VOCATIONAL ANIMATION IN THE POST-CONCILIAR DOCUMENTS OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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“I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world.”[[1]](#footnote-2) These words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* have become rightly famous. Mission is not something I have, it is what I am, it is my very being. And lest we forget that vocation is a relation not only with God but also with our fellow human beings, in *Christus* *Vivit* the pope distinguishes between mission in a broad sense as a calling from God (including the call to life, to friendship with him, to holiness, and so forth) and in a strict sense as a call to missionary service, as being there for others.[[2]](#footnote-3) Trenchantly, the pope advises young people to stop asking “Who am I?” and to ask, rather, “For whom am I?”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Already Paul VI had declared, and Benedict XVI had repeated, that *every life is vocation*.[[4]](#footnote-5) It seems to me that Pope Francis, with the Synod on youth, extends this conviction *explicitly* *to all young people*: those who belong actively to the Church, those who have other visions of life, who belong to other religions, and even who distance themselves from religion altogether.[[5]](#footnote-6) All young people are called to the joy of love.[[6]](#footnote-7) All young people are invited to make life choices within the liberating horizon of self-giving. (FD 69) All young people are invited to overcome the narrow confines of the atomic individualism of modern Western and contemporary culture and to immerse themselves in a vision of life that recognizes the intrinsic relationality of the universe and the call to the joy of giving and receiving.

In this line, the Synod on youth has invited us to overcome a narrow idea of vocations as indicating only the call to the ordained ministry and to consecrated life (IL 85) and to engage in a youth ministry that is vocational at its core.[[7]](#footnote-8) The two essential characteristics of youth ministry are first, that it is for youth, and second, that it is vocational – “because youth is the privileged season for life choices and for responding to God’s call.” (FD 140) The Synod is not asking us “to strengthen vocational ministry as a separate and independent sector.” It is asking us, rather, “to animate the entire pastoral approach of the Church, presenting effectively the great variety of vocations.” (FD 139)

In the present article, I will examine the journey of the Salesian Congregation on the topic of vocational animation – not only because it dovetails beautifully with what the Synod is saying, but also because, in its own little way, it flowed into the thinking of the Synod.[[8]](#footnote-9) In the conviction that we are called “to walk together” (*syn-’odos*), I will dedicate much attention to this journey (listening), so as to let it illuminate the vocational thinking and praxis of our South Asia region in the brief second part (interpreting) and to generate some suggestions for action (deciding).

# The journey of the Congregation since Vatican II

## A Copernican revolution: the Special General Chapter (1971)

The Special General Chapter (SGC) took place in 1971 in the midst of the dramatic post-conciliar crisis of vocations.[[9]](#footnote-10)

On the topic of vocations, as in many other areas, this seven-month long Chapter is a watershed in the history of the Congregation. The Council had highlighted the baptismal foundation of the common vocation of the whole people of God, “effecting a kind of Copernican revolution in our way of understanding the reality of vocation.”[[10]](#footnote-11) The SGC used the term ‘apostolic vocations’ to include not only religious and priestly but also lay vocations. Where the previous General Chapter had reminded us that special care of vocations to the priesthood or religious life was one of the aims of our Society,[[11]](#footnote-12) the SGC says, instead: “Like Don Bosco, we must dedicate ourselves to guiding, forming and developing apostolic vocations in the Church: *group leaders and priestly and religious vocations*.”[[12]](#footnote-13) “The evolution of the Church towards a *diversification of vocations*, in keeping with the promotion of the laity, and our own tradition, lead us to concern ourselves with those young people who are capable of becoming *lay apostles*.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

Next, the Chapter states that guiding and forming apostolic vocations “is the crown of all pastoral work among the young.” Such “*specific pastoral work for vocations* presupposes and is grafted on to our general pastoral youth work.” (SGC 374, emphasis mine)

Implied, though not stated clearly, is that all young people have a vocation: “It is the task of the entire pastoral action of the community to help the young person know his own vocation….” (SGC 384) Among these, some have an ‘apostolic vocation’: “Without neglecting larger places and groups, we must have a special care for the formation of the most promising young people.” (SGC 374) Work for such vocations, which include the laity, is specific vocation ministry. (SGC 374)

Among apostolic vocations, there is special care for vocations to the priestly and religious life: “Our schools will take the greatest care to seek and guide good vocations to the priesthood and religious life….” (SGC 382) And again: “An essential element of our pastoral activity and its natural consequence is the promotion and care of possible religious and priestly vocations and youth leaders.” (SGC 397) A much clearer formulation of this position may be found in Section 4 on formation. While our Society “has the mission of helping youth to define their own position and to discover their own roles in the human community and in the Church,” at the same time Salesians “should take special care to help in the formation of those whom the Lord has called to a total consecration to himself….” Thus: “Vocation orientation, whist it achieves the fundamental aim of helping all young people to discover and develop their own vocation, will still be the natural source of new members for the Congregation.” (SGC 662)

Thus the SGC (1) expands the idea of vocations to incorporate the lay vocation, including that of the Salesian cooperator; (2) states that vocation ministry is the crowning point of youth ministry; (3) declares that our Society has the mission of helping every young person discover his or her vocation; (4) insists on special care for religious and priestly vocations; and (5) states that Salesian vocations will be the natural outcome of a generalized vocation ministry.

This thinking is crystallized in the Constitutions framed by the SGC and promulgated in 1972.[[14]](#footnote-15)

“Vocations” is one of the special concerns of the Congregation, and our task is to favour the growth of apostolic vocations – lay, religious or priestly – among the young. (C 12)

By means of spiritual direction, we help the young develop their own vocation so that their lives are progressively inspired and unified by the gospel. (C 22) Among specialized centres and services, special mention is made of centres for fostering vocations. (C 29)

Chapter 14 of the Constitutions on the phases of formation begins with an article on vocation ministry, which here means vocations to the Salesian consecrated life. In virtue of his vocation, every Salesian feels responsible for the growth of the Society, and generously gives himself to the promotion and care of Salesian vocations. (C 107)

In the Regulations, there is a passing mention of vocation ministry under the topic of schools. (R 10) Under the topic of formation, instead, every province is asked to organize the promotion and care of vocations, establishing criteria, methods and structures for vocation orientation. (R 72) The aspirantate is a centre of vocational orientation for those showing an inclination to religious and priestly life, who are helped to recognize their apostolic vocation. (R 73)

## Vocation ministry, generic and specific: Ricceri (1974)

In a letter of 1974, Luigi Ricceri, Rector Major, returns to the topic of vocations.[[15]](#footnote-16) When he begins with a mention of “noticeable and often frightening” dearth of vocations, he is obviously talking about vocations to the Salesian consecrated life. (ASC 273 7) In what follows, however, he firmly takes up the teaching of the Council and of the SGC, first presenting the way in which vocation ministry is understood today, and then offering guidelines for action.

Ricceri points out that our mission binds us to a total, integral service to the young, going so far as to say that the vocation ministry is not only the crown of youth ministry but even that it *is* our mission. “Today it is self-evident to say that the apostolate is either vocational or it is nothing.” (ASC 273 10)

What then is vocation ministry? Ricceri is clear: “when I speak of vocation promotion or apostolate, I certainly do not mean to reduce the apostolate to a mere series of devices for ‘vocation-fishing’ just for the satisfaction of keeping our houses of formation full. The matter is wider, deeper and more substantial than that.” Vocation ministry is, in fact, the help given by the Christian community to each Christian to help him develop his baptismal vocation to holiness, and to discover his own personal vocation within that. (ASC 273 11)

With the Council, Ricceri insists on the *complementarity* of all vocations within the Church. (ASC 273 12)

The *objectives* of vocation ministry are (1) to make the baptismal vocation come alive; and (2) to help everyone to grow in their personal vocation – as the SGC had said. (SGC 109) “Unfortunately many of us have often forgotten this. We have expected to find specific vocations where there was no clear awareness of the Christian vocation.”[[16]](#footnote-17)

Ricceri goes on to outline some characteristics of vocation ministry. It is an educational service we owe to the young. It is concerned with all vocations, and cannot be reduced to priestly or religious vocations, and certainly not to searching for candidates for one’s own Congregation. But it works also for ‘sacred vocations’ – a somewhat unfortunate expression used by Ricceri to indicate ecclesiastical vocations and those of ‘special consecration.’[[17]](#footnote-18)

Vocation ministry in the Congregation has, therefore, a double dimension: a *generic* action in favour of the baptismal vocation, and a *specific* action in favour of ‘sacred vocations.’ (ASC 273 17)

After further general considerations (ASC 273 17-24), Ricceri goes on to make some practical proposals. Planning is important for ministry. Our method is the preventive system. We need a progressive catechesis (that presents also the ‘sacred vocations,’ including the Salesian vocation); a deep spiritual life that includes spiritual direction; the witness of the educators; opportunities to young people to be involved in the apostolate; and prayer. (ASC 273 24-37)

The letter concludes with an invitation to a renewal of aspirantates, defending them vigorously against uncritical allegations.[[18]](#footnote-19) At the same time, Ricceri opens the path to new forms ‘parallel’ to the aspirantates, insisting that the core of these forms be the spiritual, cultural and Salesian help needed for the calm, free choice of a vocation, and that these experiments be undertaken without abandoning the tried and tested method of the classical aspirantates. (ASC 273 38-45)

Summarizing: Ricceri clearly adopts the expanded idea of vocations proposed by the Vatican II and the SGC – such vocation ministry is not only the crown of our youth ministry but may even be said to be identical with it. He has strong words against fishing for vocations, clearly points out the double aspect of vocation ministry in the Congregation, generic and specific, and insists that we cannot discover specific vocations (ecclesiastical and those of special consecration) where there is no clear awareness of the Christian vocation. Further, we need serious planning for vocation ministry. Aspirantates remain very valid and must not be abandoned; at the same time we must also search for new ways and forms.

## Planning the vocation ministry: GC21 (1978)

GC21 responded to Ricceri’s call for serious planning of vocation ministry. As the new Rector Major, Egidio Viganò, said in his concluding address, with GC21 we have “the first Chapter document to propose a complete plan of attack for the renewal of Salesian vocational pastoral work.”[[19]](#footnote-20) He was referring to part 3 of “Document 1: Salesians, Evangelizers of the Youth,” which was dedicated to the educational plan and vocational fruitfulness.

The document first repeats the teaching of the SGC and the Constitutions: every believer has a personal calling to take on the mission of the Church, and for us Salesians, “all educational and pastoral activity contains as an essential objective a vocational dimension.” The discovery of one’s calling constitutes “the crowning goal of any process of human and Christian growth.” (GC21 106)

Next the document states the three fundamental goals of vocation ministry:

1. To help each young person to develop his or her baptismal vocation.
2. To revitalize a fundamental component of the Salesian vocation: the cultivation of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, to ecclesial ministries, and to lay leadership.
3. To keep alive the Salesian charism by fostering vocations “whether religious or lay.”[[20]](#footnote-21) This position makes clear what was already implicit in the SGC: that the vocation of the Cooperator is as much a Salesian vocation as those to the Salesian consecrated life. And GC21 111 makes clear that by “religious” vocations is meant not only SDB but also FMA, VDB, and other consecrated groups of the Salesian Family.

The lines of renewal are also three:

1. *To begin with those to whom our vocation ministry is directed*: all young people at all ages; those young people who show signs of a call to consecrated life (priestly or lay) and to Christian lay commitment (apostolic vocations, though the word is not used). In this latter group, “we will take special care of vocations to our Congregation and to the entire Salesian Family (FMA, VDB, CC, etc).” Further, a special commitment to the vocation of the Salesian Brother will help us understand and express better the meaning of the Salesian religious vocation. (GC21 111)
2. *To determine our fundamental pastoral choices*: basing our evangelizing-vocational ministry “on a deep prayer-conversion”; beginning from the fact that authentic witness is fundamental; recognizing that vocations come from God; including vocational guidance explicitly and systematically as an essential dimension of our apostolate; exposing young people to all the vocations in the Church: lay commitment, ecclesial ministries, diaconal service, consecrated life, the ministerial priesthood; working for the Church without narrow-minded exclusivism. (GC21 112-113)
3. *To engage in serious planning, at provincial and local level, of vocation ministry*. This includes appointing a person or a team to be in charge of vocational animation in each province. The team should include members from all branches of the Salesian Family. The Rector remains the first one responsible for vocation animation at local level.

There follow very interesting and practical considerations of permanent elements of vocation animation, moments of spiritual concentration, and settings for the vocation ministry. ‘Settings’ include our works, sustained educational guidance outside our works, and specialized care for those who show greater sensitivity and openness. Such specialized care can take place in aspirantates (“today wisely divided into two phases”), taking care to have a true Salesian environment, a clear project that is regularly evaluated, and a team of genuine witnesses to the Salesian life. It can also be done in other ways – communities of vocation referral, vocation clubs, periodic local and zonal meetings, community experiences – provided that the process of vocational growth, reflection and verification is ensured. (GC21 114-118)

The plan presented by GC21, as Viganò says, is a truly rich and complete plan and still valid today in its essentials. The doctrine is not new, though we now have an explicit reference to Salesian vocations as not only consecrated but also lay. But very new are the concrete steps outlined in terms of goals and lines of renewal, and above all the planning mentality. The lines of renewal themselves state clearly, again, the ‘objects’ of vocation ministry (all young people; those with an apostolic vocation; Salesian vocations, both consecrated and lay), fundamental pastoral choices, and the need for serious planning. The remarks about aspirantates and ‘other ways’ of taking care of those who show signs of a Salesian vocation are noteworthy.

## Vocation and vocations: Constitutions and Regulations (1984)

The Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis de Sales (Salesians of Don Bosco) promulgated in 1972 were revised by General Chapter 22 in 1984 and approved the same year.[[21]](#footnote-22)

The text of 1984 contains rather clearly the doctrine on vocations that was emerging in the SGC and with greater clarity in GC21: that all young people have a vocation; that some of them are called to an apostolic vocation within the Church; and that in this latter category are to be found also young people with Salesian vocations, both consecrated and lay.

C 6 declares that the Salesian vocation places us at the heart of the Church and at the service of her mission, and that it involves us in four major apostolic fronts, the second of these being special attention to apostolic vocations.

C 28 is entitled “young people called to serve the Church” and speaks about apostolic vocations in the following way:

We are convinced that many young people are rich in spiritual potential and give indications of an apostolic vocation.

We help them to discover, accept and develop the gift of a lay, consecrated or priestly vocation, for the benefit of the whole Church and of the Salesian Family.

We note here that ‘many’ – not all! – young people give indications of an apostolic vocation, which is itself described in terms of the three classes states of life in the Church: lay, consecrated and priestly.

However, C 37, “Vocational guidance,” in the section of chapter IV on our pastoral educational service, speaks of the “human and baptismal vocation” of the young, which Salesians are called to accompany. Such accompaniment, continues C 37, is collaboration with God’s design, and is “the crown of all our educational and pastoral activity”.

R 9 speaks of the vocational guidance of young people – “With the help of trained educators and a programme of suitable activities, due attention should be given to the vocational guidance of young people” – and then adds that “special regard should be paid to the discovery, and subsequent follow-up by suitable initiatives, of those youngsters who show signs of lay, religious or priestly vocations.”

Under “Initiatives at the service of vocations,” which is a subsection of Regulations ch. 3: “Activities and Works,” there emerges a distinction between apostolic vocations in general, and the particular kind of apostolic vocation that are the religious and priestly states. Thus R 16 speaks of vocational guidance centres and other forms of accompaniment such as meetings, groups or insertion into a Salesian community, for “young people who feel called to some commitment in the Church and in the Congregation” – apostolic vocations in general – while R 17 specifies that the aspirantate is one kind of vocational guidance centre which “helps older boys and young men who show an aptitude for the religious and priestly life to know their own apostolic vocation and to correspond with it.”[[22]](#footnote-23)

Summarizing: (1) The Constitutions and Regulations of 1984 imply that every baptized young person has a vocation, and that helping them discover and grow in this vocation is not only an essential part of Salesian youth ministry, but also its crowning point. (2) Many of these young people have an apostolic vocation to service in the Church and for the kingdom of God, in the lay, religious or priestly state. Salesians are called to accompany these in a special way, through vocational guidance centres, meetings, special groups, or insertion into one of our communities. (3) Without mentioning explicitly vocations to the *Salesian* consecrated life, the aspirantate is described as one kind of vocational guidance centre, which offers help to those who show an aptitude for the religious and priestly life. (R 17)

## Vocation in the journey of education to the faith: GC23 (1990)

General Chapter 23 reflected on the process of education to the faith. Obviously, vocational animation is found here as the crowning point of the process: see “Towards a commitment to the Kingdom” in the second part entitled “The Faith Journey.”[[23]](#footnote-24) This discussion about vocation follows upon considerations of human maturity, the encounter with Jesus, and a more intense belonging to the Church. A second, more practical discussion may be found in the third part: “The journey of faith of the young demands that the Salesian community give particular attention to their vocational guidance.” (GC23 247-253)

The section “Towards a commitment to the Kingdom” speaks of life as vocation (everyone has a family, professional, social and political responsibility; for some, this responsibility will bloom into a consecration of special significance, whether priestly, religious or one involving secular commitment); the explicit vocational invitation; the subsequent process of discernment (in which prayer, meditation, spiritual direction and apostolic experience are essential); and a first vocational option (with the invitation to focus on the overriding meaning rather than on work to be done). (GC23 149-157)

“The Practical Commitment of the Community” regarding vocation animation begins with an interesting note: vocational guidance is the vertex and crown of all our educational and pastoral activity (C 37) not in the sense of a terminus but rather of a constantly present element. (GC23 247)

Another interesting point is the mention of the *comunità proposta* (translated awkwardly into English as “communities for encouraging those who are already aspirants to some extent”) as a new alternative to the traditional forms of vocational orientation and accompaniment (read aspirantates). Other alternatives are vocational reference groups, houses for prayer and retreats, *campi scuola* (misleadingly translated as ‘school camps’) and vocational weeks. (GC23 249)

The local community is identified as “the decisive setting for any serious plan of pastoral work for vocations.” (GC23 250) The lines of action are very precise and practical: every community is asked to express in its educative and pastoral plan the manner in which it will provide vocational guidance to all, and accompaniment to those showing signs of special consecration (in the sense described in GC23 149, I suppose, as including lay commitment). The community is explicitly asked to provide experiences of service and group experiences with a clear vocational purpose. The Rector is asked to rediscover his role as guide of young people through personal meetings as well as group interaction. The provincial is asked to supervise the community plans, to prepare confreres for vocational guidance and spiritual direction, and to ensure the appointment of a vocation animator in the provincial youth ministry team. (GC23 252-253)

Thus if GC21 had been the first to call for serious planning of vocational animation and to suggest elements for this plan, GC23 securely and firmly integrates vocational animation into the vision and framework of Salesian youth ministry.[[24]](#footnote-25) It explains the sense in which vocational animation is the crowning point of youth ministry: “The vocational process is not a final, casual, elitist or exceptional moment, but rather the very axis of the whole journey in each of its stages.”[[25]](#footnote-26)

## A theology and praxis of vocation ministry: Viganò (1992)

In a letter of 1992 entitled “There is still good ground where the seed can fall,” Egidio Viganò presented elements of a theology of vocation, with some useful reflections also on praxis.

The Rector Major reflects on the relationship between vocation and vocations: the several vocations – priestly, consecrated, lay – are rooted in the single basic baptismal vocation and are illuminated by it.[[26]](#footnote-27) Still, it is not enough to present only the baptismal vocation; we must show that ministries, witnesses and certain services are indispensable expressions of it. On the other hand, it is precisely in baptism that we find the fundamental reason for every Christian vocation, and it is from here that we must project all our work in favour of vocations. “In other words: for us, *the care of vocations is a constitutive part of youth ministry itself*, which is meant to educate young people to the true Christian faith.” (AGC 339 9 = Viganò, LC 1207) “Unless the common Christian vocation is formed and special vocations cultivated in its service, all education of young people to the faith will remain sterile! And so in our case it becomes more urgent than ever to give our minds to the development of specific vocations for groups of the Salesian Family, and in particular to those of our own Congregation: clerics and brothers.” (AGC 339 12 = Viganò, LC 1210)

We can go further and affirm that the very existence of every human person is a vocation. Created to live in the image and likeness of God, the person is called to collaborate with others in a history that leads the whole world to the goal of the Kingdom. (AGC 339 9 = Viganò, LC 1207-8) The Council overcame the dichotomy between Church and world. These, while being quite distinct, converge in the concreteness of history – the world as ‘mass’ and the Church as ‘leaven’. The Church is both instrument of salvation for the world and an anticipation of our final state, the beginning of the Kingdom. In the same way, the vocational dimension develops at once both the human meaning of the existence of a person and his entry into the world of faith through baptism and further commitments. That is why vocation and the special Christian vocations are neither extraneous nor antithetical to the existential vocation of the person. To be Christian and eventually a priest, consecrated person or committed lay person, means to realize a special service of the Church for the world, that it might reach the great goal of the Kingdom. (AGC 339 9-10 = Viganò, LC 1208)

The Constitutions indicate care of apostolic vocations as one of the fundamental aims of our mission and include those who give signs of a special vocation among those to whom our mission is directed. (C 6; 28) (AGC 339 11= Viganò, LC 1209)

GC23 states that the subject of vocation ministry is the Salesian community. (AGC 339 11 = Viganò, LC 1209)

Viganò goes on to outline the challenges arising from the context (secularization that renders more difficult and complex the growth in faith; the multiplicity of messages; the prolonging of the period of youth; the loss of social esteem for the priesthood and religious life) and also new signs of interest in the transcendent that permit the introduction of the theme of vocational orientation. (AGC 339 12-20 = Viganò, LC 1210-15)

The rest of the letter contains practical points for a fruitful vocation ministry: communities that are signs, schools of faith and centres of communion and participation; personalization of the journey of faith (growth in faith, graduality, personal dialogue…); fostering of growth experiences (schools of prayer, experiences of service and apostolate, the service of animation, volunteer work at home or abroad, different kinds of groups); knowing how to make explicit invitations and to accompany (all too often rendered tamely as ‘follow up’ in the official English translation, though the context makes it clear that the reference is to personal spiritual guidance). (AGC 339 20-34 = Viganò, LC 1216-1226)

Apart from “specially suitable environments” – aspirantates of a new kind, *comunità proposta* (this time translated into English as “reception communities,” which is still misleading) – Viganò insists that “personal accompaniment before the prenovitiate has become more and more indispensable, and may indeed be at times the only possibility because of certain local and cultural requirements, or because of age and family circumstances.” Even if the meaning of the last two clauses is not evident, it is clear that Viganò is insisting on the importance of personal accompaniment and vocational discernment before the prenovitiate. He also declares that three criteria here are essential: “the authenticity and consistency of motivations, the proper presentation of the spiritual life, and the ability for relationships.” (AGC 339 33 = Viganò, LC 1225)

In his conclusion, Viganò speaks of the roles of the provincial, the Rector and the families. He reminds the provincial that the care for vocations should not become marginal in his governance, and that he must try to convince the confreres of the vital importance of animation. He recalls GC21 which declared that the Rector is the first one responsible at local level for vocational animation, and GC23 which asked the Rector to rediscover the personal chat with young people, especially with the older ones. He points out the critical role of families, especially the families of those who are inclined to the Salesian vocation. (AGC 339 34-36 = Viganò, LC 1226-28)

Summarizing: Viganò reflects on the link between the baptismal vocation, the way vocational youth ministry flows from it, and how it is essential that the baptismal vocation be expressed in the priestly, consecrated and lay vocations. He opens up a reflection on life as vocation in the context of the relationship between Church and world, though he does not enter explicitly into the question of the vocation of non-Christians and of youth ministry directed to them. He offers a rich reflection on vocation ministry in the light of the challenges of the age and of the new opportunities that are opening up among young people.

## The expanded subject of vocation ministry: GC24 (1996)

The topic of GC24 was “Salesians and lay people: Communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco,” but inevitably the topic of vocation occurs all over the Chapter document.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Every baptized person is called to share in the mission of the Church, each in line with his or her particular vocation. (GC24 63)

Shared formation is important and must help each one understand their own vocation. Such formation will throw special light on the values of the lay vocation in its reciprocal relationship to other vocations in the Church. (GC24 140, see 117) The clearer the vocational identity of each and the greater the understanding, respect and esteem for the different vocations, the more efficacious will be shared processes of formation. (GC24 138)

Under formation, there is a discussion also of vocational discernment. “The culminating point of the journey of faith is the vocational choice. This requires help and friendship in the individual spiritual guidance of both young people and adults. For this reason the local SDB community, the privileged setting for the suggesting and follow-up of vocations, is open to forms of welcoming young people and the promoting of experiences of the volunteer movement and of educative and pastoral service, which can lead to significant vocational options in lay life, the ordained ministry or in consecrated life.”[[28]](#footnote-29)

Salesian provinces are to invite members of the Salesian Family to set up a unified vocation ministry, with special attention to vocational discernment and the presentation of the different Christian vocations and those proper to the Salesian Family. (GC24 146, see 143)

Finally, one of the *criteria* for the Salesian quality of works managed by lay people is the help given to young people to discover their vocations and the creation of conditions for the maturing of vocational choices for the Church and the Salesian Family. (GC24 180)

GC24 builds on the ecclesiology of communion and the renewed theology of the different states of life within the Church that had been adumbrated in Vatican II and expanded in the three great synods on the lay faithful, the ordained ministry, and consecrated life.[[29]](#footnote-30) In this context, the Chapter speaks not just of Salesian youth ministry culminating in vocational discernment and life choices, but of the *subject* of this ministry which is now, clearly, not just the Salesian religious community but the educative pastoral community with its communion of different vocations.

## Vocational culture and praxis: Vecchi (2000)

In “‘Come and See’” (AGC 373 of the year 2000), written as “a contribution to the study the Provinces have to make” in preparation for GC25, the Rector Major Juan Vecchi is concerned “to open wider horizons so that our pastoral work be not limited in the field of vocations to general and superficial proposals, nor be reduced to seeking for candidates to the Salesian life only outside our own settings.”[[30]](#footnote-31)

The Rector Major points to the phenomenon in the so-called “difficult areas,” where certain communities, spirituality centres or movements are strongly attractive to the young, while others are not able to attract the young. On the other hand, in the areas that are “still fruitful,” there are many who are attracted to our life, but their behaviour sometimes changes once they have joined the community – raising the question of proper motivations. (Vecchi, LC 640)

Vecchi repeats the distinction (made, e.g., in GC21) of three levels of vocation ministry: (1) “the guidance offered to all young people”; (2) the efforts to discover and follow up “vocations of particular commitment in society and in the Church,” with “special attention to vocations of service to the Church itself (vocations for dioceses and for other religious institutes) and to the world as a whole (missionary vocations, including those of the laity)”; and (3) “a particular responsibility regarding the Salesian charism in its many forms, through the discernment and fostering of the seeds of a Salesian vocation, both consecrated and lay, present in young people.” (Vecchi, LC 643) Once again, we have the reference to “consecrated and lay” Salesian vocations.

The Rector Major notes that “vocational culture” – an expression first used by Pope John Paul II and developed further by Vecchi himself[[31]](#footnote-32) – “is now becoming the first objective of vocational pastoral work, and perhaps of pastoral work in general.”[[32]](#footnote-33) Vocational culture “is a matter of promoting a form of life and the choice of personal options for the future according to a set of values such as generosity, acceptance of the mystery, availability for being called and involved, belief in oneself and one’s neighbour, and the courage to dream and desire on a grand scale. In addition there are educative proposals and experiences in line with the values proposed.” (Vecchi, LC 644)

Vecchi goes on to present “a new approach” to vocations that is surprisingly concrete and practical. He is not speaking here only about vocations to the Salesian consecrated life, but he does, as we will see, insist that we avoid “genericism.” As a kind of premise, the Rector Major points out that there is now “a new subject to which our vocational discourse is addressed”: the “adolescente adulto,” the young adult involved in a prolonged period of adolescence because of lengthening of compulsory schooling and deferment of the age of decision. He notes the immediate consequence of this: while not neglecting any stage of youth, “we must recognize a privileged moment among animators, volunteers, young collaborators, university students, and the older pupils in schools.” (Vecchi, LC 644-645, tr. modified) And then we have to make a very special effort to talk about the Christian life and vocational guidance, because “only if they are attracted by Jesus and have understood what kind of life he is offering them do they decide to follow him.” (Vecchi, LC 645)

The new approach is presented in twelve points. (1) Vocation is an attraction: our charism and our lives must be attractive. (2) Vocation is a call and a grace: the initiative is God’s, and our part is to pray, work and be thankful for every single vocation. (3) Vocation is a lifelong journey of maturing in faith; it is not enough to be an honest and upright “rich young man.” (4) God has a plan for everyone, and so everyone experiences the call. And then the caveat: “It is true nonetheless that accompaniment towards the priesthood and the consecrated life constitutes a special aspect, and we must not level everything down in a too general discussion on vocation.” (Vecchi, LC 646) (5) A direct and explicit work is needed for vocations of particular consecration or service…. We must avoid falling into a genericism that no longer distinguishes the different kinds of calls or appeals which Jesus himself made.” (6) Every community and every confrere must be involved in the discovery and helping of vocations. Delegation to a “recruiter” is “totally insufficient and gives no guarantee as regards either quantity or authenticity.” (Vecchi, LC 647) (7) Young people need direct experience and contact with the realities involved in vocational choice. “Our parishes, schools, oratories and volunteer groups must become communities where ministries at the service of a mission are experienced and an encounter with Christ is fostered.” (8) Given that the age of decision is now prolonged, a longer period of accompaniment is needed. “A vocation-based catechesis should really begin in childhood or adolescence; but the work must not be abandoned when the young people enter the university or similar environments.” (Vecchi, LC 647) And the accompaniment given must be up to the level of the young person, his intellectual and human development. (9) A community setting is indispensable. Vecchi notes that many of our vocations have had the experience of a Salesian educative pastoral community or of a group, but notes that “experience of life in the Salesian community” should be added to this. (10) Certain experiences – such as involvement in pastoral work, learning how to pray, deeper reflection on the faith, work in volunteer movements, retreats – are very fruitful and must never be omitted from a vocational program. (11) In the case of vocations of special service or consecration an explicit invitation is most often needed. (12) Accompaniment or spiritual direction is necessary. “We could even take the expression ‘spiritual director’ not in a technical sense but in a broader one, referring to someone who is capable of accompanying,” Vecchi says, but immediately adds also that this is a weak point: “We need spiritual guides who are not only understanding but are also able to offer concrete proposals, and are experts in the spiritual life.” (Vecchi, LC 649)

In the second part of the letter, Vecchi goes on to reflect on the role of the Salesian (religious) community, which is the “space of vocational experience and proposal”. (Vecchi, LC 650ff) This part is full of rich suggestions, but I limit myself to picking out a few points.

First, many years before the synod on youth, but probably picking up a theme from the SGC, Vecchi declares: all youth ministry is vocational.[[33]](#footnote-34) “Youth ministry is aimed from the outset at a particular objective: to make the believer attentive to the Lord’s call and ready to respond to it.” (Vecchi, LC 660)

Second, he repeats the distinction found in Ricceri between vocational ministry in general and specific vocational ministry:

[W]e must not limit ourselves exclusively to seeking candidates for a certain kind of life, but – without neglecting a specific type of vocational pastoral work – set about rather providing a guidance service for every young person. (Vecchi, LC 661)

For some time now, and after more than a little confusion in thought and action, the distinction has been recognized between vocational pastoral work in general (i.e., for everyone), and specific vocational pastoral work, i.e., the kind that tries to discover and accompany vocations of special significance in building the Kingdom. (Vecchi, LC 665)

Connected to this point is also the role of the Salesian religious community: “It is true that these lay people can contribute a great deal, but it is equally true that Don Bosco wanted at the centre of his Family a community of consecrated persons.” This had been affirmed already by GC24 150: ‘Don Bosco wanted consecrated persons at the centre of his work, persons oriented to the young and their holiness (…); with their total dedication he could give the solidity and apostolic thrust needed for the continuity and worldwide extension of the mission’.” (Vecchi, LC 666)

In summary: (1) Vecchi makes a strong pitch for vocational ministry in general, and then also insists on the need for specific vocation ministry. (2) He warns against a genericism that fails to distinguish different kinds of calls. (3) He also insists on the role of the religious community, the need for experiences of pastoral work and prayer, the place of explicit invitation as far as vocations of special service or consecration are concerned, and the necessity of providing good accompaniment.

## Vocational culture and vocations – apostolic and Salesian: GC26 (2008)

Despite Vecchi’s rich and suggestive letter, GC25 is not abundant on the theme of vocation animation.[[34]](#footnote-35) It does speak of the Salesian presence that becomes a vocational proposal. It reports that in recent years many provinces and communities have drawn up vocation plans and formative proposals, and have involved young people in groups and movements, including the Salesian Youth Movement. “There is a greater attentiveness to all vocations in the Church and in the Salesian Family in particular, and the conviction that a true youth ministry is always vocational.” It admits, however, that is not easy to present life as vocation and mission, and to accompany young people personally. (GC25 41) It goes on to present lines of action for the Salesian community and for its animation of the educative-pastoral community. (GC25 48) The focus here is obviously on creating a vocational culture, but the expression itself is not used.

In GC26 (2008), however, vocation animation was one of the five Chapter themes, and here we do find the expression ‘vocational culture’: “Today we feel more strongly than ever the challenge of creating a vocational culture in every setting, such that young people may discover life as a call and that all Salesian ministry may be truly vocational.”[[35]](#footnote-36) The expression occurs under the title of “apostolic vocations.” The Chapter urges us to encourage such vocations: “There has to be a particular effort put into engendering apostolic passion amongst the young. Like Don Bosco we are called to encourage them to be apostles among their own companions, taking on various kinds of ecclesial and social service, being involved in missionary projects. To encourage a vocational option for apostolic commitment, these young people should be offered a more intensive spiritual life and a more personal and systematic accompaniment.” (GC26 53)

There follows a clear call to foster consecrated Salesian vocations. Don Bosco worked for many kinds of vocations in the Church, but also called young men to stay with him permanently. After a rich note on the fundamental choices needed to foster consecrated vocations, there follows the mention of vocational communities or aspirantates: “We recognise the need for each province to have vocational communities or aspirantates which can welcome and accompany the young people who are interested in looking at the possibility of Salesian consecrated life.” (GC26 54) This is repeated with a slight variation in the “situation”: Among the initiatives of some provinces to promote Salesian consecrated vocations, we have “discernment groups, retreats with a vocational dimension and experiences of voluntary service, communities of invitation [*comunità proposta*] and new forms of aspirantate/candidacy.” Among the weaknesses, we have the recruitment mentality which can lead to fragile motivations, and the lack of Salesians prepared for the service of accompaniment. (GC26 58)

Among the more concrete guidelines we have the importance of witness; the opening of Salesian religious communities to the young; involving young people in the apostolate; preparing Salesians and others for discernment and accompaniment; the need for explicit invitation; new forms of vocational accompaniment and aspirantates; and better knowledge of the criteria for discernment. (GC26 61-74)

All through the Chapter document there appears the concern for the two forms of our vocation, and especially that of the Salesian Brother (GC26 55, 59, 74-78)

GC26 thus took up Vecchi’s call to create a vocation culture, along with his insistence on the need to help all young people discover their vocation, encourage apostolic vocations, and work explicitly for vocations to the Salesian consecrated life.

## The consecrated life within the Salesian mission: Chávez (2011)

Three years after GC26, Pascual Chávez proposed a Strenna on vocation ministry.[[36]](#footnote-37)

Chávez picks up Paul VI’s beautiful expression “life is vocation.” (Chávez LC 1025) Taking inspiration from Jn 1:39, the Rector Major notes that the first characteristic of the Christian vocation is a meeting, a friendly relationship that fills the heart and changes one’s life. Don Bosco understood this instinctively: instead of using vocation campaigns, he set up in Valdocco “a microclimate in which vocations grew and matured, creating an authentic vocational culture in which life is understood and lived as a gift, as a vocation and as a mission, within a diversity of options.” (Chávez, LC 1027) To this vocational culture Don Bosco added spiritual accompaniment, both inside and outside the confessional. With his deep love for the Church, he sent literally thousands of vocations to the diocese and to other religious Congregations. (Chávez, LC 1031)

Chávez draws on Vecchi to elaborate the notion of vocational culture.[[37]](#footnote-38) He notes that both in the Salesian Congregation and in the Salesian Family in general, there is a certain amount of work by individuals, but there is not always a real culture of vocation in communities and provinces. “This culture in fact, requires not individual initiatives no matter how numerous, but a mindset and an attitude shared by a group; it is a question not only of private intentions and good resolutions, but the systematic and deliberate employment of the forces which the community has at its disposal. A vocational culture… operates in three areas: the anthropological, the educational and the pastoral. The first refers to the way in which being a human person is seen and presented as vocation; the second aims at fostering an appreciation of values conducive to vocation; the third pays attention to the relationship between vocation and the ‘objective’ culture and draws conclusions from this for vocation work.” (Chávez, LC 1033)

Promoting a vocational culture is the essential task of youth ministry. All ministry, Chávez insists, is vocational, and even more so youth ministry. “Therefore it is necessary to give up any minimalist idea of vocation ministry, which only concerns itself with looking for candidates to religious or priestly life. On the contrary…, vocation ministry ought to create the suitable conditions so that every young person may discover, take up and follow in a responsible manner their own vocation.” (Chávez, LC 1039) A family atmosphere in the educative and pastoral community is, therefore, vital, as also the presence of significant witnesses. (Chávez, LC 1040) Within such an environment, we must ensure education to love and to chastity; education to prayer; and personal accompaniment. (Chávez, LC 1041-48)

Having insisted so much on the necessity of a vocation culture, Chávez dedicates the final part of his letter to the centrality and role of religious consecration in the mission of the Salesian Family. He speaks explicitly of “the two complementary forms of living the vocation [of the Salesian Family], the secular one and the consecrated, and in this latter the lay and the priestly form”, (Chávez, LC 1048) before going on to insist, with GC24, on “the *fundamental value of consecrated life* in the carrying out of the Salesian mission.” (Chávez, LC 1049) Religious consecration is a “necessary sign” of the transcendent dimension, “an arrow pointed to the divine and to love of his neighbour, which stems from the divine”, and we must strenuously avoid the danger of letting it be swallowed up by the functional aspects of our vocation. (Chávez, LC 1049)

Chávez, therefore, reinforces ideas that have already become current: life as vocation and youth ministry as vocational. He insists on the relatively new notion of vocational culture. And while asking us to give up any minimalist idea of vocation ministry that concerns itself only with searching for candidates to religious or priestly life, he is clear, like Vecchi, that the consecrated life is fundamental to the Salesian mission – implying that we do need to take care of vocations to the consecrated vocation in the Salesian Family.

## The aspirantate experience: Attard and Cereda (2011)

It might be worth taking note of an important letter on aspirantates issued jointly by the Departments for Youth Ministry and for Formation, in answer to the invitation of GC26 which had asked the Rector Major with his Council to reflect on new forms of aspirantate and offer opportune directions.[[38]](#footnote-39)

The aspirantate is described as “an experience typical of Salesian vocational pedagogy, in which young people are accompanied in their discernment about their lives before God.” Again: “The environment, the suitable conditions, the process and the accompaniment proposed to the young person inclined to Salesian consecrated life are what constitute the aspirantate experience.”

As the *Ratio* already says, aspirantate is a general term, which “may vary according to places, cultures and susceptibilities.”[[39]](#footnote-40) In the letter accompanying the “Aspirantate Experience,” the two councillors observe that new forms of vocational accompaniment are being developed in the Congregation. They also note that this requires “a change in their way of thinking by Salesians and the co-involvement of lay people and of the families of the young” but do not elaborate.

The letter lists several forms of aspirantate without pretending to be exhaustive: the scholastic aspirantate for young men engaged in pre-university studies; the university aspirantate; the “comunità proposta” (prevalent in Italy, Spain and some parts of America), which is a Salesian community offering candidates an experience of Salesian life; vocational voluntary service, which is a one or two year insertion into a Salesian community for candidates who have completed their studies or who come from non-Salesian backgrounds; the external aspirantate, which is a planned accompaniment of candidates who because of social, cultural, political or family circumstances, cannot immediately join a community; the aspirantate for indigenous vocations for candidates from particular ethnic backgrounds or minorities, who need special accompaniment with attention to the processes of the inculturation of the faith and of Salesian life.

According to the letter, two kinds of candidates are eligible for the aspirantate experience: those who have been part of Salesian youth ministry and have undergone vocational guidance; and those without such an experience:

Those young people begin the aspirantate experience who, in ordinary circumstances, have already undertaken a process of developing maturity in the faith and of vocational guidance within the Salesian youth ministry programme aimed at fostering apostolic vocations for the Church and for the Salesian Family. Other young people also begin this experience who are attracted by Don Bosco’s charism, and who have not lived in a Salesian educative pastoral community. To all these candidates the Province offers specific accompaniment by means of one of the various different forms of aspirantate which best corresponds to the needs arising from their personal background and their present situation.

Apostolic schools are mentioned in a note, and are described as one kind of ‘vocational guidance centre’:

Article 16 of the General Regulations speaks about “vocational guidance centres”: these “welcome and keep in touch with young people who feel called to some commitment in the Church and in the Congregation. This service can also be carried out by organising local and regional meetings, by means of activities of special groups, or by inserting young people in one of our communities”. For example: in some countries there are “apostolic schools”; these are vocational guidance centres; there are also local vocational groups or province vocational programmes. Vocational guidance ought to precede the aspirantate experience.

Apostolic schools are, therefore, one expression of general vocation ministry that helps every young person discover and respond to his vocation, while aspirantates are meant for young people who are inclined to the Salesian consecrated life.

With GC26, the letter reminds Provinces to “study possibilities for new forms of aspirantate/candidacy in order to have one or more communities where vocational accompaniment of young candidates can take place; plan for specific vocation ministry to young migrants belonging to Catholic families or ethnic minorities and indigenous young people; take greater note of the criteria indicated in the ‘Ratio’ regarding vocation discernment.” (GC26 72)

## The great synthesis: The Frame of Reference of Salesian Youth Ministry (2014)

The *Frame of Reference* of Salesian youth ministry published in 2014 brings together the rich reflections of the preceding years.[[40]](#footnote-41)

The vocational dimension is the ultimate horizon and reference point of youth ministry. All the other dimensions converge on it. (FoR p. 160)

We need to (1) accompany the young as they make their plan of life; (2) build up a community of believers and witnesses that provides the context within which the young can discover life as vocation; (3) offer group and personal accompaniment; (4) and insert vocational discernment into the overall process of education to the faith. Helping every young person make vocational discernment includes “special attention to vocations to the Salesian charism in its many forms, through discernment and attention to the seeds of a Salesian vocation, whether consecrated or lay, that are found in the young.” The text is accompanied by Chávez’ invitation in AGC 409 to overcome a reductive understanding of vocation ministry. (FoR p. 160)

The discussion of the dimensions of Salesian youth ministry is followed by one on choices cutting across all of Salesian Youth Ministry, and this section begins with a mention of apostolic vocations: “In continuity with issues indicated in the vocational dimension, vocational animation finds an essential element in the accompaniment of the choice of an apostolic vocation.” (FoR p. 163) The discussion that follows clearly maintains the broad meaning of vocation, but also repeatedly brings in a mention of the vocation to priestly or consecrated life:

The value of a vocational culture is that it understands vocation in its broad sense as a call to life, dignified work, various commitments and services. It is a culture that leads some to reflect on the possibility of opting for the priestly or consecrated state of life. (FoR pp. 163-164)

“Vocation” begins with a call to life, continues through a call to faith, and arrives, through various responses, at a call to consecrated life. In this sense, we accompany those who, through a good process of growth and development of their own personal vocational dimension, consider the possibility of God calling them to a life of special consecration. (FoR p. 164)

The SEPP should be decisive in offering pastoral activity which is able to give rise to and identify apostolic vocations to special consecration. **Every SEPP should respond appropriately to young people who are seriously asking themselves about the possibility of a Salesian apostolic vocation.** (FoR p. 164)

Special mention is made of the spiritual guide: “The spiritual guide who is needed for any vocational process, helps apostolic vocations in particular to discern their motivations and the requirements of this vocation.” (FoR p. 164)

In chapter 7 dealing with activities and works, we find a section entitled “Other works and settings” where a mention is made of aspirantates and the “comunità proposta,” rendered in English as “live-in community experiences”:

New situations and new opportunities for youth to come together have come to light for the Salesian world. These are educational activities, services or works responding to new needs and requirements of the young and they offer appropriate responses to questions about education and education to faith. Among these we can list: vocation ministry programmes (aspirantates [progetti di Aspirantato], live-in community experiences [Comunità Proposta], vocational discernment centres)…. (FoR p. 255)

More explicitly, under “Experiences or services of animation and vocational guidance,” we find the following text:

In an effort to find new approaches to vocation ministry, new experiences and services of animation and vocational guidance have emerged (welcoming communities [comunità di accoglienza], live-in community experiences [Comunità Proposta], vocational discernment centres). These offer the young opportunities for a concrete experience of the Salesian life and mission for a fixed period of time, where they receive accompaniment and care as they explore their calling in a more systematic way.

It is important that these services guarantee:

* a Salesian community which is open and welcoming and that offers significant vocational witness to the young;
* experience of fraternal life and Salesian mission;
* systematic accompaniment for each individual’s process of vocational maturity;
* close contact and collaboration with other communities in the Province and with those responsible for vocation ministry as laid down by the Province Plan;
* collaboration with other vocation ministry centres in the local Church and with other religious institutes. (FoR pp. 256-257)

In summary, the *Frame of Reference* (1) adopts the perspective of life as vocation and insists again that the vocational dimension is the crowning point of Salesian youth ministry; (2) recognizes that all young people have a vocation, and talks about apostolic vocations; (3) moves seamlessly into mention of the Salesian apostolic vocation or vocation to the priesthood and consecrated life. It (4) mentions the aspirantate once, and the “*Comunità Proposta*” twice, seemingly as a setting that is distinct from the aspirantate, in contrast to the letter of Attard-Cereda (2011) which had clearly listed the *Comunità Proposta* as one of the many possible forms of aspirantate.

## Accompaniment and vocational discernment: GC28 (2020)

Given that the work of GC28 was cut short by the Covid pandemic, the Chapter authorized the Rector Major and his council to draw up a post-Chapter document. This post-chapter document, we must remember, is also a post-synodal reflection, coming as it does in the wake of the synod on youth of 2018.[[41]](#footnote-42)

GC27 had already spoken about vocation ministry and accompaniment. In order to be servants of the young, it had said, we need to make a shift “from a ministry of events and activities to a complete and systematic ministry able to accompany processes of vocational maturing, in tune with new Church and Salesian perspectives.”[[42]](#footnote-43) It invited Salesians to commit themselves to “developing a culture of vocation and care for vocations to Salesian life, cultivating the art of accompaniment and preparing Salesians and lay people to become spiritual guides of the young.” (GC27 75.1)

In his guidelines to the Congregation after the Chapter, the Rector Major Ángel Fernández Artime invites us “to promote a youth ministry that accompanies the young with a view to their personal maturity, growth in faith and that has the vocational dimension as its unifying principle.” (GC28 p. 24, citing FD 140 and CV 254)

The post-Chapter reflection makes an appeal to the example of Don Bosco himself who, despite not using the word ‘accompaniment,’ aimed precisely at this in all his actions. “To neglect this dimension of the preventive system means to distort it.” The Synod on young people has rediscovered the value of accompaniment for vocational discernment, and we too therefore find in our tradition three closely related levels of accompaniment: the environment, the group and the personal. We help young people to discover life not as a project of individual self-realization but as mission, as a gift to others.[[43]](#footnote-44)

The whole educative and pastoral community is involved in accompaniment, even if not everyone has the same aptitude and preparation for guiding personal discernment. In accompaniment, the key player is the Spirit of the Lord, while the other players include the young people themselves. (GC28 10)

“In the certainty that ‘those who accompany others in their growth must be people with broad horizons, capable of holding both limitations and hope together, thus helping them to always see things, ultimately, from a saving perspective’ (from Pope Francis’ Message to GC28), we are called to foster a renewed commitment to accompaniment that first of all requires that we take greater care of the preparation of confreres and lay people in this delicate area and that we ourselves have the experience of being accompanied.” We are invited to listen with empathy and offer help with humility. “The genuine authority of an educator does not consist in the power to manage, but in the strength to promote freedom: this is how Don Bosco exercised his role as father.” (GC28 10)

The relevant line of action is “a renewed commitment to accompaniment from a vocational perspective, seeing to an adequate formation of Salesians and lay people in this area.” (GC28 14) This means moving from a ministry of initiatives and activities to one involving processes and journeys of growth. It means moving from a fragmented kind of ministry to an integration of ministry within a vocational perspective. It means actively involving young people in ministry. The youth ministry and formation sectors are asked to offer formation to accompaniment for Salesians and lay people. The youth ministry sector is asked to animate, support and guide the provinces on vocational issues. And, following the suggestion made in the final document of the Synod on youth, provinces are asked to offer young people opportunities to spend time in our houses for the maturing of adult Christian life. (FD 161) Even more interesting though somewhat vague is the request to the Rector Major and his council to consider establishing a central coordination for vocation animation. More clear, on the other hand, is the directive to the regions to establish centres of formation where Salesians and lay people can be trained for accompaniment, and to provinces to include young people in youth ministry teams, consultative bodies and other structures of pastoral animation. (GC28 14)

GC28 brings accompaniment for vocational discernment to the centre of our youth ministry and insists on the adequate preparation of Salesians and lay people for this service. In the wake of the synod, the post-chapter reflection consolidates our practice of personal accompaniment of young people within the context of community and group accompaniment.

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At the moment of writing, the General Council of the Salesians of Don Bosco is engaged in a fresh study of the question of aspirantates and its relation to vocation ministry. While a final deliberation is yet to be arrived at, we could put down some points of consensus.

As expressed in the letter of Attard and Cereda, the experience of the aspirantate is a help given to those who show an interest in the Salesian consecrated vocation. As such, it is distinct from the vocational animation that is the moving dynamism and crown of youth ministry.

The Congregation is committed to a youth ministry that is radically vocational. Personal and group vocational accompaniment and discernment is not a privilege for a few; it is an essential part of youth ministry and is offered to all. It aims at creating a culture of vocation. At the same time, it also takes special care of vocations to the Salesian consecrated life – signs of which emerge normally within the context of a youth ministry that is vocational. It is in this context that may be placed the various kinds of aspirantate.

Will the aspirantate experience continue to be the principal responsibility of the Youth Ministry sector, or will it be entrusted to the Formation sector? Regardless of the answer to this question, there is no doubt that both sectors need to work in close collaboration.

# Vocational animation in the South Asia region

## Listening to our situation

Vocation ministry in the South Asia region of the Salesians of Don Bosco has remained by and large traditional: ‘vocations’ usually mean vocations to the Salesian life (or to the priesthood), and vocation animation involves vocation promoters, vocation camps, apostolic schools and aspirantates.[[44]](#footnote-45) A study done in 2020 sums up the matter thus:

* Vocation ministry [in the South Asia region] prevalently follows the recruitment model. After vocation camps, candidates are admitted to residential apostolic schools and/or aspirantates.
* The larger number of candidates come before beginning university studies. The minimum requirement for admission to the prenovitiate is a high school (class XII) certificate. (Undergraduate studies are often carried out after practical training and before specific formation.)
* Many candidates come from non-Salesian settings. Our own settings do not produce as many vocations as desired. Personal accompaniment and vocation discernment is not a strong component of our youth ministry. To move from “running schools, colleges and parishes” to “doing youth ministry” in these settings, and to ensure that youth ministry has a vocational accompaniment component, would be a great goal for this region. In general, for a variety of reasons, the oratory is not a common setting in this region.[[45]](#footnote-46)

According to the same study, there were 14 apostolic schools and 22 aspirantates in the South Asia region. According to information gathered in July 2021, instead, the region has 11 apostolic schools and 27 aspirantates of different kinds: 19 scholastic aspirantates (mostly but not exclusively for candidates in high school), 6 post-school aspirantates, and 2 missionary aspirantates, not counting 2 provinces that report candidates living in Salesian communities. The variations in the data could be due to a certain ambiguity about the terms ‘apostolic school’ and ‘aspirantate’: at least 2 provinces speak of apostolic schools as including young people in high school, while at least 4 provinces include school students in their scholastic aspirantates.

Some future study ought to raise further questions such as:

* What kind of vocational accompaniment takes place in our apostolic schools and aspirantates?
* How many aspirants come from our own settings and how many from outside?
* How aspirants come from our apostolic schools?

We could, however, draw some conclusions from the data about the number of novices and about departures of temporarily or perpetually professed confreres.

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| **NOVICES SOUTH ASIA 2014-2019** |
| Prov. | **Total****2014** | **Total****2015** | **Total****2016** | **Total****2017** | **Total****2018** | **Total 2019** |
| INB | 8 | 6 | 5 | 10 | 3 | 2 |
| INC | 10 | 15 | 12 | 7 | 12 | 8 |
| IND | 11 | 14 | 10 | 9 | 10 | 9 |
| ING | 18 | 10 | 7 | 11 | 8 | 14 |
| INH | 18 | 9 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 12 |
| INK | 9 | 15 | 12 | 13 | 12 | 13 |
| INM | 11 | 18 | 17 | 14 | 20 | 15 |
| INN | 5 | 13 | 14 | 9 | 4 | 6 |
| INP | 4 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| INS | 9 | 10 | 13 | 12 | 21 | 18 |
| INT | 12 | 12 | 14 | 11 | 13 | 11 |
| LKC | 7 | 8 | 12 | 8 | 7 | -\* |
| **Total** | 122 | 136 | 130 | 116 | 126 | 109 |

|  |
| --- |
| **DEPARTURES SOUTH ASIA REGION (Jan 2013 to June 2019)** |
| **Province** | **Temporary** | **Perpetual** | **Priests** | **Total** |
| INB | 27 | 01 | 02 | **30** |
| INC | 29 | 01 | 00 | **30** |
| IND | 23 | 01 | 00 | **24** |
| ING | 45 | 11 | 09 | **65** |
| INH | 38 | 00 | 10 | **48** |
| INK | 30 | 04 | 02 | **36** |
| INM | 20 | 03 | 02 | **25** |
| INN | 17 | 02 | 01 | **20** |
| INP | 09 | 01 | 01 | **11** |
| INS | 16 | 06 | 03 | **25** |
| INT | 23 | 04 | 03 | **30** |
| LKC | 03 | 01 | 00 | **04** |
| **Total** | **280** | **35** | **33** | **348** |

Some observations:

* There is a downward trend in the number of novices since 2014.
* There is no clear trend in the number of novices who did not profess. 16.7% did not profess in 2007-2008, while 19.8% did not profess in 2017-2018. We cannot therefore talk about a significant improvement in the quality of vocation ministry, aspirantate, or prenovitiate.
* 797 made the first profession in the period January 2013 – June 2019. During this period, 280 confreres (35.13%) left from temporary vows, while 68 left from perpetual vows and priesthood, making a total of 348 (43.66%). We could say that the region is losing a little less than half of those who make first profession.

Further light is shed by looking at the worldwide trend as far as those in temporary vows are concerned:



The two regions with the largest number of confreres in temporary vows are Africa-Madagascar and South Asia.[[46]](#footnote-47) The former shows an upward trend, while the latter shows a slightly downward trend in recent years.



Projecting these trends up to 2029, we have a dramatic result: the Africa-Madagascar region will have almost twice the number of confreres in temporary vows as the South Asia region.

Perhaps in the South Asia region we still think that there are many vocations, and that all is going well. The figures, instead, indicate something else. The fact remains that at least 3 provinces indicate negative or at best very marginal growth in the last few years. The question is whether we need to change as far as vocational animation is concerned. Perhaps it might be worth giving a listening ear to what the Spirit is telling us through the Church and the Congregation. We are being invited to discern: to listen, interpret and act.

## Listening to the Church and to the Congregation

It might be useful at this point to summarize in a synthetic rather than genetic way what the Church and Congregation are asking of us.

The very first point is an expansion of the idea of vocation. The most fundamental vocation, and one common to all in the Church, is the baptismal vocation. This vocation needs to be expressed further in ‘apostolic vocations’: the priestly, consecrated and lay vocations of special commitment. Three great synods were dedicated to these three states of Christian life, followed by three important post-synodal apostolic exhortations, *Christifideles Laici*, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and *Vita Consecrata*, that contain precious elements of a new theology of vocation.[[47]](#footnote-48)

We need to recognize, therefore, that every baptized person has a vocation. (C 37) Even more radically we could say, with the synod on youth, that every human being has a vocation, a God given call to make his or her life fruitful in love. Life is vocation. I am a mission on this earth.

Helping every young person to discover and grow in his or her vocation is an essential part of Salesian youth ministry, its crowning point, its very axis. To speak of the vocational dimension of Salesian youth ministry is to say that our ministry cannot be itself if it neglects this vocational dimension. So we are invited to give up any minimalist idea of vocation ministry that concerns itself only with searching for candidates to religious or priestly life. We are called to create a vocational culture in all our settings.

Having said this, we must also insist that vocation ministry be not only generic (for all) but also specific (recognizing different vocations within the basic baptismal vocation). Salesian youth ministry is therefore attentive to special vocations in the Church and for the kingdom, whether lay, priestly or religious, which it accompanies in a special way, through personal accompaniment and also by means of vocational guidance centres, meetings, special groups, or insertion into one of our religious communities.

When our youth ministry is what it is meant to be, Salesian vocations will be a natural outcome. When the Salesians and laity who share our spirit and mission dedicate time and energy to help young people discover life as vocation, we will surely come across young people who feel called to the Salesian way of life, whether as consecrated persons or as dedicated lay persons.

In all this, there is a need for sound convictions, good planning, the joyful and solid witness of life, but also of educative attention, explicit invitation, and good accompaniment. One of the consequences is the need to prepare Salesians and lay people for the service of spiritual accompaniment.

Apostolic schools could be seen as specialized centres for the accompaniment of young people showing signs of an apostolic vocation, whether lay, priestly or religious.

As for aspirantates, there are many different kinds according to our different contexts, but at the core of this specialized service for those who manifest an inclination to the Salesian consecrated life is accompaniment and vocational discernment.

## Understanding and responding

A very first point is to acquire a good knowledge and understanding of the doctrine of Church and Congregation about vocations. That every young person has a vocation is a theological affirmation, not an empirical one. All of us are called to accept this – along with the dignity of every baptized person and indeed of every human being. We believe that every young person, regardless of his or her fundamental convictions and beliefs, is called to contribute something beautiful to this world, and we Salesians have the privilege to accompany them in the delicate journey of discernment.

As youth ministers, we are not merely in the business of providing services, however excellent and however much directed to those most in need. In all that we do and are, we are called, like Jesus, to reveal the merciful face of God who calls us to brotherhood and communion. And we have to help each young person live life not merely for himself and for his family, but as a mission of love open to all.

Within such an approach, we must be convinced that we will come across young people with vocations to special service, either as lay people or as religious or priests. Explicit invitations are necessary – and we are usually good in that – but also accompaniment and processes of discernment, even before “stepping into a Salesian community” – and it is an urgent task in our region to prepare ourselves for this service.

Apostolic schools will be with us for some more time, and we probably need them for young Catholics who not only come from outside our settings, but also may not be privileged to have adequate education in their own environments. But it is not enough to multiply apostolic schools. We need to ensure that these schools have teams – of Salesians but also of lay people, women and men – capable of welcoming, educating, evangelizing and accompanying these young people. In other words, we are called to evangelize and educate young people in this setting and help them grow in faith and discover their vocations.

As for aspirantates, we would do well to understand that these are defined not in terms of a particular kind of setting or infrastructure, but in terms of accompanying young Catholics with an inclination to the Salesian consecrated life to discern their vocation with a view to entering the process of initial formation. This we can ensure if we are convinced about it and prepared for it. And the experience, as we have said, can be offered in different ways: for high school students, for post high school students (university and others), for graduates; in a boarding school setting, or in a mission setting, and so on. The critical factor is always the help provided by way of accompaniment and discernment, along with exposure to the Salesian mission and community life.

Some of our provinces are already in negative growth, as I have pointed out. This could mean that these are in a full blown vocation crisis. But it could also mean that they are being called to make a radical change in their vocation animation, from recruitment to discernment. On the face of it, this calls for a huge change. It means improving the pastoral quality of all our settings, works and services. It means being present among the young and being prepared and wiling to accompany them. It means convincing confreres to see the need for this kind of shift and to take steps to make the shift. Vocation promoters will, therefore, not now go around “hunting for vocations” inside and outside our settings. Their job will be primarily to animate the communities and ensure their pastoral vocational quality. On the province level, they will organize initiatives such as groups and meetings for those who show signs of a special vocation. This might sound like the old vocation camps and hill thrills, but there is a difference: the difference between one time events and ongoing processes. The shift from recruitment to discernment will call for patience from everyone: not only from provincials who are tempted to ask about numbers (“How many vocations did you get this year?”) but also from the confreres who face the very same temptation. But let us not forget to look at the bigger picture: large numbers have been entering the process of formation, but large numbers have also been leaving. And then, the question is not merely about those who leave. The real question is: how sound are the motivations of those who stay? And how clear is their grasp of the vocation to the Salesian consecrated life?

Where educative and pastoral communities (EPC) are functioning – that is, where we have groups of Salesians and lay collaborators who share our spirit and mission – it would be essential to involve this animating nucleus in the thinking presented above. We will immediately raise the question of non-Christian collaborators, and this is certainly a relevant question in our region. But I do think that in traditionally or majority Christian areas such as South India, West India and North-East India, we have good possibilities of involving the EPCs and ensuring that youth ministry is vocational. To our lay collaborators – once again, I am not talking here of simply every lay person who works in our settings, but of those who are part of the animating nucleus or council of the EPC – we must present the lay, priestly and religious vocations in the Church, and the lay and consecrated vocations in the Salesian Family, as well as the lay and priestly forms of the Salesian consecrated vocation. We will find, I am convinced, precious and enthusiastic collaborators if only we know how to take them into confidence as people who share our spirit and mission.

In short:

* Could we make a quality investment in our youth ministry, making sure of its vocational quality?
* Could we give particular attention to “vocation promoters,” to help them understand, accept and envisage a new kind of vocation ministry?
* Could our Rectors (and others) find time for group and personal accompaniment of the young people in their settings, services or works?
* Could we take care to select and prepare Salesians for the service of accompaniment and discernment in our apostolic schools and aspirantates?
* And simply, once again, could we all become convinced that every young person is called by God to do something beautiful with his or her life?

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1. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 273. Henceforth EG. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Francis, *Christus V*ivit 248, 253. Henceforth CV. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cited in Synod of Bishops XV Ordinary General Assembly 2018, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment: Final Document* 69. Henceforth FD. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Cf. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* 15. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 77: the creative Word “calls each one of us personally, revealing that life itself is a vocation from God” (both cited in FD 79). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. FD 117. The pope repeats this bodily in CV 235 when he invites to a ‘popular’ youth ministry. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Synod of Bishops XV Ordinary General Assembly 2018, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment: Instrumentum Laboris* 1. Henceforth IL. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. FD 140: “From the very beginning of the synodal process, it became very clear that youth ministry needs a vocational slant.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. To mention only a few names: Rossano Sala, professor of youth ministry at the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, and editor of *Note di pastorale giovanile*, was one of the special secretaries of the Synod on youth; Andrea Bozzolo, professor of systematic theology and Rector of the Salesian Pontifical University, was one of the experts at the Synod. The Rector Major himself, Ángel Fernández Artime, was a member of the Synod. Sr Alessandra Smerilli, FMA and Sr Lucy Nderi, FMA were also participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Cf. *Special General Chapter of the Salesian Society. Rome, 10 June 1971 – 5 January 1972*, Appendix 3. Henceforth SGC. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. E. Viganò, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai Salesiani* (Roma: Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996) 1207. Henceforth Viganò LC. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Atti del Capitolo Generale XIX (1965), *Atti del Consiglio Superiore della Società Salesiana* Anno XLVII, n. 244 (gennaio 1966) 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. SGC 374 (in document 4: Pastoral renewal of Salesian action among youth, chapter 4: “The objectives and pastoral method of liberating evangelization.” See also SGC 419: among the practical means for the formation of basic communities (small Christian communities) are (e) the formation of co-responsible lay missionaries, and (f) zeal for priestly and religious vocations.

Document 18 on Cooperators specifies that among apostolic vocations is also the vocation of the Salesian Cooperator. (SGC 744) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. SGC 50. I have modified the official English translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis of Sales* (1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. L. Ricceri, “The Crucial Problem – Vocations,” *Acts of the Superior Council of the Salesian Society* 273 (1974) p. 7. Henceforth ASC 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. ASC 273 15. As a colleague of mine said recently, we cannot first find vocations and then shove faith into them. First comes growth in faith and then the discovery and response to vocation. See Francisco Santos, “Vocazione e preghiera nell’accompagnamento spirituale: la storia di ogni vocazione è una storia di preghiera,” *Direzione spirituale in prospettiva salesiana. Accompagnare la vita di preghiera*, ed. Fabio Attard and Miguel Ángel García (Torino: Elledici, 2020) 73-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. ASC 273 16; see *Lettere circolari di don Luigi Ricceri ai Salesiani* (Roma: Editrice SDB, 1996) 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. In the context of special care of vocations to total consecration, SGC 662 had said: “The aspirantate, as an environment characterized by an intense vocational orientation, is still a valid form to help youth discover their own vocation and consciously correspond with it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. “Address of the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò at the closure of the GC21 (12 February 1978),” *Chapter Documents. XXI General Chapter of the Salesian Society* (Rome, 1978) 574. Henceforth GC21. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. GC21 110. The appeal to SGC 169 makes it clear that the reference is to the vocation of Salesian Cooperator. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. *Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis de Sales* (1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. R 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. *Educating Young People to the Faith. Documents of the 23rd General Chapter of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales. Rome, 4 March – 5 May 1990* 149-157. Henceforth GC23. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Cf. Viganò, LC 1206: “The originality of GC23 is to have inserted the vocational dimension into the journey of faith of the young, and to have understood the journey itself as a gradual and progressive response to a personal call.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Viganò, LC 1206. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. E. Viganò, “There is still good ground where the seed can fall,” AGC 339 (1992) 8 = Viganò, LC 1207. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. *Salesians and Lay People: Communion and Sharing in the Spirit and Mission of Don Bosco. Documents of the 24th General Chapter of the Society of St Francis de Sales. Rome, 19 February – 20 April 1996*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. GC24 141. See also the beautiful paragraph about the gradual way in which most lay people discover a Salesian vocation and grow in it. (GC24 21) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. The post-synodal apostolic exhortations that resulted were *Christifideles Laici* (1988), *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) and *Vita Consecrata* (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. *Educatori appassionati, esperti e consacrati per i giovani. Lettere circolari di don Juan E. Vecchi*, ed. Marco Bay (Roma: LAS, 2013) 636, see 638. Henceforth Vecchi, LC. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. J.E. Vecchi, “La vocazione tra cultura e culture: crisi del modello occidentale?” *Cultura e Vocazioni* (Roma: Rogate 1994) 31-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Cf. Pontificia Opera per le Vocazioni Ecclesiastiche, *Nuove vocazioni per una nuova Europa. Documento finale del Congresso sulle vocazioni al sacerdozio e alla vita consacrata in Europa* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998) n. 13b, cited in Vecchi, LC 644. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Cf. SGC 374: vocation ministry “presupposes and is grafted on to our general pastoral work.” We may note that Vecchi was one of the principal architects of the documents of the SGC. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. *The Salesian Community Today. Documents of the 25th General Chapter of the Society of St Francis of Sales*. GC25. Rome, 24 February – 22 April 2002. Henceforth GC25. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. *“Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.” Documents of the General Chapter XXVI of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales. Rome, 23 February – 12 April 2008* 53. Henceforth GC26. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Pascual Chávez Villanueva, “‘Come and see’ (Jn 1,39). The need for vocation ministry. Strenna 2011,” AGC 409 (2011) = Pascual Chávez Villanueva, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani (2002-2014)* (Roma: LAS, 2021) 1022-1057. The latter henceforth as Chávez, LC. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. J.E. Vecchi, “Cultura della Vocazione,” *Dizionario della Pastorale Vocazionale* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Rogate, 2002) 370-382. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Fabio Attard and Francesco Cereda, “Aspirantate Experience,” prot. 11/0377 dt. 26 July 2011. Cf. GC26 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. FSDB 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. *Salesian Youth Ministry: Frame of Reference* (2014). Henceforth FoR. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. *“What kind of Salesians for the youth of today*?” *Post-Chapter Reflection of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales* (AGC 433 – 2020). Henceforth GC28. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. *“Witnesses to the radical approach of the Gospel.” Work and temperance. Documents of the General Chapter XXVII of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales. Rome, 22 February – 12 April 2014* (AGC 418) 74. Henceforth GC27. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. GC28 9. Reference is made to FD 138-143, and CV chapter 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. A senior Salesian was far more brutal in his assessment in a recent intervention: “I am convinced that by and large we religious do not do vocational discernment. We are only searching for manpower to keep our institutions going.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Formation Sector, “Study of Initial Formation in the South Asia Region: Presentation to the Rector Major and his council,” prot. 20/0013, 14 January 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. The regional codes used in the diagrams: RAFM: Africa-Madagascar; RAMI: Interamerica; RAMS: Amercia Southern Cone; RASE: Asia – Oceania; RASS: South Asia; RECN: Central & Northern Europe; RMED: Mediterranean. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. See a good summary of this theology in *Animating and Governing the Community: The Service of the Salesian Rector* (2020) 23-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)