**RMG - The Don Bosco oratory in Valdocco: virtual reality and "immersion," a new way of communicating**

**(ANS - Rome)** - The publication of the series of articles by Fr. Gildasio Mendes, General Councilor for Social Communication, on the theme "Don Bosco and digital and virtual reality" continues. In the contribution proposed today, the Feast Day of St. Francis de Sales, the focus is on the Valdocco Oratory: virtual reality and "immersion," a new way of communicating.

The explosion of social networks and games has brought people into a new dimension of communication that we can define as a virtual immersion in the network. Our relationship now interacts with our senses (hearing, touching, seeing): indeed, it is true that both our bodies and our emotional and cognitive faculties allow us to enter the digital universe. We can, for example, share news and photos instantly. Through social networks we make an event in place *X* become an event for a person in place *Y*. What we photograph and share becomes an experience for others. We live in the era of so-called "immersion."

I would also like to add that "immersion" is a technical term used by virtual reality (Biocca F. 1993), and cannot be confined only to our contact with digital. It is important to broaden the vision of the concept of "immersion". For example, when we are cooking food in the kitchen, we are in a certain way "immersed" in that space, the senses take hold of us and enter into a relationship with the experience we are having of cooking: the smell of the food, the taste of the food. When we listen to music in a room, we are, in a certain way, immersing ourselves. It is therefore all our senses that allow us to immerse ourselves in all the realities of life. Going to a shopping center or participating in a religious celebration is an immersive experience.

Digital communication and networking in the world of cyberspace are basically an immersive experience. It allows us to communicate beyond the geographic location we find ourselves in, and consequently, if we think of communication via radio, via television, or the Internet, they too allow us to communicate through this new channel.

When we watch a movie, the images transport us into historical reality, into its virtual context interacting on an emotional level, because we get emotional, we cry and let ourselves be embroiled in the plot. How can all this happen if what I am watching in front of me is represented by nothing but images and sounds? What is the psychological phenomenon that occurs when images and sounds engage people in a profound way, leading them to relive, recreate, re-enact the film script, becoming a real experience for them?

How to combine applying this concept of immersive communication to Don Bosco and the educational environment of Valdocco?

I would now like to compare this concept of immersive communication to some of John Bosco's dreams. My intention is to follow this example only at the level of the psychodynamics of communication by entering specifically into the dynamics of the dream.

In Don Bosco's famous dream as a nine-year-old, already from the very first line of the narrative, we are immersed in another reality: "I seemed to be near my house, in a very large courtyard. A crowd of children was playing. Some were laughing, others were playing, and quite a few were cursing. When I heard these bad words, I immediately jumped into their midst and tried to stop them with words and with my fists."

Don Bosco across this dream full of images, sensations, sounds, and colors invites us to immerse ourselves in the reality of the dream to live the experience he had had.

This experience, which goes beyond a rational and technical vision, involves us, makes us participate together with Don Bosco in this dreamlike dimension.

Another practical example of immersive communication could be the atmosphere of the Valdocco Oratory.

For example, let's imagine how the oratory functioned on a sunny day. There are about eight hundred young people. The setting is small, but it allows the youth to move around and participate, and thus be completely immersed in the environment. In this place, the youth participate in the Holy Mass, they experience an intense moment with songs and prayers, they are immersed in the smell of incense, their gazes are filled with the images of the liturgy (such as the celebratory vestments). The liturgy and singing allow young people to immerse themselves in the environment and participate in the celebration with their whole being, with their souls, with their hearts, with feelings involving all their senses.

On the other side of the church, there is a playground where young people run, jump, play, with great enthusiasm and participation. This is an immersive experience accompanied by laughter, strong expressions of emotion.

When a group of young people sings in the choir and another group presents a play in the oratory, the whole setting becomes immersive, like a true and proper multimedia moment, where young people immerse themselves, participate, creating in unison a completely inner involvement in the activities of the oratory.

Immersive experience is thus an anthropological expression of the way we communicate. This is why the digital world is fundamentally based on immersive experience.

In this way, Don Bosco creates an educational environment that enables his young people to live affectively and cognitively through liturgical and playful experiences. His objective has always been to educate to life, to educate to God, to praise and magnify the name of Mary, the Help of Christians who did everything.