**"The life of the Congregation is not only measured by numbers, but by fidelity to the charism"**

Ángel Fernández Artime : "Both Don Bosco and his charism are of the greatest relevance today. I identify with his passion for education and evangelisation."

"Only from a family-oriented, educational and social ‘culture’ that believes in solidarity will it be possible to sow sensitivities that will flourish everywhere."

"We Salesians cannot separate our educational activity from the task of evangelising: it is our charism. This is a dream of Don Bosco’s that is now found throughout the world."

"The Church is not just a church of people consecrated in religious life; we would be much better off if we were to bear this in mind."

"Covid-19 can be an opportunity for us, once it is over, not to enter a race of unbridled frenzy but a lucid path towards ever greater humanisation and global social justice."

"I am convinced that if they knew us, and not just us but the many other religious and educational institutions, many of the prejudices about State-funded education, at least Catholic ones, would fall by the wayside."

Religión Digital
31.01.2021 José Manuel Vidal

Ángel Fernández Artime, (1960, Luanco, Asturias, Spain) is a Salesian priest and has been the Rector Major of the Congregation since 2014. A true Salesian, he identifies with the educational and evangelising passion of Don Bosco, whose charism enjoys the 'greatest relevance' after more than a century and a half since the dream began: “in fact, there will always be young people and we have to know what we can offer them that is truly worthwhile.”

“He was a great dreamer and a man of God, deeply human, who lived with strong convictions and tried to help his boys fend for themselves in life. He trained them, helping them to firmly establish themselves.” So really, he 'taught them to fish', which is the most truly effective way. Because for him the problem was not the young, “neither the priests nor the nuns”, but “the model of society and society itself”.

And education is essential. On this point he considers that there are many prejudices regarding Catholic teaching and believes that things would be better if, instead of everyone pulling on the emergency cord there was a common mentality and mutual understanding: “I am convinced that if they knew us, and not just us but all the other religious and educational institutions who offer their lives for the education of the young, many of the prejudices and ideological falsehoods spoken about State-funded education, at least the Catholic kind which is what I know best, would fall by the wayside.”

The question is to educate, and to educate to values. The world changes, and education with it, especially now immersed in the digital age. Artime considers that it is one more tool that must be understood so as not to be swallowed up: “Not knowing how to read decades ago is equivalent to not accepting any knowledge or contact with the digital world today. The digital world and the world of technology in general offers magnificent possibilities, and these cannot be ignored.” In this respect he understands that “there is no other way than that of a positive, critical and self-critical presence at the same time in this field and with these means.”

With regard to the vocational health of the Salesians he tells us that it is 'a blessing'; over the last ten years there has been an average of 450 novices a year from around the world. The number is much poorer in Spain, but “the Church is not just a church of people consecrated in religious life; we would be much better off if we were to bear this in mind” and in fact, here they depend on the valuable assistance of lay vocations to demonstrate this fact. “While the Congregation is faithful to this charism, the Congregation does not run any risk.”

In his opinion "Covid-19 can be an opportunity for us, once it is over, not to enter a race of unbridled madness but a lucid path towards ever greater humanisation and global social justice”, he says, even though he knows that life is difficult to change. However, this is something that is in our hands: “Only from a family-oriented, educational and social ‘culture’ that believes in solidarity, in service, in the free gift of self etc…, will it be possible to sow sensitivities that will later flourish everywhere and in all kinds of service and vocations in life. This will result in good professionals, honest workers, entrepreneurs with a conscience, politicians who feel above all that they are servants of all (and not just of some), for the common good. And from then on, let's use our imagination.”

**You have the privilege of having as your founder a saint who is also a magnet and a reference point that never goes out of fashion. This is a matter of pride, right?**

Well, that would not be the word I would choose. It is not about pride. In fact, all the saints in one way or another are giants of the faith. It is a matter of knowing how to contemplate them with depth and openness to God's action in our lives, and we will see what he has done in them, and the road ahead for us. However, in reference to Don Bosco, yes, I have to say that he arouses very special sympathy around the world. In the 100 with Salesian presences I was able to visit in the previous six-year term before the Covid-19 pandemic, I was able to see how Don Bosco was so loved by thousands upon thousands of adolescents, older youth and their families. There is no doubt that he is seen and felt as the Saint of the young. In my opinion, the way he was declared by Saint John Paul II ( as “Father and Teacher of the young”), is the way he is perceived everywhere. The feeling is that he is a saint who is close to us, a saint who was concerned about his young people in Valdocco (Turin), and of all those who would come after them. It seems to me that many young people feel he is close to them and has something to offer or suggest for their lives. And they quickly discover that he does this in the name of Jesus.

But it is true that both Don Bosco and his charism are of great relevance. In fact, just as society will always have the elderly, there will always be young people and we have to know what we can offer them that is truly worthwhile.

**Which of Don Bosco’s dreams do you identify most with?**

More than with his dreams, I identify with his passion for education and evangelisation. I believe that every genuine Salesian heart has engraved on it the testimony of a Don Bosco who practised what he always preached: “I promised God that until my last breath I shall have lived for my dear boys.” And he spent his life thinking, planning and dreaming about what he could do for the good of his boys in Valdocco, and all those who came after, even though he would not know them. And it is true that, in this sense, he was always a great dreamer and a man of God, deeply human, who lived with strong convictions.

He was a great dreamer and a man of God, deeply human, who lived with strong convictions and tried to help his boys fend for themselves in life. He trained them, helping them to firmly establish themselves; to always be good workers, good professionals (‘upright citizens’ is what he said), and he always wanted to bring his young people closer to an encounter with Jesus so that they would be good children of God. When we speak of Don Bosco, we cannot separate his educational work from his evangelising work. They always went hand in hand. This was part of his educational genius.

And it is true that with all his dreaming, he always wanted his sons, the Salesians of Don Bosco, and later his daughters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to go beyond the borders of Italy. He would have had more than enough reasons to assign all his Salesians to work in Italy as it was in the middle of the 19th century; but nevertheless, 16 years after the beginning of his young Congregation, counting on some of the boys who had grown up with him (Rua, Cagliero, Rocchietti, Turchi, Angelo Savio, Francesia, Fagnano, etc ...), he has already sent the first Salesian missionaries to Argentina to see to the education and evangelisation of so many children of Italian immigrants, and to go as soon as possible to meet the 'Indians' of Patagonia.

That missionary dream came true with him as it has throughout all of Salesian history, and today his Congregation is not limited to Italian territory but is to be found in 134 nations on five continents.

This way of 'dreaming' of Don Bosco's does seem fascinating to me.

**At a time of a vocational ‘winter’, does your Congregation enjoy good health around the world? What about Spain?**

It is very true that the vocational situation regarding priests and religious today is not what it was 40 years ago, but in order to speak more precisely on this subject we need to clearly specify what we are talking about and what parts of the world we are referring to. It is evident that the numbers of vocations of consecrated individuals and priests from much of Africa and from many Asian nations (including India, although it is no longer what it was 30 years ago), cannot be compared with how things are in Europe.

I will speak of the Salesian Congregation, since in a certain way it can be compared with what happens in the Church in general. There are 14,500 Salesians of Don Bosco in the world today in 134 nations. They belong to 90 religious provinces. Every year, and now I am referring to the last ten years, we have close to 450 (sometimes 435, sometimes 460), from all over the world. About 155 in Africa, 103 in India and Sri Lanka, about 75 in Asia-Oceania, about 78 throughout the Americas, and about 40 in Europe. Something like that every year. It is certainly a blessing. Today there are 3,200 SDBs in their initial formation years. Great hope for the Congregation and the Church, and great responsibility at the same time.

Over these years, greater perseverance has also been noted than in previous decades, although it is not the same on all continents. Curiously, or simply as an expression of what 'we have to put up with', Europe has the least number of vocations but a high index of perseverance in our case (which is between 76% and 92%).

That said, let me refer to Spain, confirming that the situation is very poor, at least in our case. But there is one very positive circumstance, and I don't mean it as a consolation but as a real richness. It is the fact that we have spent decades working more and better in a shared mission with magnificent lay people who have a great Christian and charismatic identity. These are other valuable vocations, lay vocations this time, that make the life of the Salesian charism possible, and that I cannot but mention.

And although you haven't asked me, I want to add another nuance that I consider very relevant. It concerns the following: the life of the Congregation is not measured only by numbers, but above all by the fidelity of the Salesians of Don Bosco to the charism received from our founder, Saint John Bosco. As long as the Congregation is faithful to this charism, with a predilection for the poorest and most needy children and young people, the least, the lowliest ones, and as long as this done in the name of Jesus, the Congregation will not be in any danger. You can alter how things are organised, the colour of the skin, the geographical areas, but the charism will be assured. In other words, the future of the Congregation and fidelity to the charism go hand in hand.

**Are young people still able to listen to and respond to the vocational call?**

Absolutely yes. Let me go further and remind readers that there are more vocations in the Church than just people consecrated in religious life, or in priestly ministry. For example, what about the vocation to Christian marriage? Or is it that married life is not a vocation. Furthermore: I hope we know how to accompany so many young people on their path to maturity and in their choice of life as they prepare for this precious life project called marriage. Honestly, we would do much better as a Church and as a society.

Having said this, and it was not just a marginal comment, and referring in particular to consecrated persons and priests, I continue to believe that young people today also have the capacity to listen and respond to the Lord's call. They continue to have generous ideals and hearts. But ... What is the 'but' ...? We simply have to understand that this is not something ad hoc.. Only from a family-oriented, educational and social ‘culture’ that believes in solidarity, in service, in free gift of self etc. ... will it be possible to sow sensitivities that will flourish everywhere and for all kinds of service and vocations in life. This will result in good professionals, honest workers, entrepreneurs with a conscience, politicians who feel above all that they are servants of all (and not just of some), for the common good. And from then on, let's use our imagination.

The young are not the problem, nor is it the priests or the nuns (as it is said colloquially). The ‘problem’ if I can speak like that, is the model of society and its values…, everything that, for example, is praised so much by some groups in this Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

**Will we come out of this pandemic better?**

I was wondering if there was a 'politically correct' answer to this question. Would it be politically correct to say yes? I think you can't say yes or no. There will be everything. There already is.

And believe me, I think I am very aware of the drama of pain that many families have experienced, and the economic drama that so many sectors of our society are experiencing. When I hear about the closure of so many establishments in the news I cannot help but think of the critical situation of the lowliest people, of so many good people who live from their honest, daily and demanding work. On the other hand, I am not thinking of the wealthy types who have managed to build up their already generous coffers more in a crisis like this. In fact, it is the same with great wars. Sadly this is the way things are.

However, with the return to a ‘new normal’ there will be many things that will not have changed. I do not take it for granted that we will be more generous and supportive. I do not take it as a given that the social conscience will have grown in favour of the less favoured. There will be any number of individuals, institutions, enterprises who are just waiting to enter the race to make up for lost time and money at the cost of crazy consumption, unbelievable pollution, in short, sheer frenzy.

But I also have to say that I think that for many of us (and I want to count myself among them), it will not be the same. We will value more highly the work of the health workers and the people who have looked after our safety and public order. We will appreciate even more the service of so many civil and religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, which have been a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people in these bitter hours; some of us will be more aware of the unbridled consumption and pollution we create. Quite a few people will value the simple things much more, family ties, closeness, more humane rhythms of life.

**Uneven vaccination, especially in poor countries, seems to be demonstrating the opposite.**

In my opinion, this uneven vaccination simply shows what things have been like until today. The inequalities that existed before Covid-19 continue today or have grown even more, according to what some international agencies working with this tell us. On the very day that I am writing these lines, the World Health Organisation itself has warned of the unequal treatment between countries regarding vaccination, implying that by the time some countries have vaccinated 95% of their population, others, the poorest, will not have reached 10% of their population, or even less.

The nations that have possibilities (among them our European Union) buy millions of vaccines and pay for them. And the so-called developing countries 'developing' for years, how will they continue after this Covid pandemic? We know the answer: still developing.

Furthermore: after the Covid-19 pandemic (which I hope will be soon), will it be like many other pandemics, such as hunger, that have not disappeared from the world, or the lack of opportunities to access education in many countries around the world? What will happen to vaccines that are not investigated because they are not profitable, or because a disease like Ebola only affects a poor continent? How will we continue as a 'global village' working to eliminate sexual exploitation, child labour, organ trafficking…?

In my opinion Covid-19 can be an opportunity for us, once it is over, not to enter a race of unbridled frenzy but a lucid path towards ever greater humanisation and global social justice..

**How do you position yourself with regard to the new Spanish education legislation? Is it as bad as some people say it is?**

Allow me to repeat here what I already said on a previous occasion when I was asked about this. I recognise that the fact of not being in Spain at the moment prevents me from having a deep understanding of the situation. From what I can follow through the press and from information from my Salesian confreres in our homeland, together with what I experienced as a teacher and director of educational centres in previous years with the various education legislation, I consider that it is, once again, a missed opportunity to achieve a great State Social Pact in favour of Education. The education of our children and young people is something very important, sensitive and delicate. But it makes me sad that in these times when there is so much talk about dialogue, participation, inclusion, non-exclusion ... we are not able to agree on combining forces on behalf of the new generations.

I imagine that what will come from application of this new legislation will not be without its problems. Up until now we have been able to keep moving ahead in the context of the various education laws. Strength is found in unity, especially with all the other institutions with whom we share this vocation to educate the young: I am thinking of Catholic Schools Spain, of some of the Parents Confederations, and of other institutions with whom we share the same vision in the educational field.

And I am saying this not so much to defend our right to exist, which is perhaps not in question at the moment, but for something much more profound: the fundamental right to freedom of education in terms of the right of parents to choose the type of education for their children in accordance with their civil, moral and religious convictions. Fr Rodolfo Fierro had already said this in his day, back in 1910, as a Salesian of Don Bosco who spoke in the name of the Salesians before the parliamentarians of our country when they were debating the ‘Candado Law’: “I am not here to fight; I have come to speak about the Salesian Society... I have come simply to explain, inform, to invite you to inform yourselves personally by visiting our houses.”

I am convinced that if they knew us, and not only us but all the other religious and educational institutions who give their lives for the education of the young, many of the prejudices and ideological falsehoods spoken about State-funded education, at least of the Catholic kind which I know best, would fall by the wayside.

**Does the Salesian Family continue to bank fully on the new digital playgrounds?**

Interesante pregunta a la que respondo sí con fuerte convicción, pero también con precaución y prudencia, como debe ser con todo lo que es importante.

Certainly an educator, and even more so a Salesian educator, could not say something like "stop this train of the world of digital communication. I want to get off and stay with the ribbon typewriter". Not being in this world in the way that one can and should be here is like choosing to be illiterate. Not knowing how to read decades ago is equivalent to not accepting any knowledge or contact with the digital world today.

On the other hand, there are many more playgrounds today than just those in schools or youth centres. Digital playgrounds are just as real (‘we don’t say virtual because they really exist’) as many others, despite being different. We can meet young people here, and we have to meet up with them as educators.

The digital world and the world of technology in general offers magnificent possibilities, and these cannot be ignored.

Yet there is a ‘but’. This ‘but’ has to do with the use of these media, has to do with education to their use, has to do with the critical capacity we have and that must be ever on the increase.

To refer to this I want to use the authority of far-reaching thinkers as an argument. One of them is the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who seriously doubted the democratic and modernising effectiveness of social networks. Along with him another author, César Rendueles, and the German philosopher of Korean origin Byung-Chul Han, seriously questioned the widespread idea of many social network users who think that writing 'revolutionary' messages from their home base is equivalent to intervening in the public space.

Social networks have a great capacity to attract attention, but they lack stability and consistency; they can be very ephemeral and unstable, lacking in solidity and in the search for truth or at least objectivity. Someone of the stature of Jürgen Habermas, now in his nineties, surely the most influential living philosopher in the world due to his intellectual career, a philosopher with whom Pope Benedict XVI has dialogued at the same intellectual level, and a German like him, goes so far as to say something as serious as this on the matter: "It is possible that in time we will learn to handle social networks in a civilised way".

What else is left to say after this? For all these reasons I believe that educating brings with it the task of accompanying something as delicate as this, and I am not speaking only about the digital playground, but the entire great ‘ocean’ it deals with. But my understanding is that there is no other way to go than that of a positive, critical and at the same time self-critical approach in this field and with these media.