## “Don Bosco’s geographical intuition and its relationship with digital and virtual reality”

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Location!! Where is it located? How do we get there?

Nowadays we all raise these questions. We all are familiar with GPS and Google Maps, or Apps like Weizer, Glympse and other to help us to drive almost  anywhere.

What is the central point of these apps? To allow us to quickly and easily share our GPS locations with friends and co-workers.

What is behind the design and digital logic and connection of all these apps? The concept of geography. Specifically, the  so-called geographical information system(GSI).  GSI is a framework that  allow us to capture and analyze spatial and geographical data. By using computer-based tools we can, for example, create searches, store and edit spatial and non-spatial data, optimize and share information in map format.

This article is not about delving into such complex concepts. But we can allow this example of GPS technology a little later in this article to link later on in this article to how we might apply Don Bosco’s insights into communication.

For now, let’s focus all our attention on this word MAP. Maps are about geography! This is what interests us mostly in this article.

The central idea I would like to highlight, by taking GPS technology as an example, is that geography is what lies behind digital technology, systems and satellites.

Let’s take three words from these complex concepts: geography, maps, spatial data.  Maps offer a structure to design and build computer systems and analyze data. Geography really matters in digital and virtual technology!

We can now move on to Don Bosco.

Initially, to apply the concepts of mapping and geography  to Don Bosco's view of communication, we have to raise two essential questions: Was Don Bosco interested in geography at all? And if so, what influence did geography have on Don Bosco understanding of communication?

In one of the passages of Don Bosco's BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS, his Biographer tells us that:

**Don Bosco's competence in geography helped secure a splendid position for an Oratory boy named Marchisio.  In July 1863, the Department of Communications published a new postal map of Italy, eight maps of Italian provinces, and a timetable of mail pickups and deliveries patiently drawn up by Marchisio in the course of several years. Don Bosco had advised him to undertake this project and had encouraged him to bring it to completion.  Marchisio often came to the Oratory to work under Don Bosco's guidance. Later on he was appointed postmaster in Rome itself. (MB VII, p. 274, English edition. (Don Bosco's Memoirs as recorded by E. Ceria and J.B. Lemoyne).**

Surprisingly, this passage reveals three pieces of important information to us about Don Bosco and his interest in geography: First, Don Bosco had some knowledge of geography; second, he knew Marchisio, an expert in mapping in Turin, and third, Don Bosco supported Marchisio in drawing maps.

With regard to the first piece of information: Don Bosco had some knowledge of geography. He was interested in it.  We can be on the look out for more information.

According to the BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS, one afternoon in 1883 Fr. Philip Rinaldi entered Don Bosco's office in Turin for an informal conversation and was surprised to see Don Bosco with a globe on his desk and his gaze lost in the distant immensity of the places on the globe, while with one hand he was caressing the map of Brazil.

Fr. Giulio Barberis, who wrote chronicles about Don Bosco, testified to the saint’s interest in maps.

**I took two maps, one of Patagonia and the other of South America. Don Bosco and I began to study the geography of Patagonia in detail. We spent much time studying its characteristics, such as the gulfs, the Straits of Magellan and the outline of the islands. (ASC A001 – Cronichette – Barberis G., Cited by Lenti, Vol. 3, p. 226).**

Don Bosco had a keen interest in geography! Clearly thist this perspective on geography was motivated above all by his focus on spirituality, education, the expansion of the Salesian Congregation and the Missions. Therefore, his interest in geography and maps has to be included within the whole picture of his mission: “da mihi animas caetere tolle!”

However, for the purpose of this article, let’s continue considering this idea from the perspective of communication.  We could say that what lies behind his interest in geography is certainly what we call spatial imagination.

When we say spatial imagination, we are touching here not only on the technical aspects of the geometry of geography, not just  the designing of maps. We are saying much more than this. We are saying that the fundamental point for understanding Don Bosco's geographical imagination is that it was inherent to his cognitive/affective intelligence and an expression of his inner creativity and imagination.

Don Bosco's spatial imagination is rooted in his creative imagination, is an expression of his desire, his profound  faith and spirituality, his vision of founding the Salesian Congregation and reaching out to other countries to evangelize.

Don Bosco's spatial imagination developed as he grew up within the family, through his studies, his  interest in arts, his outlook as  an educator, and through his way of designing his educational system, his way of dreaming, his capacity to plan and implement the foundation of the Salesian Congregation and to project it on a worldwide scale.

One of the most consistent scientific studies on spatial imagination  has been carried out by Philip J. Gersmehl and Carol A. Gersmehl(2007).

In their published article entitled "Spatial Thinking by Young Children: Neurologic Evidence for Early Development and 'Educability'" we have a coherent description of what they call eight distinct modes of spatial thinking.

The two authors basically suggest that we learn through  all things that are geographically designed (nature, houses, buildings, traffic, arts, objects, symbols, rituals...).  In other words, we make sense of things by the relationship between objects, how they are set in spaces, how we organize them in order and series and  how we catalogue things and even perceive ourselves and conceive our relationships with others.

An analysis of Don Bosco dreams from the perspective of spatial imagination demonstrates that Don Bosco always offers a spatial outlook on what he dreams.

Don Bosco used dreams as a kind of encyclopedia of communication. Each dream has a true script, colors, movements, rhythms, contrasts, motion and message.

Dreams are an explicit grammar of Don Bosco's spatial imagination. He communicates through dreams, images, metaphors and dream symbolism.

Each of his dream narratives expresses an educational geometry, symmetry of educational spaces, geopolitics of expansion of the Salesian Congregation, spatial viewpoint on educational relationships. Don Bosco's educational architecture is revealing of his imagination as educator and founder.

In one of his missionary dream, Don Bosco says:

**After travelling a very long distance, the train stopped before a town of considerable size, possibly on the 47th Parallel, where at the very beginning of the dream I had seen the big knot in the rope. There was no one at the station to meet me. I got off the train and immediately found the Salesians. I saw many houses with many people in them, more churches, schools, various hospices for children and youths, artisans and fanners, and a school for girls which taught a variety of domestic arts. Our missionaries were caring for both the young and the adults”.  (MB XVI, p. 310)**

In the dream of the **fourteen tables**(MB VI, 708-709, English edition pp. 410- 411) Don Bosco said:

**"I saw my boys in a most gorgeous garden, seated at fourteen long tables arranged amphitheatre-wise at three different terrace-like** **levels. The top most tables were so lofty that they could hardly be seen.”**

In this dream, of geometric proportions, Don Bosco defined the scenario in metric and symmetrical terms. He uses mathematics and geometry to give a sense of dimension to what he will narrate.

As if drawing up an 'engineering blueprint for the dream', he describes the dimensional spaces in measured terms: semicircles, the placing of the tables divided into three terraced levels, in such a way that the scenario – drawn in geometric shapes – is logical, coherent. From this logical geometric environment comes the educational message. Often, the geometric design that the theme inspires becomes the message. It does not need words because the geometry of the dream speaks for its structural consistency; because the aesthetics of the whole of this geometry is the educational message.

Don Bosco was never in the Americas, but he had in mind the geographical mapping of Patagonia. He read, studied, drew and dreamed of the places where he wanted to send missionary expeditions. In one of his dream he says:

“**To the west I see very lofty mountains, and to the east there is the sea… The marks numbered on the rope, each corresponding precisely to the degrees of latitude, were those which allowed me to keep in memory for several years the successive localities I visited as I traveled in the second part of this same dream.” (MB XVI, p. 307).**

Don Bosco's geographical vision in his dreams always reveals large, wide, spacious environments of deep and vast dimensions. Don Bosco reads reality through maps. He maps reality, places, people, nature and culture.

According to Sambrook R. & Zurick D, in their text “The Geographical Imagination” (2010), sources of spatial information from the outside world are assimilated and harmonized from the innate inner knowledge we have of orientation and places based on our personal experiences.

“**Our sense of places involves our sense of self, emotional and intellectual connections and our cognitive-affective processes motivated by our spatial imagination and decisions connected to them." They state "that our spatial behaviour depends on how we perceive ourselves and conceive places and their geographic relationships” (p. 477).**

In the dream about Brazilia, the capital of Brazil, Don Bosco describes:

“**Between the 15th and 20th parallels there was a rather long and wide inlet that started from a point where a lake was formed**… **The journey continues, along the Cordillera, toward the south; as does the description of the regions of the Prato, the Pampas and Patagonia, to Punta Arenas and the Straits of Magellan**”**.**(E. Ceria, MEMORIE BIOGRAFICHE DI S. GIOVANNI BOSCO, VI. XVI, Societá Editrice Internazionale – Torino, 1935).

This dream, very well known and discussed in Don Bosco's dream studies, offers us clear and strong evidence of his spatial intelligence:

The dream is explicitly a spatial geographical representation. Don Bosco reached the point of establishing the 15th and 20th parallels as the place where a great city would be built.

It is fundamental to the analysis of these dreams, from the perspective of spatial imagination, to apply the basic foundations that we have set forth in this study.

Sambrook R. & Zurick D., in regarding the role of maps in human imagination, say that:

“**Maps have a fundamental technological role in our organizations and navigation in space” (p. 4).**

The authors suggest that through spatial intelligence, we are inwardly motivated to expand our vision of growth, world knowledge, sense of achievement, expansion, whether in political, economic or religious matters.

This means that through our geographical imagination, we analyze the spaces of relationships either in the family, the neighbourhood, the school, the district, community, society in general.

Unlike the abstract concept of ideas, spatial imagination is something real, a practical imagination which takes its notion of of human and social relations and politics from geography.

Through the development of his geographical imagination, Don Bosco drew up and applied his educational, communitarian and pastoral vision in a creative and practical way.  Don Bosco's geographical vision is part of the design of his thinking, the nature of his planning, the architecture of his objectives, the realization of his dreams.

We could say from this stand point that Don Bosco's geographical perspective offers him a visual, designed language ready to be executed. His geographical perspective prevents him from getting lost between how he thinks and what he does, between what he reflects on and what he does. His geographical perspective gives him a creative, open, flexible and integrated practicality, with great clarity in evangelisation.

This geographical perspective is expressed through his way of conceiving of and designing the Preventive System, constructing environments, organizing regulations,  creating educational spaces in oratories. It is expressed through relationships in educational space, the planning and opening of new houses, how he developed a formative project for young people, promoted good press, established a liturgical artistic setting within educational environments.

Therefore, Don Bosco was a practical man!  With  profound spirituality and love for the mission to the youth  he moved  with passion and creativity to ensure that what he had in his mind and heart became real. He knew how to design his educational and communication system with a strong faith in God and Mary Help of Christians.

As we saw initially, GPS technology, maps, the digital and virtual world all very much involve a geographical framework, and navigating the internet and social media are very much about our spatial imagination.

When Don Bosco, with deep faith, gazed upon a map of the world, his geographical imagination helped him to think both locally and globally. He thought in terms of a worldwide map, foresaw communication as networking, mapping, human relations, a great movement of people coming together to evangelize and educate the young.

Don Bosco offers us an integral, educative and creative vision of communication in digital and virtual reality.