

FLASH

Salesian Youth Ministry Animation

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Cultivating dreams, collecting fruits

Local and Provincial organic planning

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YOUTH MINISTRY SECTOR
Salesiani di don Bosco SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA



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1 Salesian educative-pastoral model and methodological approach

We hold with conviction that the true strength and distinctive character of our Salesian mission are the strong values that inspire it, the dreams that these values manage to generate and the results that are achieved. Every time we are confronted with our mission, the awareness arises that **we must become more capable of carrying it out according to the Salesian educative-pastoral model.**

In order to elaborate the educative-pastoral proposal («Honest citizens and good Christians») on which our commitment is verified, every EPC (every province!) must choose the *appropriate instruments and define the concrete steps*. For animation, coordination and governance, it is indispensable to have this **methodological attention** that allows us to trace out ways, to reach the objectives, to use the resources well and to verify the results.

In our contexts we perceive so many challenges (social, educative, pastoral) and, therefore, we need **tools to think about the future**, that is, to express the mission in courageous, thoughtful and well-planned projects. Planning is:

- a mental and community process of involvement, clarification and identification (stopping for a moment, taking stock... and then «launching» the Province/EPC in a concrete direction);
- an operational tool.

Concretely, the **Salesian Educative Pastoral Project (SEPP)** is the **updating of the Preventive System**: the general action plan guiding educative and pastoral processes in a determined provincial and local context. The unity of the educative-pastoral interventions requires that there be a project, according to this global vision of the person. The project can be conceived as a kind of «highway signs» that gives indications on how to move in the territory of the young people, as Salesians.

The value of the commitment of a Salesian province/work is tested more and more by the fruits, and less and less by good intentions or by a good name historically acquired.

There is **a lot of talk about planning, and not only today**: we speak of projects, curricular models, objectives and evaluation. However, until a few years ago, these terms and the related problems were *far from the attention of the majority of pastoral workers*. In fact, every leader went ahead without worry-

ing too much about planning; when they did, they relied mostly on intuition and practicality.

2 The main «hindering» factors

Pastoral planning must be framed within the need to seek new ways of acting that renew and stimulate pastoral action capable of effectively evangelizing the world of young people today.

Nevertheless, we note that we are still trapped in a pastoral action of activities instead of a pastoral approach to processes. Moreover, we run the risk of responding to pastoral challenges with a «generalization» of the goals to be achieved. It is said that what we need to do is to evangelize those who are far away, to undertake a new evangelization, to renew our pastoral agents, etc. All this is true, but the objectives are so broad that we can never know with sufficient precision what we want to achieve, let alone to what extent they are being achieved. What could be preventing us from planning adequately? Why do we sometimes resist planning? What are the fears that we have when it comes to planning? Today, the recurring objections/resistances have this profile:

- «Pastoral work has been done for two thousand years without the need for projects». We acquire habits of improvisation or routine in our daily repetitive work that make us see as useless and costly any rationalization of the pastoral activity. We have a long experience, so why plan what we already know and are doing every day?
- «Pastoral work is under the free and unpredictable action of the Spirit and, therefore, it is not programmable». Planning is all too human a matter and even an obstacle to free divine action.
- «It's always been done this way» (repetitive laziness). Carrying out a planning process, with all that it entails in terms of fore-

sight, analysis, cooperation and evaluation, makes little sense and clashes with ingrained attitudes.

- «This is how it is done because it is the safe practice»: «nothing new under the sun» is expected. It is a passive conformism that adapts to what others command and say: there is no need for projects because others already have them. We are simple executors.
- On the contrary, «everything changes and must change»: references must be created continuously and freely, each person tends to let his own project prevail.
- «Excessive desire for results»: this may be an anxiety related to achieving short-term goals, with the desire for immediate answers. It rejects approaches that require constancy, patience, long periods of quiet but effective and permanent work.

All this leads us to ask ourselves if pastoral planning is still necessary or if it is a mere resource and a fad of the past. Is it worth the effort to elaborate serious and well-done pastoral plans or is it better to let ourselves be led by the Spirit? What is needed for good planning? What attitudes and methods are necessary to achieve good and effective planning?

3 Complex educative-pastoral situations with which we have to deal

Salesian youth ministry, in all its expressions, is formulated and expressed operatively in planning. Without it, it would remain in the realm of principles and intentions without an effective translation in relation to the pastoral action in its daily life. Pastoral planning becomes more pressing in light of the following challenges:

Educative and Pastoral fragmentation (lack of operational unity) is widespread. As a result,

pastoral workers suffer from a lack of effectiveness and impact of their apostolic action; everything depends on the ingenuity and good will of individuals.

There is also the problem of *language*, that is to say, common words are often used, but with different meanings, according to the mentality and experience of each person. Words such as co-responsibility, integral formation, evangelization, etc. have different meanings depending on who is using them.

Pastoral dispersion is also found in an *interior dispersion*. The persons need a synthesis to achieve coherence in pastoral action. Where do we want to go? What should I do?

There are more and more frontiers, demands multiply, *urgencies become pressing*; projects are made, but often without concrete impact; and even when they are put into practice, they are rarely evaluated. It is necessary not only to be aware of that, but also to *sensitize, to raise awareness and empower people to act in order to take on the educational and evangelising proposal, specific to the Salesians.*

4 The Benefits of Planning for the EPC/Province

The project: a matter of faith

Pastoral planning does not respond primarily to organizational needs. Planning is done in the light of faith; it is not immediately part of a «technical prudence». It places mental effort at the service of young people. These considerations apply at all levels and for any kind of initiative or course, at local and provincial level.

Above all, it is a decisive, an essential way of facing reality with the eyes of Don Bosco: running too much in the planning process is not a sign of concreteness, but of superficiality. The *planning of pastoral*

(ecclesial) action is above all a question of discernment: listening to what is the Lord asking of us at this moment in the history of these young people? And to discern is also etymologically, to separate, to distinguish, to divide; it means to take a position, to take sides: «Test everything and hold on to what is good» (1 Thess 5:21).

Pastoral planning is not reduced, therefore, to seeking the multiplier effect of our efforts and institutions. Planning is a mediation that puts us all in search, in the light of the Word and with the help of the Spirit: what are the needs that make us discover the Lord through the challenges presented to us by the reality of youth?

Let us say at the outset that pastoral planning means exercising *the virtue of hope*, which gives historical form to the ideal for which we strive, is based on faith and translates into the gift of self. «What we have behind us and what we have before us is irrelevant compared to what we have within» (O. W. Holmes). The exercise of hope implies a series of demands:

- The elaboration of a local or Provincial project requires, first, *interior freedom*; namely, *freedom from any negative past experiences we have had*. Without inner freedom, we will remain prisoners of the disappointments we have experienced, of the failures we have seen despite our serious commitment, to the point that we may be convinced that it is not worth trying again. Freedom from the *present*, not to live it as a closed or oppressive time, a time that cannot be changed. Freedom, finally, before *the future*, not to be paralyzed by the fear of failure, by the worry of «what will come next», by the anxiety of the unknown.
- This interior freedom will allow us to exercise *pastoral intelligence*, in determining what is the greatest possible good here and now. Pastoral intelligence helps us to over-



come our tiredness (or lack of energy) to decide, to opt for what seems to us to be God's will, and to overcome the perplexity (or uncertainty) that comes with making a choice, accepting our limits.

- Along with inner freedom tempered by pastoral intelligence, *patience* is needed, both in terms of waiting for the right time (waiting for things to be ripe), and in terms of concentrating all energies on what is possible today, thus preventing these energies from being dispersed and exhausted in nervous activism, sterile immediacy, or useless complaining and anger. The patience needed to cope with the difficulties of planning will also be necessary when the time comes for implementation.

The project reflects the type of EPC/Province

The existence (or not) and the quality of the design clearly show the *EPC/Province model* that is intended and pursued:

- An EPC/Province of an *administrative-bureaucratic* type: the decision is the prerogative, the privilege of a few, generally one person (director, parish priest or the provincial and his closest collaborators). The project has a «top-to-bottom» character or profile: the *sdb* and the laity receive it ready-made and are called to put it into practice and, if necessary, to collaborate in its realization.

- An EPC/Province based on *improvisation*, there is an overlapping of initiatives and proposals on parallel lines. It reflects a «weak» planning: there is a lack of thought-out, shared and verified processes and relationships. There is no relationship with clear and thought-out intentions (projects), without the concern to converge on common objectives and around the person of the young people.

- However, in an EPC/Province based on *co-responsibility*, spaces for mobilization and exchange open up; the diversification of participation bodies (councils, commissions, groups) generates a true decentralization and creates areas of responsibility. The elaboration of the SEPP or the OPP requires a co-responsible community that in turn builds it, a «synodal» style that expresses and creates communion.

Project builds and educates the EPC/Province

The dynamics of the project highlight certain *processes relevant to the life of the EPC/Province*, on the communicative level (communication between persons and different groups), on the level of decision-making (common shared choices) and on the structural level (appropriate use of available resources and attention to their regeneration). It is a reminder of the ecclesiology of communion. That is why we need time to reflect together: planning is an

exhausting and time-consuming undertaking (whereas pastoral work is always in a hurry!).

A project presupposes an explicit reference to one's own identity and its operative implementation (the desire-need to put into practice certain fundamental values and options in a concrete situation and with some clear and known addressees). It is not planned according to existing structures or tasks, but to the surrounding reality. Always towards an action to be carried out in and from the future, expressing simultaneously what we want to be and what we tend to do.

The commitment to planning is a strong instrument to safeguard oneself from *external influences* that, often unconsciously, modify the action and the very intentionality of the EPC/Province, adapting it in fact to needs that are not originally evangelical (and sometimes even incompatible with the Gospel). On the other hand, the triggering of spaces for sharing preserves the members of the EPC/Province from the temptation of a «narcissistic» and «self-referential» mission.

The EPC/Province also must manage *conflicts*; in fact, they can become a cause of deepening and growth, or of authoritarian involution, or of tragic division, when participation capable of transforming the conflict into a factor of change, is not activated. It is preferable to accept confrontations than to run away from reality. Genuine planning supports this constructive effort. Conflicts are inevitable in the climate of human events, but their positivity is neither evident nor automatic. In this sense, communication is crucial.

OPP/SEPP of the Province creates a sense of ownership

Feeling part of a group/community is the fruit that such a planning process produces in those who elaborate it first, more

directly, and in those who participate in it: for those who elaborate it, **it means a sincere and positive desire to build**; for those who participate, it means the advantage of knowing where they are *going and at what speed*, and of giving their own contribution by sharing the reasons.

This sense of belonging is an indispensable element for us. Therefore, we must seek the *highest level of trust that is realistically possible*, according to the situations, the people and the type of EPC/Province in which we live. Planning is crossover with stimuli and contacts, with vertical and horizontal links, with actions aimed at achieving the objectives that are ours and that we all pursue together, with personal responsibility and complementary roles. The first attitude to strengthen the bond is *trust*. We humanize ourselves through relationships of trust with others (not against others).

OPP/SEPP of the Province triggers testimony

Planning places the EPC/Province in the living fabric of the territory. The «topographical» determination becomes a **task and responsibility of evangelization** towards the population of an area.

A planning mentality is essential to **act effectively and wisely in the educative-pastoral field**. Without planning, there is no careful analysis of reality (fidelity to the young) and a clear and shared definition of pastoral objectives (fidelity to God) with appropriate strategies, within the established deadlines. We are called to work in concentric circles, as Jesus did when he addressed the crowd, the 72 disciples, the 12 apostles, the three chosen ones... with different attitudes, paths and perceptions.

Another advantage is that the planning reminds us what **idea of person (Salesians, lay people and young people) we want to form**. What anthropology and for what project of life. In a context in which we are «domesticated» and become insensitive because we are full of so many things, in contact with «provocative» situations, we must reflect on the totality of the person and the harmonious and integral empowerment of mind, heart and body, the insistence on the unity of life, on the search for a unitary meaning. Consequently, planning refers us to the central aspects of our educative-pastoral proposal.

The educative-pastoral proposal of the SEPP of the Province and the proposal of the OPP must be organic, intelligent and courageous. The planning forms the capacity to **listen, discern** and **decide**.

Listening is...

- *to get out of our points of view*, our schemes, our needs, our security.
- *to be ready to welcome*, to make room for the other and for the reality that surrounds us.
- *to participate, to share, to let oneself be «wounded»* by the events that happen, by the life that is told to us; an attitude to grasp and take charge of presences, silence

situations, deprivations, aspirations, facts, tragedies.

Discern is...

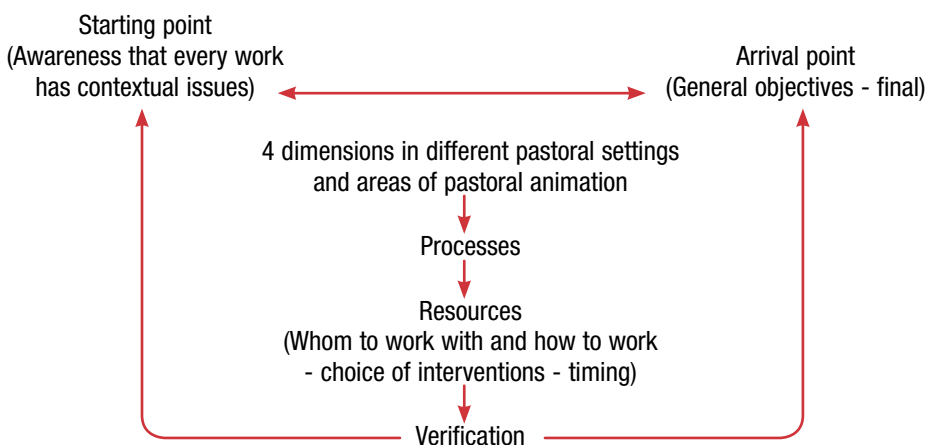
- *to distinguish*, take responsibility, regarding the problems of the area.
 - *to understand* that preferential love for the poor is an inevitable criterion of Salesian discernment.
 - *to compare what is there*, to understand how to respond to what God is asking of us.
- Decide...

- *to activate the most important and urgent processes in relation to people's real needs.*
- *to create an intervention strategy*, lines and instruments of action, as a reference guide.
- *to relate* Salesian principles and values to the situation on the ground.

5 For a proper approach

The question of operational tools is not secondary. This last point is intended to raise awareness of the criteria for good pastoral planning: easy to use, brief text, understandable to all.

What is the **life cycle of SEPP**?



It is a matter of **articulating «knowledge»** (which comes from experience) and **concrete «strategies»** (which come from tactical decisions). In this regard, it is worth noting:

The context of the Salesian work is very important. We are talking about a summary of 2 or 3 pages. Explaining the reality, the educational, cultural, social and pastoral framework to which reference is made is the first step in developing a planning process. It is not a statistical fact. Defining the premises is necessary for those who read the project, it is an act of transparency towards those you intend to involve.

The different ways of reading reality and the meanings attributed to it, lead to different knowledge, different hypotheses and sometimes contrary operational methods; it is therefore essential to make explicit and share the main concerns/challenges of reality. It is not a matter of carrying out a sociological study, but of defining and redefining what challenges us: as in all areas of human experience, it is not possible to change what is not reflected (=known). Without this prior common awareness, there is a risk that operational actions will be incongruent, scattered and repetitive. The SEPP is not born from nothing, but from the history (positive and negative) that sdb and the laity of the works live day by day, individually and/or in groups.

The history of the Salesian work today takes place in a specific historical period and in a specific territory. We run the risk of devising and drafting «ideal» but occasional and scattered objectives, processes or actions, which are repeated here and there, without visualizing and interweaving the most urgent questions. Our projects must be conceived and implemented within «real contexts» of life expressed, written, reflected upon.

From this «wisdom» *emerge the priority points of attention and work for all*, the nodes

of the project. They correspond to the situation of the Salesian work and are considered generators of apostolic resources: it is the unifying part that acts as a pole of reference and convergence for the programming of the different areas and sectors of pastoral animation.

The renewal of the environments and sectors of pastoral animation is a matter of **strategic and concrete decisions and choices**. The implementation of a pastoral project is done through actions, thought-out and not improvised, simple and connected steps. For this, care must be taken in the formulation of the precise interventions. The question of this part is: how to operationalize each of the proposed processes through an INITIATIVE or a CONCRETE ACTION (or SERIES OF ACTIONS). The right interventions reflect a great deal of contact with «provocative» (stimulating/challenging) situations that help to reflect and to see where the essentials of the environments are, what are the central aspects of the practice.

In summary: the organization of the different sectors of pastoral action, articulating them in a coherent way and seeking an indispensable union of wills around the one mission, has shown more and more clearly the importance and the necessity of an organic pastoral. The most notable requirements of an organic pastoral are, on the one hand, to impress on all pastoral action an evangelizing character (unidirectionality). This implies demanding the union and coordination of the work of all the pastoral agents and promoting the convergence of the action of all the agents in each of the pastoral sectors. And, on the other hand, to program the action, to establish the goals to reach, to choose the means to use and to establish a rational distribution and a promotion of the available resources, human and material, adequate to the needs of the moment and of the context in which we act.

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