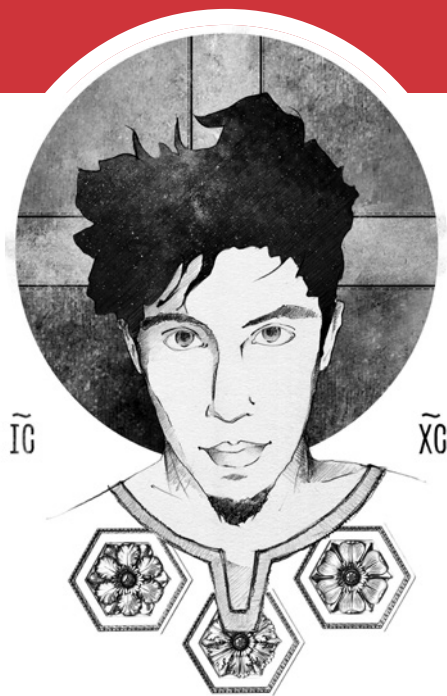


# FLASH

Salesian Youth Ministry Animation

Number 4. September 2023



## The Salesian Shepherd Educator in the Educative and Pastoral Community: Opportunities and Current Approaches

Fr. Miguel Ángel García Morcuende  
Youth Ministry General Councilor

**YOUTH MINISTRY SECTOR**  
Salesiani di don Bosco SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA



# The Salesian Shepherd Educator in the Educative and Pastoral Community:

## Opportunities and Current Approaches

**Fr. Miguel Ángel García Morcuende**

Youth Ministry General Councillor

### 1 The Circle Metaphor

#### *Definitively Replaces the Pyramid*

**[a]** In the magisterium of our Congregation the conviction of the co-responsible involvement of lay people and young people in the realisation of a Salesian mission is well rooted. Today we live in a fortunate era in which we have moved **from curiosity and benevolence toward the laity to understand the value of co-responsibility**. Three factors, in particular, are at the origin of this renewal:

- *The ecclesiology of communion and the rediscovery of the role of the laity*. We cannot deny the great change that the awareness of the “universal vocation to holiness” has brought about in the Church.

The understanding of the “specific nature” of religious life within the single baptismal vocation is guided by the meta-

phor of the circle, which must definitively replace that of the pyramid. Among the various vocations, the question is not which is the most perfect in relation to Christ, but what particular manifestation of Him each of them makes to the sacramental ministry of the Church. If Christ is for every Christian the pearl of great price to be admired and shown to the world, it is not necessary to place him at the top of a pyramid, a position in which some enjoy proximity which to others is excluded. The pearl of great price, which is Christ, must instead be imagined as being placed at the centre of the people of God so that each person (Salesian or lay) can participate according to the specific position given to them by their vocation in life.

- *The new understanding of charisms within the ecclesial community*. The charism is a gift to the Church; the Congregation which

incarnates it is responsible for it but does not own it, so it is recognised that the laity can also make it theirs according to their state in life. Gradually, the concept of a spiritual or charismatic “family” has been developed, based on the recognition that the charism of the Founder is also incarnated in other ways of living the Christian life.

- *The continuous renewal of our Salesian charism, which consists in going back to the beginnings.* Don Bosco, in fact, always involved many lay people in his youthful and public mission, forming part of his apostolic project: from Mama Margherita to the businessmen, including young people, the good people of the town, theologians, nobles and even the politicians of the time. Historically, we were born and grew up in communion with the laity, and they with us.

**[b]** However, *there are those who are suspicious of this openness to the laity* because, in their opinion, it calls into question the identity of the SDB. The co-responsibility of the laity, some think, is detrimental to the role of the religious in Salesian Work. Therefore, this experience of co-responsibility and daily communion is perceived more as a practical problem than as an obvious reality, more as an imposition than as an opportunity.

The lack of precise identification of the laity leads to diminishing and devaluing it, empties it of vocational concreteness and is therefore charismatically insignificant. Reality tells us that, in some cases, the understanding of lay vocation and spirituality is substantially undefined (a lay person is neither a priest nor a consecrated person).

In connection with this, a second question appears in praxis: sometimes the indications of the Congregation have not been implemented in all of the provinces; particularly those operational guidelines contained in the Frame of Reference for Youth Ministry: the involve-

ment of the whole EPC in the elaboration of the provincial and local SEPP, in the constitution of the Council of the Work / EPC, etc.

## 2 The Role of the Salesian in the Life of the Educative-Pastoral Community

Generally, the Salesian is presented as a generous and selfless person, but the demands of today's times and places require and favour particular tasks and ministries. In addition, you have to adapt to changing conditions and figure out how to balance the demands and challenges of being an educator in today's world. The current historical situation, linked to the co-responsibility of the mission with the laity, asks us to ask ourselves:

How do we resituate the SDB in his most proper and necessary contribution within the EPC? What predominant role is asked of him today? What kind of SDB is needed to achieve a significant and effective presence? What can and is he able and willing to contribute to Salesian Work today? How would we like the SDB of tomorrow to be seen?

### 2.1. First Disciples, Then Apostles

**[a]** The life of the SDB can only be understood from the experience of having “**found the treasure**” (Mt 13:44). It is only in this way, starting from a personal experience of faith, that we can develop any evangelising project. Without this initial conviction, it is difficult to achieve educational and pastoral objectives. If the SDB reverts to Jesus, we can affirm that his spiritual experience will be expansive: he communicates what he has seen and heard.

Only in this way will *the communion between different but complementary vocations be enriching*: the laity remind each Salesian of the concreteness of love, encouraging him to give



the best of himself, as well as the value of reciprocal fraternity; the Salesians help the laity to grasp the richness of a life totally given to God and to the service of their brothers and sisters in a communitarian way.

*At the heart of the educational and evangelising task is the person of the SDB, at his most authentic, his own convictions and experience of God, nourished by an interior life, a sincere fraternity and a generous apostolate among young people.*

Pope Francis, quoting a priest from his native country, Father Lucio Gera, recalls his words: "Always, but especially in trials, we must return to those enlightening moments when we experience the Lord's call to consecrate our whole life to his service. It is what I like to call 'the Deuteronomic memory of vocation' that allows us to return to that illuminating point where

God's grace touched me at the beginning of the journey and with that spark to rekindle the fire for today, for every day and to bring warmth and light to my brothers and sisters. With this spark a humble joy is kindled, a joy that does not inflict pain and despair, a good and serene joy" (Letter of the Holy Father Francis to priests on the 160th anniversary of the death of the holy Curé d'Ars, 4 August, 04.08.2019).

**[b]** The model of Jesus the Good Shepherd is what helps the SDB to live in an integrated way, with a strong capacity for personal affinity with others and with God. It challenges us to investigate the origins and the motives for the way we live. There is, therefore, an urgent need to advocate a return to our "first love". The **paternity of Don Bosco** is the concrete expression of this model that urges us to be

signs and bearers of the paternal presence of God in the EPC and, in particular, among young people.

The “pedagogical love”, “the system of kindness”, “gentleness of St. Francis de Sales”, “pedagogy of the heart” refer to the Preventive System, in particular to that set of attitudes and practical indications that are related to loving kindness, which goes beyond the gesture of friendliness. It always underlies the pastoral charity that seeks the salvation of young people, manifested through recognisable affection tempered by reason. And this applies especially to young people, but also to the laity.

It implies, above all, a *pastoral “heart”*: the will, the drive, the desire to work, to find enjoyment in pastoral undertakings, to be available, to give oneself with a joyful heart, to feel drawn towards those most in need, to consider every effort proportionately, to overcome small frustrations easily, not to give up, to face risks and difficulties as if they were small things, to “begin new processes with enthusiasm and creativity” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 222).

**[c]** Living pastoral charity means fighting against the “enemies” within us. There is always something to improve, something to free us from, which leads to a loss of passion for the mission, intimately linked to the fear of change, the difficulty of adapting to new languages and the lack of courage to take risks (to get out of our comfort zone). All of this is the manifestation of the **“charismatic chill”, which limits the prophetic response** and, consequently, gives rise to pastoral withdrawal.

Sometimes an identity crisis arises in some brothers when they no longer have a specific position of responsibility within the Work (due to physical and/or mental aging or illness). In the EPC, it is not always easy for *older members* to get involved and participate,

unfortunately forgetting that these brothers enrich our houses with their experience, their prayer and the offering of their lives.

However, we are convinced that in any situation *we express our consecrated “being” in our “being” among young people (“sacrament of presence”)*, giving priority to the poorest. In other words, the SDB, with his weaknesses and in spite of them, must wholeheartedly enter into the depths of the youthful condition, especially where there is most need and abandonment. For this reason, each one, when reviewing his personal project, must question himself about his sensitivity to the *dramas and urgencies of society*, especially the reality of children and young people who suffer the most from injustice and its consequences.

*In the words of Pope Francis: “to bear witness that Jesus is suffices for us and that the treasure with which we wish to surround ourselves is made instead of those who, in their poverty, remind us of and represent Him: not the abstract poor, statistics and social categories, but real people whose dignity is entrusted to us as their fathers. Fathers of real people; that is paternity, the capacity to see, concreteness, the ability to caress, the ability to weep (Address to bishops participating in a training course organized by the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for Oriental Churches, 12 September 2019).*

## 2.2. **Taking the Side of Young People by Working for an Organic Pastoral Ministry**

Youth culture is a place inhabited by God and in need of SDBs, who are able to enter into it, to know its dynamics in depth and to rewrite the Gospel in a new and different way, so that it is accessible and valid for them. *The first responsibility of an educator/evangeliser is to define reality with a concentrated, sustained, deep gaze.*

This reality tells us that a lack of pastoral integration must be overcome, *breaking down the "customs" and "domains" that can be created within the works*. Therefore, we must wager on developing an organic pastoral strategy that overcomes the separated or unconnected pastoral approach of animating many activities, with little or no coordination between them, converging one with the other, in favour of an approach that is with and for the young.

The term "organic" coherently expresses the formation of a living organism in which all its members act in close relationship for the common project, believing in the spirituality of the processes. For this reason, it is essential that the SDB develops a *collaborative style*, consistent with a model where the full potential of individuals is pursued. This collaborative culture requires considering the different sensibilities present in the EPC, unifying criteria in the shared pursuit of service to young people, avoiding arbitrariness and personalism, and supporting the development of the required leadership according to the skills of each member of the teams and the needs of young people.

Moreover, it involves a commitment to pastoral leadership, which is not authoritarian, hierarchical and top-down, but that values dialogue, which generates and promotes discrete leadership, facilitating autonomy in decision-making and motivating initiative and creativity according to each person's charism.

### 2.3. *Reliving pastoral experience leads us to recover the theme of community*

The EPC sparks into life and walks with young people. Every young person needs a community like a maternal womb in which they can set in motion and further their life and their faith. The path that the Church has identified is that of synodality, which expresses

and underlines the call *to walk together, form co-responsible communities, learn the art of discernment*. This task is realised in being a sign, witnessing to and denoting with one's life, the Kingdom; setting out to look for young people, as instruments of God's action; welcoming the reality of young people, their needs and their searching; questioning and proposing, offering experiences and spaces where young people can meet Jesus; accompanying the process of openness and growth in faith. This is what every SDB and every community must believe in.

This is why we should not be afraid of the progressive transfer of responsibilities to the laity in areas of mission, which today is much more horizontal and less centralised within the religious community. This indicates that the very life of the community (intergenerational, intercultural, with few members...), living as the animating nucleus of the work, also needs to be redesigned in terms of its composition, the order and volume of work and the human and relational aspects within the EPC as a whole.

In this sense, once again we note the importance of the two concrete areas in which we express the charism together as a community: fraternal life with the laity and with young people:

**[a] Increasingly appropriate forms of fraternal life with young people:** despite the variety of mission settings and history, in many communities there is a good quality of fraternal life shared with young people. The presence and importance of having stable or at least frequent moments of sharing daily life with them, whether they are the direct recipients of the mission or young animators-colaborators, has grown.

In fact, today *short stories* are essential, that is, communities steeped in life and affective

warmth, reference spaces that are close to day-to-day life, with proposals and experiences of life, faith and fraternity (deep, true, lasting).

Alongside the more structured moments of sharing life, we note *constant attention to welcoming all the young people who pass through our works on a daily basis*. The SDB is expected to be there where the young people are (presence), to accompany and encourage their growth, starting with those who are the worst off (service), to establish an interpersonal communication where the young people allow themselves to be accompanied and challenged by those who welcome and listen to them (dialogue), sharing more what we are and do than what we say (testimony) and explicitly announcing Jesus Christ, facilitating the emergence of faith in the life of the young people (evangelisation).

In the houses, the *involvement of young people in educational-pastoral action* has also grown. In many places, the SDB has involved young people in the reflection, planning and animation of the activities. This is the most fruitful method of “formation in mission” and allows them to evolve an outlook that boasts discipleship and pastoral charity, as well as the path of vocational discernment.

**[b] Increasingly appropriate forms of fraternal life with the laity:** there are more and more experiences of fraternal life and of living together, especially at specific moments of the EPC (Salesian feasts, retreats, local events, etc.).

It becomes necessary for the SDB to put into practice all the “micro-skills” needed to establish positive human relationships: trust and trustworthiness, communication skills, humility, proximity, empathetic listening, assertive dialogue, recognition of manifest and latent tensions, practice of sharing feelings, etc. The SDB is called to recognise, thank, praise and



reward achievements, accompany difficulties, and encourage new learning. It is not only “collaboration” in educational-pastoral action, but “communion” of life, fraternal relationships, acknowledged affection, of shared responsibility. And all this implies an effort, especially in educational institutions, to know how to harmonise the “informality” of fraternal life and the “formality” of the working relationship.

#### 2.4. *Institutional support for discerning the educational-pastoral dimension of the house*

In order to put into practice the complementarity and functionality of each person involved in educational-pastoral action, special attention must be paid to the **Council of the Works / EPC Council** and, when they exist, to the various **teams, groups or councils**, so that they are not seen as mere organisational places where time and space are attuned. It is promising to be able to have collegial spaces in which to discern opportunities for fraternal life for Salesians, young people and lay people.

One of the aims of the Council of the Works / EPC Council is shared *planning and programming between Salesians and lay people*. It is an exercise that goes beyond pastoral personalities, improvisation and gratuitous intuitions. Effective management and obedience to the local SEPP aim not only to define the flowchart and the job description of each person, but also to promote the renewal of pastoral praxis in each context, formulate the inspiring criteria of the various educational-pastoral actions, energise the operability of the organisational structures and coordinate the differentiated contribution of each and every member of the EPC in the various fields of pastoral action as a whole.

All this may also require new alignments between the collegial bodies: in the Council of the Works / EPC Council (which animates

and orients all Salesian action through reflection, dialogue, planning and revision of educational-pastoral action) *decisions are developed and matured* (consultative phase); in the House Council (deliberative phase) *they are taken on board, reflected on and decided*, collaborating with the director in the performance of his function as the first person responsible for the EPC. In the Works entrusted to the laity, the first phase is already deliberative. In other words, it is a process of consensus building: decisions are the fruit of interaction, from below and from within.

All this change entails a certain amount of loss and anxiety. Losses because this new articulation implies “unlearning” deeply accepted and lived beliefs and practices. On the other hand, anxiety because, in the transition from a model where only Salesians had a “voice and vote” to a diverse one, it may produce nervousness and insecurity at least temporarily. Some Salesians are faced with changes that require questioning or challenging beliefs and practices that have been crystallised for years.

#### 2.5. *Greater rationalisation of pastoral workers at all levels*

Through the OVERALL PROVINCIAL PROJECT, the SALESIAN EDUCATIVE AND PASTORAL PROJECT or other projects, each EPC tries to put at the service of young people all the capacity for creative imagination and foresight of which it is capable. But also, with planning, the aim is to introduce into the exercise of pastoral responsibility a greater rationalisation of work at all levels so that educational-pastoral action can be adequate and effective and not left to gut feeling or to prerogative and choice of a few.

What, in the final analysis, must motivate any local and/or provincial planning or specification must be the effort to increase *the opti-*



*misation of human resources* so that, in the best possible way, Salesians and lay people can act as effectively as possible, having a positive impact on the education and evangelisation of young people. For this reason, we must be attentive to two factors:

**[a]** We make no secret of the fact that the *continuous rotation of personnel and of confreres in front-line educational-pastoral tasks* (directors, coordinators, educators, etc.) puts a strain on the continuity of educational-pastoral processes. It also contributes to fragmentation, especially when there is little conformity to planning or disregard for existing community joint responsibility processes. Sometimes the impression can be given that there are transitory, passing roles or assignments, in which new leaders are continually being welcomed and dismissed.

**[b]** Secondly, a certain *balance between fraternal community life and mission is necessary*. Our works are becoming more and more complex, and this difficulty can undermine community life. In fact, the dichotomy between fraternal life and mission is especially present in those houses where the volume of activity risks engulfing everything. Let us not forget the words of Fr. H. Kolvenbach (Superior General of the Society of Jesus) to the Jesuits: “it is quite contradictory that the mission the Lord has entrusted to us should exhaust so many of our companions” (*Address to the Conference of European Provincials*, Manresa, 29 October 1995).

In this sense, like two sides of the same coin, it is important *to redefine the workload and the responsibilities of the SDB*, which are often too great. In some SDBs, the managerial function



is lived to the detriment of pastoral animation and human relations with personnel. The successful leader must be able to combine both functional and attitudinal skills. The complexity of the management of our works as a whole (from the managerial, administrative, charismatic and pastoral point of view) requires us to seek the right balance for a life that is humanly healthy, evangelically committed and pastorally effective. On the other hand, being attentive to the SDB's culture of self-realisation of the SDB, *which generates identification with the role*, reduces availability for the mission.

The *community project*, although a fairly widespread tool, is sometimes reduced to a simple calendar of commitments and activities and does not set in motion the dynamics of growth necessary for the well-being of the community. In practice, it lacks a healthy balance between the demands of apostolic life and the conditions necessary for community life. On the other hand, it should be inte-

grated with the other two projects: the personal project and that of Salesian presence (local SALESIAN EDUCATIVE AND PASTORAL PROJECT).

## 2.6. *Recreating the charism requires promoting joint formation processes*

We feel the growing need for a shared formation that conforms to the pastoral and formative life of the work. Formation is to give constant care and time, like the work of the farmer or the craftsman; it is to cultivate in order to establish the roots and to make it grow; it is not simply a scholarly action. Every person is, in fact, during his life, both formator and formee, educator and educated.

On the other hand, the updating of confreres is very limited, mostly optional, not very incisive and not very attractive for ministerial life, often left to the free initiative of individuals. Not pursuing continuing education is a toler-

ated sin, often justified even by the numerous obligations of the Salesians. However, it remains true that ongoing formation cannot be conceived as “do it yourself”, as a kind of self-management, but requires organized impulses and well-structured proposals.

We perceive as necessary the unavoidable and urgent formation for *roles of responsibility of Salesians and lay people*, in our Salesian works: we need charismatically and vocationally identifiable people. In many cases, it will be opportune to rethink the formative pathways, to ensure that the routes designed for all the members of the Salesian mission are as serious and profound as those foreseen for candidates to religious life.

The educative-pastoral formation does not stand outside, above or below the other dimensions (human or spiritual), but is proposed for their specific purpose. In fact, by educative-pastoral formation we do not mean the ability to learn techniques or methods, to become familiar with the practice of ever-new experiences, but above all to educate oneself in a way of being that directs the whole personality to the style of the shepherd. To be a shepherd implies, in fact, an adult humanity, a spiritual freshness, a fatherhood in love.

On the other hand, important difficulties persist, due to the lack of trained confreres in various fields of interest for Salesian life and mission (for example, in the field of vocational training). In many cases, we have to overcome outdated concepts and practices, routine repetitions, dissipation or improvisations caused by inertia or by the urgency of the problems that, on many occasions, afflict daily life.

### **2.7. Encounter, listening and discernment:** **keywords to rethink the charismatic density of the Salesian houses**

“Encounter”, “listening” and “discerning together”: asking ourselves what the Lord

wants of us requires these verbs. This is the coherent order of a single process of listening to God’s will. These are actions that question the adaptability of the Salesians to the changing environmental and educational conditions that appear in an unprecedented way compared to the recent past.

On the other hand, with the hectic pace of life of the confreres and the number of issues to be dealt with each day, engaging in reflection becomes almost a luxury. Often an “emergency room” syndrome develops, and one lives only in pursuit of emergencies. However, history does not stand still, even if some have decided to drop anchor.

All this requires a path of discernment that must lead to the appropriate renewal of our processes, procedures and ways of acting and of situating ourselves in the mission, of our lifestyles, of our capacity to understand the world in which we live, in short, of taking care of everything that helps us to grow and to be more faithful to the charism. To discern is to decide with a horizon, looking beyond oneself, one’s own well-being, comfort, affection.

Discernment for the SDB means, on the one hand, to subject to “crisis”, to “test” our thinking and our educational-pastoral mission, to give continuity to what we do well and to remove what is no longer useful and, therefore, unrecognisable for the young people of today; on the other hand, to “litigate” (to submit to judgement) our way of being with regard to our Works, because routine and inertia are often deceitful.

In short, it is time *to move from analysis to synthesis* of possible solutions:

- Consider the possibility of *new models of fraternal life, shared with young people*.
- Promote the fact that several apostolates, working in a synergistic and integrated way,



can be *referenced to a single Salesian community*. Among the essential reasons is the need to safeguard, above all, the community criterion, that is, the desire to be able to have significant and sustainable communities, which today are too burdened by workloads that are not always balanced and by an apostolic life that struggles to connect with community life.

- Stimulate a profound discernment of the Works, so that they may be faithful and creative expressions of the charism, favouring the works (the sectors, the courses, the activities) of greater direct expression of pastoral charity for young people. It will therefore be necessary *to gradually close some, to innovate in others and/or open new ones*.
- *Consider the lay management of the Works*. This formula already allows for an in-depth authentication, but as a Congregation we have offered a tool for reflection in order to rethink this management model of

entrusting to the laity and to better define the tasks and duties involved. At the same time, it remains essential to guarantee the link and the responsibility of the verifier through one or more accompanying SDB(s) to ensure charismatic continuity.

...

Thanks to the Salesian charism that unites spirituality and educational-pastoral service, the SDB lives in the midst of the people, dedicating himself to relationship with God and to the service of young people. It is a life that opens itself to a witness of harmony and serenity and that also becomes a prophetic path in the various contexts where we find ourselves.