



THE SALESIAN VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE EXPERIENCE: FORMATION PATHWAYS

Fr Miguel Angel García, General Councillor for Youth Ministry
Fr Ivo Coelho, General Councillor for Formation

Acts of the General Council n. 438

1. The purpose of this document

This text stems from the desire to have a shared reference framework that will allow for the **reception and vocational guidance of young people who wish to gain a closer knowledge of Salesian life and to mature in and discern their vocation**. We want to offer these young people the environment, conditions and accompanying pathways for such.

The document is divided into seven points. First, a summary is offered, in chronological order, of the main references from the Congregation's documents since Vatican II, and then an overview of the Congregation's practice in the various regions. Next, a consideration is presented with respect to the origin of the candidates. Of particular importance are the points relating to the entry profile of young people, the formation pathway for accompaniment and discernment, and finally, the suitable environment and conditions that the Salesian house must guarantee. A pedagogical proposal is offered concerning times and ways of accompanying this experience, and finally, an in-depth examination of the topic of vocation animation in the Province.

These current reflections draw on some essential references of the Church and the Congregation.¹ They are not simply a collection of sources, nor a re-proposal of them in some sort of skilful synthesis, nor even an interpretation of them. The path thus documented highlights very clearly the value of the continuity, discernment and attention that has been taken up and has gradually matured through the different experiences of Salesian vocational guidance. **This document is concerned with understanding, exploring and enriching actual experiences of Salesian vocational guidance.** A mapping of the situation of the Aspirantate and its various expressions in all the regions of the Congregation (July 2021) has been taken into account in the drafting of the following guidelines.

2. Vocational guidance in documents of the Congregation following Vatican II

Reading the journey of the Congregation allows us to discover the persistent reflection on the situation of the aspirantate. Incentives are offered, new challenges are posed to which the Provinces ordinarily try to find innovative and up-to-date solutions. Reconstructing the thread of history is not a superfluous activity; on the contrary, it guides us in tuning into a very important reality in the field of vocation ministry and guidance.

¹ *Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis de Sales; General Chapters of the Salesians of Don Bosco (CG); The Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco: Ratio Fundamental Institutionis et Studiorum, 2016; Acts of the Superior Council (ASC) and Acts of the General Council (AGC); Francis, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christus vivit, 2019; Synod of Bishops, XV Ordinary General Assembly: young people, the faith and vocational discernment. Final Document, 2019; Salesian Youth Ministry. Framework of Reference, 2014 (FoR); Young Salesians and Accompaniment. Orientations and Guidelines, 2019 (YSA); Orientations on the experience of the Aspirantate, 2011.*

Congregational reflection on vocational guidance was crystallised in the Constitutions and Regulations (1984). General Chapters studied the matter further and built up a very rich patrimony, integrating the Letters of the Rectors Major and initiatives of Provinces. Thus, recognised first and foremost was the Christian vocation to which all the baptised are called (C 37); for this reason, not only religious or priestly vocations, for which special care is required, but also lay vocations were conceived as 'apostolic vocations' (C 28).

In one way or another, the insistence has been that pastoral work for vocations is the crowning glory of youth ministry, "its unifying principle"², because the Salesian mission aims at helping young people discover their vocation.³

The concept of vocation ministry as mere 'recruitment' of vocations has been rejected on a number of occasions, confirming the dual aspect of vocation promotion, both general and specific.⁴ On the one hand, it calls for constant attention to discovering and accompanying vocations of special commitment in society and the Church with differentiated and appropriate initiatives; but it also sustains the awareness of a special responsibility for arousing an explicit invitation to a vocation of special service or consecration, in particular, to the Salesian charism in its multiple forms.⁵

This is why it is stated that the first objective of vocation promotion is to create a "culture of vocation" in every Salesian setting.⁶ Through relationships, communication, activities and projects, it encourages a vision of life as a gift and as service, proposing attitudes that foster vocational development, even leading to an explicit proposal of consecrated and priestly life.

The Congregation has never ceased to insist on the special care of the relevant and indispensable environments wherein it is essential to help young people discern their vocation and respond to it consciously. These formative spaces have been called "aspirantates", then "live-in community experiences", "come and see groups" among others.⁷ In this respect, the teaching of the Rectors Major and Chapters has, over the years, urged the renewal of these vocational guidance proposals⁸, described in the Regulations as "vocational guidance centres" (cf. R 16 and 17).

Serious planning of vocation ministry is also needed⁹ within the journey of faith offered by Youth Ministry. This perspective has been emphasised in recent times by the Rector Major's Action Guidelines following GC28: there is a need to accompany "the young with a view to their personal maturity, growth in faith".¹⁰ This excludes the vocational process being an "ultimate", "casual", "elite" or "exceptional" moment, but the backbone of the whole faith journey.¹¹ The Youth Ministry Frame of Reference (2014) inserts the vocational dimension within the Provincial SEPP, not as something added to it but as

² GC28 p. 24.

³ SGC 374; C 37; cf. GC23 247.

⁴ L. Ricceri, *Lettere circolari di don Luigi Ricceri ai salesiani* (Roma: Editrice SDB, 1996) 636-38. The document *Young Salesians and Accompaniment. Orientations and Guidelines* insists on clarifying the difference between vocational recruitment and accompaniment and vocational discernment (cf. YSA 183).

⁵ Cf. J.E. Vecchi, *Educatori appassionati, esperti e consacrati per i giovani. Lettere circolari di don Juan E. Vecchi* (Roma: LAS, 2013) 644. 649

⁶ In his letter for the Year 2000, "Now is the favourable time" (AGC 373), Fr Juan Vecchi introduces this expression used by Pope John Paul II. Cf. GC26 53.

⁷ E. Viganò, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai Salesiani* (Roma: Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996) 1225; cf. GC26 72.

⁸ Ricceri, *Lettere circolari* 657-64.

⁹ Ricceri, *Lettere circolari* 645-57.

¹⁰ GC28 p. 24.

¹¹ E. Viganò, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai Salesiani* (Roma: Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996) 1206.

something internal and substantial; it also explores the meaningful options for vocation discernment that are part of the process of education to the faith,¹² without setting aside vocations of special consecration.

GC21 (1978) offered the "first systematic guidelines for the renewal of Salesian vocational ministry".¹³ It was already mentioned at the time that this is a formation methodology aimed at young people with greater sensitivity, willingness and spiritual richness, and who require differentiated and special attention. Besides, "the Provinces, and not the communities or individuals"¹⁴ are responsible for certain conditions: defining clear objectives, an educative project and accompaniment in groups or communities¹⁵ where there are people who witness to authentic Salesian life.

The Salesian community is the "privileged place for vocation proposal and accompaniment". However, we must not forget that the subject of Salesian Youth Ministry, where vocation discernment and life choices culminate, is the Educative and Pastoral Community, a communion of different vocations.¹⁶

Over the years, the Congregation has developed a reflection on guidance in the education to the faith of young people. It has identified vocation guidance as its founding and qualifying dimension.¹⁷ Some aspects support and complement each other in this vocational commitment: on the one hand, the guidance offered to all young people in the context of education; on the other, the constant attention to discovering and accompanying vocations of particular commitment in society and in the Church with differentiated and appropriate initiatives, so that young people can make a conscious and free choice (C 109); finally, a particular responsibility towards the Salesian charism in its multiple forms, through discernment and by nurturing the seeds of a Salesian vocation, both consecrated and lay, found in young people. To implement this last aspect, the Salesian vocational guidance experience will need to relate to Salesian consecrated life.¹⁸

Many of these issues are broadly developed in the letter "The Experience of the Aspirantate (2011)"¹⁹: the dimensions of Salesian formation, the value and urgency of accompaniment and discernment are presented in addition to the nature and purpose of the aspirantate. Ultimately, the text clarifies, on the one hand, the conditions to be ensured; on the other, the different forms. The same introduction emphasises that the vocational accompaniment of candidates to Salesian consecrated life is part of Youth Ministry and is therefore the responsibility of the Youth Ministry Sector, in close collaboration with the Formation Sector.

3 Various expressions of a single definition

a.- Our Congregation's Regulations use the term "aspirantate" to describe the **accompaniment of young people who show an aptitude for religious life and that will allow them to understand their vocation**. Young people in this experience can explore, verify and mature in the signs of a vocation that arise in

¹² Cf. FoR p. 247. 248.

¹³ GC21 574.

¹⁴ GC21 118.

¹⁵ R 16; cf. GC26 72.

¹⁶ GC24 141.180

¹⁷ Cf. SGC 374 and 692; GC21, 110ff; GC23, 149ff and 247

¹⁸ cf. GC26 54, 58, 69 The Letter of F. Attard - F. Cereda, "Guidelines on the Experience of the Aspirantate" reminds us that these proposals are essentially an accompaniment experience (nos. 1 and 14) and of discernment on the Salesian consecrated vocation (no. 15).

¹⁹ The Letter of F. Attard - F. Cereda, "Guidelines on the Experience of the Aspirantate", 27 July 2011, came about as a response to the GC26, 73 guidelines drawn up by the Youth Ministry and Formation Sectors.

their lives and that guide them to the possibility of a choice of Salesian religious life that they have not yet made publicly and consciously (cf. R 17).

This experience, carried out through a great variety of forms and approaches, must not be considered simply as an external structure, but as a maturing process that allows the young people involved to have targeted experiences of accompaniment and vocational discernment. In fact, the faith education dimension of the Salesian educative and pastoral project educates them to live from a vocation perspective. This is also the result of a good educative and pastoral path: leading the individual to experience a mature faith, and thus to realise the plan that God has for his life. In other words, vocational guidance is the summit and crowning of our educative and pastoral activity, not in the sense of the journey of faith reaching its ultimate moment, but as "an element always present, and one that must characterize every stage and every area of intervention" (GC23 247). As previously emphasised, the 23rd General Chapter had said that there had been a "long reflection" in the Congregation to address the new situation and the traditional and new forms of vocation promotion, aiming at "new and varied experiences" (GC23 249).

In the first instance we mention no. 329 of the Ratio (revised in 2009) in reference to the pre-novitiate: "This first phase of formation [pre-novitiate] presupposes that the prenovice has previously gone through an appropriate period and experience of vocational growth, human and Christian maturing, guidance, community living and an exercise of Salesian pastoral ministry – all things one cannot do without."

The Youth Ministry Frame of Reference tackles the vocation dimension: "This process allows a young person to make a calm, personal, free and well-motivated decision while having experience in a community where he is formed according to the charism to which he is called, growing in understanding and gradual conformation to it".²⁰

b.- This period, which can **tend to be pre-novitiate oriented, is described in various ways**, generally as the "aspirantate", even though the term varies according to place, culture and sensitivities.

Already in the 1980s and 1990s, a number of structures in some provinces gradually emerged which replaced the term, sometimes with new approaches compared to the classic aspirantates: "*comunità proposta*" (a live-in experience), "vocational welcome community", "guidance house", "Salesian vocational guidance centre" (R 17), "welcome community", "Come and See programme", "external aspirantate" (for candidates who, due to social, cultural, political or family circumstances, cannot be introduced immediately into a community). Other designations used before these years are "school aspirantate" (young people engaged in pre-university studies), "missionary aspirantate", "aspirantate for indigenous vocations".

²⁰ Youth Ministry Frame of Reference. Rome 2014, Chap. 6, 2.4.a (Called to life and faith).

What follows is the current situation and the different terms used in our congregation.²¹

VARIOUS KINDS OF ASPIRANTATES IN THE REGIONS (2021)							
	RAFM	RAMI	RAMS	RASE	RASS	RECN	RME D
Systematic accompaniment		6					
School-based aspirantate	1			3	19		
Aspirantate after school/university	7		5	5	6		
Insertion into a community			5			6	
Missionary aspirantate					2		
<i>Comunità proposta</i> (live-in community)		6				4	9
Vocational volunteering		10			2		
External aspirantate	3		1	3		2	
Aspirantate for indigenous vocations			1				

Repeatedly and insistently, the need has arisen for in-depth reflection on the **apostolic schools** in which so many confreres are involved and which reach a large number of recipients (in the Africa and Madagascar Region and the South Asia Region).²² There is a need for verification and renewal, and it is urgent and important that those most involved in this field at the local, provincial and regional levels become part of this process, enhancing the guidelines already outlined at the congregational level – such as those mentioned here on the vocation ministry – and deepening the pedagogical sphere with respect to studies on the age to which it is addressed and the characteristics of the school-type structures on which this educative and pastoral service is based.

c.- In any case, this welcoming environment for young people wishing to embark on a path of vocational discernment **is not a stage added to formation**: it seeks to be a setting “characterized by an intense vocational orientation, is still a valid form to help youth discover their own vocation and consciously correspond with it,”²³ the natural bridge between Salesian youth ministry and formation.

4 Origin of candidates

a.- This is a **necessary experience**, all the more so since these young people who are searching come from heterogeneous backgrounds with very different ages, family situations, levels of personal maturity, life experiences, faith and culture, and coming from a variety of Salesian circumstances and with different knowledge of Don Bosco.

²¹ RAFM = Africa and Madagascar Region; RAMI = Inter-America Region; RAMS = South America Region; RASE = East Asia and Oceania Region; RASS = South Asia Region; RECN = Europa Central-North Region; RMED = Mediterranean Region.

²² Already in 1965, chapter members at GC19 (Part III - ASPIRANTS) insisted on the fact that “Apostolic schools are to be considered neither Aspirants nor Pre-Aspirants”.

²³ GC20, 662

- » This particular experience begins for those young people who have already embarked on a *journey of maturing in the faith*²⁴ and of *vocational guidance*²⁵, ordinarily as part of the processes of Salesian youth ministry such as, for example: vocation weekends, camps and vocation groups, accompaniment by a Salesian in a house, accompaniment by the coordinator of the province's vocation ministry, or as the result of volunteer experience.
- » Other young people attracted by Don Bosco's charism, *who have not lived in a Salesian Educative and Pastoral Community*, also begin this experience. These young people trust the Salesian charism as a charism open to the Church in its totality and embark in freedom on a vocational journey that can have different outcomes.

b.- To all these candidates, the Province offers specific accompaniment through a concrete proposal **that best meets the needs of their personal history and situation**.

These structures are mainly aimed at university students or high school youth. However, some provinces have maintained structures for aspiring adolescents and pre-adolescents, with a style more similar to the "minor seminary" structure: same study hours for all, less contact with the outside world and little pastoral practice due to age.

5 Some aspects of the entry profile

a.- from this perspective on formation it becomes essential to create **the most suitable conditions for the person to make the discernment step**. In fact, this period of "first acceptance" becomes an experience that can have very flexible configurations and vary in place and duration, including according to the candidate. It is necessary, in fact, for the young person to have a formation rhythm which is in accordance with his personal maturity and vocational journey, without confusing it with other stages.

The first condition to be taken into consideration in order to be admitted to the Aspirantate is that the young person enters this experience at the moment when he explicitly questions himself about a possible vocation to the consecrated Salesian life before God. In other words, he must have **expressed the desire and willingness to discern God's plan in the Salesian charism**, and so **be willing to embark on the path of verifying** whether his initial attraction is truly a call from God and **discerning whether he has suitable conditions** for accepting it. In any case, the young person must remain open to other vocational outcomes.

It should be made clear that the one who accompanies him has no other interest than to help the young person discover before the Lord what he is called to and, if it is a vocation of special consecration, to initiate the process and if it is a calling to something else, then to guide it. *It is not about identifying or discarding religious vocations*, but a service (the crowning one of pastoral accompaniment) of help in identifying one's vocation and offering guidance for it.

b.- After this preamble, some conditions are important, i.e. some points that outline the **entry profile of the young man** who intends to live this experience, following the Church's criteria as follows: "To respond to our vocation, we need to foster and develop all that we are. This has nothing to do with inventing

²⁴ C 6, 28, 37 and R 9.

²⁵ Article 16 of the Regulations: "Vocational guidance centres 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 organizing local and regional meetings, by means of activities of special groups, or by inserting young people in one of our communities."

ourselves or creating ourselves out of nothing. It has to do with finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit" (CV 257):

- » verification of a healthy lifestyle (physical and psychological), in a broad sense;
- » presence of a personal experience of God that has enabled him to perceive his call in some way (not that it is already clear); it is desirable that he has previously participated in vocational guidance experiences;
- » readiness for personal accompaniment;
- » commitment and fidelity demonstrated in one's work (personal study, apostolic activity, community service);
- » ability to interact with and relate to others in a positive manner;
- » readiness for apostolic work with young people, especially the poorest;
- » indications regarding age. Some provinces give preference to young people aged 17-18 and over; for candidates over the age of 35, the journey is accompanied to check its feasibility; other provinces welcome teenagers between 14 and 17 years old.

6 The formation path of accompaniment and discernment

The growth in maturity of the individual occurs, in this phase, by facilitating certain aspects that become specific objectives to be pursued. It follows that the great work of the formators lies in accompanying the young person to identify and implement the inner dynamics that lead him to harmonise and live *the various dimensions not as a spectator on the sidelines, but as someone who takes an active part in them*.²⁶

a.- **Human maturity** is the basis of the young person's vocational growth. It tends towards the goal of psychic and emotional balance and harmonious and integral growth, paying particular attention to becoming aware of any psychological weaknesses and initiating safe processes for overcoming them. In the aspirantate experience, the young person begins to mature:

- » An authentic and profound contact with self and, therefore, a good ability, serenity and maturity in being able to honestly read and decipher oneself, one's feelings and desires, the dispositions of the heart, the gifts received and any wounds.
- » Further opportunities are offered to understand the dynamics of community life and the elements of affective maturation, for example: the ability to respect others, to listen to and accept others' points of view, not to use others for one's own ends, to care for others while growing in empathy.
- » The ability to grasp the central motivational core of one's actions, beyond the more external and emotionally contingent aspects, such as, for example, new family balances.

b.- The area of **relationship with God and spiritual commitment** must be traced with certain references in mind:

²⁶ "the Synod proposes with conviction to all the particular Churches, to the religious congregations, to the movements, to associations and to other ecclesial bodies that they offer the young an experience of accompaniment with a view to discernment. This experience – whose duration should be determined according to contexts and opportunities – can be described as a time destined for the maturation of adult Christian life. It should involve prolonged detachment from habitual environments and relationships, and it should be built around at least *three indispensable elements*: an experience of *fraternal life shared with adult formators that is essential*, simple and respectful of the common home; a *firm apostolic programme* for living together; an offer of *spirituality rooted in prayer and sacramental life*"(DF 161).

- » The discovery and acceptance of the real primacy of God and its evangelical logic in the life of the Christian.²⁷ Familiarity with the Lord, the introduction to the life of faith and friendship with Jesus, are part of this²⁸ by seeing to prayer and liturgy.
- » Willingness to let oneself be helped and, therefore, openness to the practice of personal accompaniment and to *taking responsibility* for decisions. It is a process which, on the one hand, must verify certain steps in vocational suitability; on the other, it must deepen the vocational motivations of the young person making the journey (the needs, desires, interests, internal and external drives that incline the young person to such a choice).
- » Furthermore, the experiential dimension of Salesian youth spirituality must be privileged over the theoretical dimension in the reading of faith in daily life and in reflection on lived experiences.

c.- For the young person who is discerning a vocation as an educator and evangeliser of youth, certain elements of the **intellectual dimension** are desirable:

- » Attention to everyday life as the place where continuity and constancy in taking care of one's study or work commitments, personal duties, required services, household chores is manifested.
- » The acquisition of habits of reflection and sharing, as well as the ability to reflect on situations and critically evaluate the surrounding reality.
- » Maturing in the ability to perceive evangelical and vocational values according to the Gospel and Salesian youth spirituality, rather than tracing them back to one's previous cognitive patterns.

d.- "The youngster trains himself to generosity and availability. These are two attitudes that give rise to joy: to gain life you have to give it".²⁹ Therefore his **educative and pastoral growth** includes:

- » Initiation to apostolic activity, lived in an experiential way and reinterpreted in accompaniment by privileging the typically Salesian moments of assistance and the systematic and continuous animation of a group. This educative and pastoral initiation becomes an opportunity to listen to the needs of the young; to know Don Bosco and the Preventive System; to discover the dimensions and characteristics of the Salesian animator;
- » The desire to subject one's pastoral activity to the scrutiny of others.
- » Flexibility in roles rather than a tailor-made ministry.

Focus on the intellectual dimension of the journey should not be *an excessive burden in terms of academic study, with little opportunity to work seriously on oneself*.

7 The appropriate environment and conditions that the Salesian house must provide

As we have seen, this is the period in which the Congregation offers an experience to young people who are searching, seeing to accompaniment and personal discernment according to the criteria indicated. **The final objective of the process is the vocational decision.** The individual Provinces propose a Salesian house (or several houses in the Province) where young people are offered the valuable opportunity of fraternal life among Salesians and peers, in the simplicity of daily life where there is no lack of school commitments, domestic duties and relationships, apostolic proposals according to Don Bosco's charism and an offer of spirituality that helps to combine faith and life: "To anyone who is thinking of becoming

²⁷ "The incidence of faith on life, or its practical irrelevance, is clear today in some aspects of the existence of individuals or of culture, which therefore become its acid test. It is not a matter of particular points, but rather of areas where the significance, strength and contrasts of faith can be found" (GC23, 181).

²⁸ CV, 250.

²⁹ GC23, 152.

a Salesian, an environment and suitable conditions are offered to enable him to discern his own vocation and to mature as a man and a Christian."³⁰

It is desirable for this type of experience to be lived, in particular, by those young people who are approaching fraternal life in Salesian communities for the first time and who have not previously frequented our apostolic life environments.

Four conditions are needed to obtain this result:

a. - **The community environment is a lively and open one**, simple, family like, cheerful but busy. Relationships of friendship and familiarity stand out. They can share some moments of prayer, spirituality, activities and friendship with the community (but not in the ordinary structure of religious life). That is, a family environment where there are suitable conditions for a period of time in which these young people can discover, take up and responsibly follow their life project.

Community life is a valuable opportunity to learn fraternity in relationships, discussion with educators, shared responsibility in services, generosity in giving oneself. To make growth in maturity easier, dialogue is certainly to be preferred to imposition, testimony to mere observation, shared responsibility to servitude, the internalisation of motivations to the mere carrying out of tasks, respect for the person and his processes in a personalised accompaniment to standardised approaches and anonymity.

b.- The Aspirantate is an **experience of accompaniment**. First of all the young person is offered *community accompaniment*. This is a set of relationships, an environment, a favourable climate and a pedagogy which are proper to the Preventive System and which go from the close presence of the Salesians in charge of the Aspirantate to discussion, guidance, support along the vocational and formation journey.³¹

In addition to this accompaniment, it is important to introduce the young person to *personal accompaniment*: spiritual, vocational, pastoral, in study. In this sense one speaks of an interpersonal relationship of "vocational dialogue" an attentive and immediate accompaniment in relation to each of the four areas of the formation process indicated above. Only a path of personal accompaniment can facilitate an adequate identification of the objectives of growth and awareness of what it means to live an apostolic vocation.

However, accompanying these young people must provide knowledge and encourage them to experience their own contingencies, needs, desires, weaknesses and wounds. Therefore, much attention must be paid to the human dimension of the person. To this end, it is necessary to address certain aspects that "touch on" the human being: self-differentiation (the ability to maintain one's own sense of self, identity, thoughts and emotions in relationships with others), self-mastery (the control of one's feelings, behaviour, through understanding one's reactions, emotions, mood swings) and self-appraisal (linked to one's self-esteem).

This is a process that has to be verified in various ways: in personal discussion, observation of the experience by the formators, description of the results by the individual concerned.

³⁰ C 109

³¹ "it is always better to live the faith together and to show our love by living in community and sharing with other young people our affection, our time, our faith and our troubles. The Church offers many different possibilities for living our faith in community, for everything is easier when we do it together." (CV, 164).

It is a process that must, on the one hand, *verify* – God's call, vocational openness and availability, the specific nature of an option and suitability for it – and on the other hand *deepen* the motivations of the young person. If vocational maturity proceeds in the direction of Salesian consecrated life, the aspirant is guided towards pre-novitiate.

c.- The effectiveness of the experience depends largely on the **accompaniment team**: Salesians and others (lay people, experts) chosen to be in charge of this experience, who are particularly well prepared for the not always easy task of offering candidates personalised accompaniment for their human and Christian growth. Indeed, "The family atmosphere of welcome and of faith, created by the witness of a community which gives of itself with joy, is the most efficacious setting for the discovery and guidance of vocations."³²

It is preferable to have a *heterogeneous team comprising Salesian priests and Salesian coadjutor brothers* precisely to foster knowledge and appreciation of the two forms of the Salesian consecrated vocation.

Some important indications: there must be a person within the community who is clearly indicated as a reference point for the young person; the reference confreres, at the discretion of the delegate for vocation ministry, must be invited to the meetings of the vocations ministry commission.

d.- **Relationships with the family**: Aware of the importance of the family, the young person maintains appropriate ties with it and, starting with the vocational choice he intends to make, learns to establish new family relationships. Normally no young person starts the Aspirantate without prior contact with the family. Parents should be encouraged, if possible, to visit the Salesian community by being present at certain significant moments. In this respect it is advisable to begin by recognising and addressing any family problems in accompanying these young people.

8 Times and approaches

The timing and approaches of the proposal are variable, depending on the age of the young person, the path followed and the province's traditions. On the other hand, certain conditions can be considered fixed points:

Times are not too structured (both in terms of everyday life, which must be adaptable to the path of the young person, and in terms of the general framework of vocational experiences), but agreed together with the young person on the basis of his personal journey and the possibilities of those still bound by study or work commitments. In any case, young people continue their university studies/work commitments during this period.

Given the diversity of personal journeys, we like to think of the community as an open experience involving multiple kinds of stays, a gradual path of insertion that begins with:

- » an occasional or casual first contact,
- » then limited periods of stay at times considered significant for the life of the community or the young person himself,
- » and then move on to more challenging choices.

It is also necessary to promote periodic meetings that aim to bring young people together **with other young people who are on a vocational journey**, for example: days or weekends in which the young

³² C 37.

person lives an experience of prayer and sharing with other young people (pre-novices, novices, etc.); vocational camps where both young people who have begun the aspirantate journey and young people who intend to begin this type of experience meet. It is very important to organise all these initiatives systematically and gradually, at local and zone level, in a vocations ministry plan within the Provincial SEPP

Being a specific moment of knowledge and exploration, accompaniment and experience of Salesian life and mission to verify and mature this initial orientation, it becomes very interesting to put these young people in contact with other Salesian communities.

In general, some provinces report at least six months of a stable aspirantate proving to be sufficient **to make a first discernment that is able to respond to an initial question:** are they ready to being a process of accompaniment/discernment *with real guidance to Salesian life in the pre-novitiate?*

9 Vocation ministry in the province

a.- Vocation ministry must be the principle and summit of youth ministry. All ministry, and youth ministry in particular, is radically vocational: this dimension is its inspiring principle and its natural outcome. In other words, **vocation ministry emerges from youth ministry as the breath and concrete expression of its vitality**. This is why provincial vocation ministry offers a mentality, a sensitivity, but also a pedagogy. To the extent to which it makes its vocational dimension explicit, youth ministry finds its best motivation for its relaunching: it rediscovers life as a gift, as “being for” in a liberating and fascinating perspective because it takes place before the surprising and magnificent plan of God.

Personal vocation accompaniment is not a privilege for good people or some kind of exceptional pastoral activity: it must be a normal formation tool offered to everyone. This is why personal vocational accompaniment of young people is a pastoral duty towards all young people and a right for every young person!

The local and Provincial Educative and Pastoral Plan must help the confreres and lay people who share for the Salesian mission to form a “culture of vocation”³³, a sensitivity, a way of thinking and – especially – a way of “seeing” the many boys and young men they approach every day. If all this is true, it is easy to understand how the provincial vocations animator and province approaches are at the service of this local responsibility, not as an alternative or a substitute for it.

Promoting vocation ministry is an essential task of youth ministry:

- » guaranteeing the guidance and accompaniment of all young people because the vocational proposal, from childhood onwards, is included as part of the process of education to the faith, as the point of convergence of all educational and evangelising efforts.

³³ Speaking of the prophecy of fraternity, GC27 reminds us that “it is necessary to accompany young people, to walk with them, to listen to them, to provoke them, to shake them up so that they go beyond the comforts in which they have settled, to awaken their desire, to explain to them what they are experiencing, to lead them to Jesus, and always giving priority to freedom so that they respond to the Lord’s call in a free and responsible manner”. It is necessary to create a climate of trust, to make young people feel that they are loved as they are and for who they are. [...] The personal relationship with young people on the part of consecrated persons is irreplaceable. The third guidelines of GC28 also invites us to live the “Salesian sacrament of presence” according to which “The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any kind of technical and functional reductionism”.

- » noting that vocation ministry is not simply aimed at recruiting pastoral workers, nor something isolated or just part of one or other Sector, but rather an activity linked to the being of the Church and therefore also intimately embedded in youth ministry;³⁴
- » creating the appropriate conditions (a real path of accompaniment; communities that are friendly, committed and open to all young people seeking their destiny in life, etc.) so that each young person can discover, take up and responsibly follow their vocation;
- » proposing different vocational paths to young people without forgetting or underestimating the explicit vocational call to consecrated or priestly life;
- » encouraging a family climate with meaningful vocational testimonies.

b.- In this sense, the Aspirantate, as clearly stated in the letter "The Aspirantate Experience (2011)": "It is our wish that these Guidelines be taken up by the Provincial Delegate for Youth Ministry, so that he may accompany the Province vocation promoters and their Commission and may review that part of the Provincial Educative Pastoral Plan which concerns provincial vocation promotion. In this Plan it is also necessary to identify a model of vocation promotion at the local level that can draw in the Salesian communities and the educative pastoral communities. This sort of work also requires close collaboration with the Provincial Delegate for Formation".

This accompaniment at the provincial level by the delegates and those who are responsible for the animation and governance of the province is all the more important when the care of the aspirants is entrusted completely to local communities (however the experience is defined in the various contexts). If there is no good planning and careful verification, there is the risk that what happens is in fact without any connection either with youth ministry, or with formation, or with the guidelines of the province and the Congregation. It is not enough to describe what the conditions are for good accompaniment in a document such as this text,. It is necessary to put in place all the measures at the provincial and then local level to ensure that it is actually put into practice.

10. Conclusion

We firmly believe that the acceptance and assumption of a vocation by young people is the educational process par excellence, towards which all the efforts and labours of every educative and pastoral Community are directed. Vocational guidance properly carried out, therefore, is the sure way to full human maturity and the source of true happiness. Therefore, all youth ministry is conceived, implemented and verified starting from this objective: to accompany each young person until they are ready to take the place the Lord has assigned them in the building of the Kingdom.

Today more than ever we feel the challenge and urgency of "creating a vocational culture in every environment, so that young people discover life as a call, and so that all Salesian ministry becomes truly vocational" (GC24 50). In this respect the vocational dimension³⁵ really does run across everything we offer. Although it presents itself with its own specific project, it represents the core of every pastoral proposal and must therefore be present in every environment. With regard to Salesian consecrated life, we believe it is urgent to offer young people these experiences of vocational guidance that *ignite desire and guide the heart*.

³⁴ Cf, for example, Ricceri 645-57; GC26 58; Chávez, *Lettere circolari* 1039; YSA 183.

³⁵ For this dimension see FoR, 152-154.