was now moving me. I could not grab a chair or a stick because there was not and so I gripped one of them by the shoulders and used him as a battering ram against those bullies. I knocked four of them to the floor and the others lost no time in taking to their heels. But that wasn't all. At that very moment our teacher entered the room, and upon seeing arms and legs waving wildly amid a terrible din he, too, began to swing right and left to restore order. The storm was about to burst over my head, too, when he stopped to ask the cause of all this commotion. After I had told him, he wanted me to reenact my defence. It amused him greatly and he began to laugh. Everybody else joined in and no further thought was given to the punishment I might have deserved."*

Here we admire John's humility in disclosing this fact. It is difficult to persuade oneself that in his generous soul there was no room for strong emotion on seeing his friend being treated in this way. After the narration of the above, we read again in Don Bosco's own manuscript: "Comollo taught me many other lessons. 'John,' he said to me as soon as we were alone, 'your strength scares me. Believe me, God didn't give it to you for slaughtering your companions. He wants us to love one another, to forgive one another and to do good to those who do evil to us.' Mild-tempered as he was he was never seen

*to quarrel with his companions, but remained patient and affable. I greatly admired his spirit of charity and put myself entirely in his hands, letting him guide me as he wished. Together with another friend of ours [William] Garigliano, we went to confession and to Communion. We met for meditation and spiritual readings, visited the Blessed Sacrament and served Mass. Comollo knew how to invite us to these activities with such goodness, gentleness and courtesy that it was quite impossible to refuse him.” This is how true friendships are born among teenagers.*