



SOCIETA' DI SAN FRANCESCO DI
SALES

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Subject: The educative and pastoral experience of practical training

Dear Provincials and members of provincial councils,
Provincial formation delegates and members of the formation commission,
Rectors and confreres of communities with Salesians in practical training,
Confreres living the practical training experience,

Greetings from the Basilica of the Sacro Cuore in Rome.

I'm writing this letter a few steps from the room where Don Bosco wrote the letter of 10 May 1884, giving us his heart and mind about his pedagogy and spirituality, and telling us what kind of Salesians he wanted us to be for the young people of every age.

My main focus is the FORMATIVE EXPERIENCE OF PRACTICAL TRAINING, and the way to accompany confreres living this period of their lives, which our *Ratio* describes as “**the most characteristic phase of initial formation**” from the Salesian point of view. (FSDB 428)

I would like to reflect with you on what the Constitutions, Regulations and the *Ratio* say about practical training, keeping in mind also the findings of the research on Salesian Personal Accompaniment – to which 554 practical trainees contributed (78% of the total) – and the sharing about the practical training experience by a large number of young confreres we have met in the last five years (especially those in the first year of specific formation, both Brother-Salesians and Salesian aspirants to the priesthood).

1. Constitution art. 115 on practical training

C 115. Practical training

Throughout the whole period of initial formation, importance is given not only to study but also to the pastoral activities of our mission.

The practical training period provides opportunity for **a deeper living experience of Salesian educative and pastoral action**. During this time the young confrere gets practice in the preventive system, particularly in **Salesian assistance**.

With the **support of the rector and the community**, he is **able to integrate his activity and the fundamental values of his vocation**. [See also R 86 and 96]

The first point to note is that **C 115 focuses not on the educative and pastoral action as such but on the DEEPER LIVING EXPERIENCE of such action.** It is the QUALITY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE that makes the practical training years “the most characteristic phase of initial formation.” (FSDB 428)

The integration of activity and the fundamental values of our vocation mentioned here is an echo, in fact, of the “learning by experience the values of the Salesian vocation” of C 98. And both C 98 and 115 are taken up again in a new synthesis in C 119, which is the final article of the third section of the Constitutions on formation, and which captures the essence of what formation is for the Salesians of Don Bosco:

“Living in the midst of the young and in constant contact with working-class surroundings, the Salesian **tries to discern the voice of the Spirit in the events of each day**, and so acquires **the ability to learn from life’s experiences**. He sees his ordinary activities as effective means of formation, and he also makes use of any other means of formation that may be offered him. ...” (C 119).

C 119, like C 98, talks not about practical training as such but about “ongoing formation,” which it describes as “a permanent personal frame of mind.” It sees this frame of mind as a learning by experience that is a *discernment* of the voice of the Spirit. With all the more reason we can say that practical training is not so much about work, work and more work but about learning the attitude of formation that lasts through life. This most characteristic phase of our formation, our first “full immersion” as religious into Salesian educative and pastoral activity, is therefore a question of learning from experience and discerning the voice of the Spirit in living and constant contact with the young.

SALESIAN ASSISTANCE is, fact, the hallmark of practical training. ‘Salesian assistance’ is our daily educational presence among the young and it is wonderfully described in C 39 and in a brilliant comment in the *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco* (pp. 372-376 267), which I would urge everyone to read, beginning from our young confreres in practical training.

Assistance is the Preventive System in practice. It calls for “empathy with the young and a willingness to be with them” (C 39). It is a presence that is brotherly rather than institutional or authoritarian. It is an active presence that is proactive. It is also an animating presence that knows that the young are not objects but active and responsible subjects of our pastoral work among them. It is a witnessing presence that knows also how to listen, appreciate and dialogue.

All this means that very high expectations are placed on our young confreres! They must be always physically present, but also very creative. They must understand the young and the “new world” to which they belong, but also make them behave in the way their seniors want them to.

On the other hand, our young practical trainees are precisely that – “trainees” who, far from being experts, are new to their job. If they have met Salesians who were always present among the young, and have lived in communities “capable of a living communication of the Salesian ideal” (C 104), they are blessed and will have some idea of what to do and how to go about. If, on the other hand, their experiences have been negative, as sometimes happens, they arrive in practical training with severe handicaps. Blessed are they if they find welcoming communities “capable of a living communication” of the meaning of the Preventive System and of Salesian assistance.

“Learning from life’s experience” happens with the “SUPPORT OF THE RECTOR AND THE COMMUNITY.” If such support is always important, it is even more important during the first ‘full immersion’ of a confrere in the active Salesian life.

A community with practical trainees is, in fact, a “formation house,” one that has a major impact on the lives of the young confreres sent to live there. The Rector of such a community is first and foremost a formator, not only of the younger ones entrusted to his care but also of the other Salesians, so that together they may live “ordinary activities as effective means of formation,” (C 119) leading the younger ones first of all by their example.

The accompaniment of confreres during practical training is the key to making sure that the experience is formative. This is what Cafasso did with John Bosco, 26 year old newcomer to Turin. Through Cafasso’s accompaniment, what John saw in the juvenile prisons and in the miserable suburbs of Turin became a transformative experience to whose fruitfulness we are still bearing witness.

Very soon the *Orientations and Guidelines* on young Salesians and accompaniment will be available – fruit of a study that has involved the whole Congregation in the last few years. This study has confirmed what we already knew: that the phase of formation needing most attention and accompaniment is precisely the practical training.

When there is good accompaniment, and when the young confrere feels understood and affirmed, he grows and profits from the experience, even when it is very challenging and demanding. Accompaniment of experience clarifies and reinforces the motivations and the ‘right intention,’ which is the basic energy behind the Salesian vocational journey, and opens the confrere to new opportunities for growth and the flowering of his inner potential.

Unfortunately, for a large numbers of confreres in practical training this is not or has not been the case. The data of the research and the sharing with young Salesians give evidence of serious lack of accompaniment, where the main and almost only focus is on the work to be carried out, and huge amount of tasks and activities are loaded on the shoulders of the newcomer, without much orientation or care for how he feels and is able to cope. The worst situation is when sectors are strictly demarcated and each head (principal, in charge of the boarding...) expects the confrere in practical training to be at his disposal, with the Rector himself being reduced to just one more on the list of these authorities. Imagine what happens when not only the work is compartmentalized but also there are rivalries among sectors. The practical trainee may find himself in an unpleasant tug of war, with some seniors even threatening him with dire consequences at the time of admissions.

What stand should we take about the accompaniment of confreres in practical training?

The most important action is at the level of province governance, as the *Orientations and Guidelines* mentioned above say: the choice of community for practical training, the availability of good formation guides, etc.

As far as the Rector of a community with practical trainees is concerned, his first responsibility is towards the confreres, starting from the younger ones: he has “a direct responsibility toward each confrere; he helps him realise his own personal vocation and carry out the work entrusted to him.” (C 55) He is the guardian of the charism and the spiritual guide of the community. He meets his confreres “frequently” for a friendly talk (C 70, R 49). The *Orientations and Guidelines* ask him to distinguish between the friendly talk and personal spiritual accompaniment (“spiritual direction”), and to respect the freedom of each one to choose his spiritual guide. He will do his best to create a family atmosphere and a climate of mutual trust and confidence, giving time every month for the confreres in practical training to

meet him. In addition, if he is blessed with more than one practical trainee, he might find it useful to have also a monthly meeting with them, in order to share and learn together from experience.

2. Regulations art. 86 and 96

R 86. The pastoral experiences should be carried out in activities proper to our mission, and should have **as their purpose the development of an apostolic spirit and of the educative and pastoral potential** of the Salesian in formation. Such experiences should be **diversified and graded** so that they **respond to the personal and religious development** of the individual confrere and to the phase of formation he has reached.

R 96. Practical training lasts ordinarily for two years and is carried out before perpetual profession in **a community that can provide whatever is necessary for the validity of this experience.**

Art. 86 of the Regulations reminds us that the goal of the pastoral experiences during initial formation is not the work to be done but rather the **APOSTOLIC SPIRIT** to be developed through “the activities proper to our mission.” Once again, we have here a call for proper accompaniment in which the young confrere is helped to learn from experience.

This means that we cannot assign just any occupation whatsoever to young confreres in practical training. To be generous and available is surely part of our spirit, but the energies of the young are to be invested in a way that the experience leads to “the development of an apostolic spirit and of the educative and pastoral potential of the Salesian in formation.” Such a goal calls for quality discernment at the time of community planning, as also at the time of evaluation, and not just about the practical trainee and the work assigned to him, but also about the community as a whole and the way it accompanies him. When what is demanded of the young confrere and the accompaniment that is given him is not in line with this goal, the Rector has the moral duty to intervene and reorient the community and the confreres.

R 86 also says that “such experiences **SHOULD BE DIVERSIFIED AND GRADED** so that they respond to the personal and religious development of the individual confrere and to the phase of formation he has reached” (see also GC27 71.4). The primary reference here is to the set of apostolic experiences over the arc of initial formation, but obviously this includes also the phase of practical training. The leading criterion is not so much the diversity and gradation as the personal, religious and pastoral development of the young confrere. Don Bosco was an artist in the ability to find for each one of his young Salesians what was most suited to his personality and gifts. We will have our Michael Ruas and also our Caglieros, and we allow ourselves to be inspired and guided by our founder and by the Constitutions that take his place.

R 96 takes care to specify the communities to which confreres are sent for practical training: “a **COMMUNITY THAT CAN PROVIDE WHATEVER IS NECESSARY** for the validity of this experience.” This is where governance at provincial level plays a major role. The Provincial, of course, never acts alone: he has his council, his delegates for formation and for youth ministry; he has the possibility of animating and giving direction during meetings of Rectors and of other groups. Each of these contribute to the animation and government of the province, also with regard to this delicate act of discernment: to send young confreres to communities that “can provide whatever is necessary for the validity of this experience.” Let’s be very clear on this point: the one criterion is formation, there is no other. Practical trainees are not cheap labour, they are not meant to fill the gaps, they cannot be dispatched merely to satisfy the demands of

confreres who know how to make their voice heard. Every province needs sound formation, and R 96 reminds us of an important and indispensable element in that formation that takes place in practical training.

Where possible it is useful, as our Ratio says (FSDB 441), to assign more than one practical trainee to a community. Once again, the idea is not so much to meet the “needs” of a community and its work, but to ensure formative quality to the experience.

What about communities that are direly in need of help, but cannot provide what is necessary for the validity of the experience of practical training? Here the Provincials have to be firm. They can never sacrifice or put at risk the vocational growth of a confrere under the pressure of emergencies.

As for communities that receive practical trainees but do not meet formative requirements, once again Provincials must make clear decisions: no more practical trainees to those communities.

3. FSDB 428 and 429

FSDB 428. “Throughout the whole period of initial formation, importance is given not only to study but also to the pastoral activities of our mission. ‘The practical training period provides opportunity for a deeper living experience of Salesian educative and pastoral action. During this time the young confrere gets practice in the Preventive system, particularly in Salesian assistance. With the support of the Rector and the community, he is able to integrate his activity and the fundamental values of his vocation.’ (C 115) From the Salesian point of view, this is the most characteristic phase of initial formation; it has its **model in Don Bosco’s lived experience with the youth** of the first Oratory.

429. During practical training great importance is attached to formation-centred goals and approaches since **its main concern is the formation of the confrere**. Practical training has two objectives:

- growth in the Salesian vocation: the confrere, exercising himself in the **spirit and mission of the Preventive System, develops his aptitudes and his sense of responsibility** and seeks “to **integrate** his activity and the fundamental values of his vocation” (C 115);
- **assessment** of his vocational suitability through a personal and community experience of the Salesian mission and in view of his perpetual profession.

FSDB 428 and 429 take up themes that we have already mentioned:

- At the very beginning we recalled the remarkable statement that, from the Salesian point of view, practical training is the *most characteristic phase of initial formation*.
- Again and again we have insisted that the *main concern during practical training is the formation* of the confrere.
- We have spoken about *assistance as the hallmark of practical training*: the confrere exercises himself in the spirit and mission of the Preventive System.

- We have seen that the *integration of activity with the fundamental values of our vocation* (C 115) echoes C 98 and is reassumed by C 119 in the key of discernment as a permanent frame of mind for the Salesian.

The two fresh elements are the mention of the first Oratory as model, and the two objectives of practical training.

The reference to **DON BOSCO'S EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRST ORATORY** is more than a historical remembrance. It is a way of giving emphasis to the Salesian charismatic nature of this period of Salesian life, where our mission that “sets the tenor of our whole life” (C 3) can be lived so intensively as to shape the heart, mind, energies of a son of Don Bosco. This experience is greatly enriched through solid reflection and reference to the Salesian sources. The practical training phase needs intellectual formation no less than other phases, though of course the proportion of time dedicated to study will differ. With the help of Rector and other guides, in constant contact with young people and along with the lay people who share our mission, the young confrere can be helped to connect life and reflection. So much depends, once again on the quality of accompaniment offered in this phase.

The two objectives mentioned are (1) *growth in the Salesian vocation*, and (2) *assessment of vocational suitability* in view of perpetual profession.

“GROWTH IN THE SALESIAN VOCATION” includes exercising oneself in the spirit and mission of the Preventive System, developing aptitudes and sense of responsibility, and the integration of activity and the fundamental values of our vocation by a process of discerning attention to experience so as to learn from it.

“ASSESSMENT OF VOCATIONAL SUITABILITY” happens in formal and informal ways, the formal ways being the periodic assessments (scrutinies) and the admissions to renewals and to perpetual profession. The 2017 research shows that there are widespread difficulties about the way these assessments are conducted and communicated. What is meant to be a help for personal growth often does not achieve its purpose. Our new document *Young Salesians and Accompaniment: Orientations and Guidelines* (2019) has this to say on the matter:

The formation team is invited to reflect carefully on the purpose and modality of the periodic assessments in order to guarantee a healthy process that will benefit the candidate in formation. It is worth emphasizing that the assessment is not in itself a discernment process linked to the admission of a candidate to the next phase. Such admissions are juridical acts that involve the province and not only the house council, while the main purpose of the periodic assessments is to foster the vocational growth of the one receiving it, through the qualified contributions offered by members of the local council. The formation scrutiny is, instead, an assessment of the progress made by someone who is in formation. Used during initial formation to personalize the formative process, it is an instrument of considerable help to the Rector and the spiritual guide in their work of spiritual accompaniment. Since each phase has its own specific objectives in the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of formation, the formation personnel – and more specifically, the Rector and the council of the community – make use of these objectives to assess the progress made by their candidates and Salesians in formation. Each assessment will take into account the progress made in respect of the previous assessments.

A suggestion made by the *Ratio* may be helpful: the direct involvement of the confrere himself in the process of evaluation. “During the period of initial formation, scrutinies must be conducted every three months to evaluate and foster each person’s process of formation. The objectives of the phase and the progress of the confrere should be examined together, and his growth in his vocation must be assessed in continuity with previous assessments. The confrere himself should be involved in the assessment in different ways.” (FSDB 296)

Above all, the assessments must make constant reference to “the way of the Gospel” set out in the Salesian Constitutions (C 24). They are part of the assistance of our brother Salesians that we invoke in our formula of profession to keep us faithful day by day. Our brothers in formation must be helped to remember that such assistance in living our Gospel way of life is an essential part of our growth and fidelity. (*Young Salesians and Accompaniment: Orientations and Guidelines* 169-170)

Looking more specifically at the phase of practical training, there is an interesting suggestion of the *Ratio* with regard to assessment that is not yet well known and practiced:

When one finishes his practical training, it is appropriate that there be an overall assessment – on the part of the Provincial and the community, and on his part as well – of his entire experience and of the progress he has made in his vocation. (FSDB 439)

It is worth taking this invitation seriously.

The assessment is an evaluation of growth in the Salesian vocation; it involves an effort of integration; and it involves not only the Provincial and the local community – religious as well as educative-pastoral, one would imagine – but also the confrere himself. If done regularly, it can provide precious data on the quality of practical training experiences in the province, and an important aid to discernment about communities capable of providing good experiences (see the comment on R 96 above).

4. The 2010 letter of Fr Cereda

I have been trying to reflect on what our Constitutions, Regulations and the *Ratio* say about the practical training phase of formation. Our documents have important things to say not only to practical trainees but also to provincials and their councils, formation delegates and their commissions, Rectors and communities where practical training is taking place. The research on Salesian personal accompaniment served to highlight both opportunities and challenges in the way the phase is being lived.

Before I end, let me mention a point made very well in a letter of 2010 by Fr Francesco Cereda, then councillor for formation, addressed principally to confreres in practical training: that each confrere in practical training remains his own first formator, since “all formation... is ultimately a self formation” and “no one can replace us in the responsible freedom that we have as individual persons.” (PDV 69) Real life situations always present themselves as a mixed bag of gifts and challenges. The apex of our formative capacity is when one learns to make “the best formative use of any situation, and to see it as a favourable opportunity for growing in his vocation.” (C 119)

May Mary be our Mother and Teacher as we become, and help our confreres become, pastors and educators of the young in the lay or priestly state they have embraced. (C 98)



Affectionately in Don Bosco,
Ivo Coelho, SDB
Councillor for formation



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*The General Councillor for
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Rome, 17 February 2010
 The Beginning of Lent

**To Confreres of the Congregation
 in practical training**

**Subject: The formative experience
 of practical training**

Dear Confrere in practical training,

You represent the enthusiastic and dynamic face of our Salesian Congregation among the young and you are the hope of its present and future in society and in the Church. I am writing this letter to you because of the affection I have for you, since it is mainly up to you to take on the responsibility of making the experience of practical training you are having a formative one and therefore may undertake a real journey of vocational growth.

There are very many reasons which lead me to write to you. Above all in the centenary year of the death of Don Rua I want to recall with you the decision the Congregation took during his period as Rector Major to make practical training a particularly significant part of the formation process. In addition, through this letter I want to help you, your community and the Province to pay more attention to practical training which is a stage sometimes neglected and not sufficiently understood. Finally addressing you personally I want to encourage you to live "your" period of practical training in a joyful and demanding manner.

Recalling Don Rua

During the time Don Rua was Rector Major, the IX General Chapter of 1901 established throughout the Congregation the period of practical training, as a stage of formation to take place in Salesian communities and works after the post-novitiate. Before that decision of the Chapter assistance and the practice of the preventive system were undertaken together with theological studies while remaining in the houses. This was a response to the need to remain faithful to the original vision of Don Bosco who wanted his Salesians to be formed among the boys, This formation decision of Don Bosco, which at the beginning of the Congregation was also dictated by the scarcity of Salesian personnel, proved, however, to be unsatisfactory and it was often at the expense of the theological studies.

For this reason, Don Rua, attentive to the good intellectual preparation of the young Salesians, pressed the General Chapter which decided that following the course of philosophy after the novitiate there should be a three year period of practical training in an apostolic community, and then to set up formation communities in the whole Congregation in which the study of

theology should be seriously undertaken. Communicating the decision of the General Chapter in his circular letter of 19 March 1902 and referring to practical training, Don Rua wrote that it is especially in this period that Salesians are formed to “real practical Salesian life” and he asked the Rectors of the communities to be like fathers and to take special care of their confreres in practical training.

A time of valuable vocational experience

Many Salesians remember with joy the days spent among the young during practical training. Certainly being dedicated to the young demanded of them hard work and sacrifice, but it offered a vital and joyful experience of the Salesian charism. I think must also be your experience. You are close to the new generations, you feel “an empathy with the young and a willingness to be with them” (C. 39), you are sensitive to what interests them and to their mentality. You are open and flexible, you are conscious of the creative freshness of your age, you are full of energy and enthusiasm, you know how to bring a spirit of cheerfulness among the young and in the community, they feel the joy of giving yourself. In these recent years we have seen the proof of this generosity in the considerable number of those in practical training who each year leave for the missions and adapt themselves to a variety of climates, cultures and languages.

You are having a powerful experience of the Salesian vocation and living through an important time of formation in its various aspects: human maturity, spiritual life, cultural development and, above all, educative and pastoral commitment. An opportunity and a great challenge in this phase of formation is learning to live the “grace of unity”, making space for all the various aspects; otherwise you will find yourself running round in circles, pulled in all directions, empty. This grace is a gift but it also requires our commitment.

With the young people you are having your first experience of assisting and teaching, educating and evangelising, animating and exercising authority. You are assessing your suitability for consecrated Salesian life, you are preparing for your perpetual profession and also re-enforcing your identity in the Salesian vocation to be a Priest or a Brother. You are studying yourself, becoming more aware of your good points and of your limitations, and living Salesian apostolic spirituality.

Life and relationships with the confreres offers you the real experience of a Salesian apostolic community of which you are a responsible member, sharing prayer and work, providing your services and communicating ideas, livening up the conversations and receiving advice. In the community you have the experience of accompaniment. Through the community you are learning more and more about the Province and the Congregation. Through your contact with the lay people and the various groups involved with us you are learning what it means to be part of the Salesian Family and of the vast Salesian Movement, and you are appreciating the breadth of Don Bosco’s heart and the wealth of his charism.

As you can see, practical training is a particularly significant time for vocational growth, not so much theoretically as through lived experience. You are coming face to face with what Salesian life is all about. You are discovering the joy of being a Salesian. During practical training you are discovering how to learn from experience. This time is a great gift from God. Ask yourself what in practice the experience that you are going through is, and whether you are taking full advantage of all the opportunities it is offering you for your development.

Not without its difficulties

Having said that, I don’t want to ignore the difficulties you may encounter during practical training. Sometimes you may find yourself in a community with few confreres and a great amount of work and responsibilities, without a lot of time for fraternal relationships. Your life in community may prove difficult on account of the difference in age, temperament, way of thinking or formation, but also because of lack of attention, misunderstandings or little

communication; sometimes you may feel lonely and without the support you would have expected.

Dealing with the young is not always easy. They are looking for a full life, plenty of freedom and an experience of genuine love, but often these good things are under threat and compromised. In the past, the preventive system stood in comparison to the repressive system; nowadays, the challenge it faces is from a permissive system, which progressively leads to relativism and to nihilism. In this culture it is hard work helping the young to ask themselves questions, to find answers to the meaning of life and to be sound guides in their regard.

And then, in your personal life you might find yourself in an over-active state in which your spiritual life is sacrificed to excessive work. Busy-ness is our current heresy, a new form of Pelagianism which ignores the words of Jesus "Apart from me you can do nothing" and which forgets the words of the Psalm "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labour." With busy-ness you run the risk of becoming cold-hearted and suffering the burnout of your energies and talents without being able to bring them to life again.

You can also find yourself becoming dependent on the social communication culture, especially in the use of personal media. Perhaps you are extending the period of practical training by concluding university studies, and in this situation there can be the danger of not getting involved in community life and in apostolic activities, and therefore feeling detached from the community. There can also be other difficulties, which it is important to recognise in order to overcome them; discussing things with other people on practical training like you, can also help you to focus on them and together to find ways of dealing with them.

Accompanied by the community and by the Province

The *Ratio* offers some very sound guidelines, at times little known, about practical training. Besides for the Province and the community, it is also important for you to read and study these directives so as to draw up your personal annual plan of life as someone on practical training, and to assess your progress. In these last two years all the Regional Formation Commissions have spent time reflecting on the subject of practical training for the purpose of making it an experience which is really formative. Every Province has been invited to have its own *formation plan for practical training*, which ought to indicate some courses of action at three levels: province, community and personal.

The Province could decide to create a greater sensitivity regarding the formative purpose of practical training; arrange to send those doing practical training only to the communities which have the necessary conditions for formation, and to choose those communities; to send those doing practical training at least two at a time to each community; to hold formation meetings for the Rectors who have those doing practical training, and to have at least one annual meeting for them; ...

The plan for practical training could ask the communities to make an effort to welcome those on practical training with warmth and understanding; to take an interest in their formation; ensuring that the Rector fulfils his duty of accompaniment through regular meetings for the personal chat and spiritual direction; making the assessments regularly as a help for the person on practical training; ensuring educative and pastoral accompaniment; being close to those on practical training who extend this period with university studies; ...

The person on practical training should be encouraged to assume responsibility for his own formation; faithfulness to the life of prayer; the monthly practice of the personal chat and spiritual direction; active participation in community life; the annual preparation of his own personal plan of life; self-discipline and vigilance in the use of time and of the means of social communication; ...

In all of this you can see the thoughtfulness and the care of the community, of the Province and of the Congregation for you; but what is important is the process by which convictions come to

personal maturity, motivations are strengthened, the heart and mind are transformed, long-lasting and strong links and affections are established. Also in this regard, ask yourself whether you are taking an active part in the process of your formation, and whether you are laying the sound foundations of your identity.

For a real formative experience

You are fully immersed in the world of the young; in fact, practical training “provides opportunity for a deeper living experience of Salesian educative and pastoral action” (FSDB 428). You are engaged in so many activities and initiatives; you are learning from your experiences, those positive and those less so. What gives meaning to your life is the fullness of love; a burning and passionate love can help you to strengthen your vocation, to go from *vocational fragility to vocational fidelity*.

Love for the Lord Jesus

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of so many activities each day it is necessary to live the “grace of unity”, which enables you to avoid being pulled in all directions, which gives meaning to all your toil, which gives you strength and courage in moments of difficulty, so that you will reach the end of each day tired but also full of joy. What gives unity to your life is the Lord Jesus and your love for Him. You are a consecrated person; this means that Jesus is the centre of your life. You love Him with all your heart and you try to imitate Him, so as to be His authentic disciple and zealous apostle. He sends you to the young and accompanies you. The mission of education and evangelisation is His; it frees the young from evil, from poverty, from ignorance, from bad habits, from a meaningless life. He it is that you meet in the young to whom you are sent and to whom you reach out. Do you remember the example of Blessed Artemides Zatti? When a poor boy appeared at the door, he asked the Sister: “Sister do you have something to cover a poor Christ?”

It is not enough to do a lot of work. It is necessary to have a good motivation for all the work you do. Then the work, even though it may be hard, fills you with joy. Without a great love and a strong motivation, you can become discouraged, especially in the face of difficulties, ingratitude, indifference. Love for the Lord Jesus comes from an encounter with Him in daily “lectio divina” in the Eucharist, in frequent Confession and in personal prayer. To be able to recognise the Lord Jesus in the young it is necessary to have known him before; then they will ask you to let them see Him and meet Him.

With Jesus there is His and our Mother: Mary. She is the Teacher promised to little John Bosco in his dream at 9 years of age. She leads us to Jesus, as she did at the marriage feast of Cana when she said to the servants: “Do whatever he tells you.” Mary helps you to give the first place in your life to her Son, as she herself did calling herself “the handmaid of the Lord.” The Immaculate Conception, she gives you the inspiration for an anticipatory love which guides you towards the young; the Help of Christians she is your support in carrying out your duty among them. On this account do not neglect the Rosary, which is a prayer of contemplation and of intercession.

Love for Don Bosco and for the young

At the same time, for us Salesians, the practical path to follow Jesus is Don Bosco. Through the motherly intervention of Mary, he was raised up by God to work among the young. Think for a moment about the great need and the importance of his, and now *your* mission among the young; they are never a problem; they are an asset for society and the Church, not only for the future, but also for the present. “Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ and to make him known to others,” to the young (Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, n. 84).

Have confidence then in your vocation and love it: you have been loved by the Lord Jesus and now you have been called to see to it that the young feel loved by Him and respond to His love

by becoming and living as the children of God. This is the work of education and evangelisation which is entrusted to you through putting into practice the preventive system.

Keeping alive your preferential love for the young, be happy to be with them and to create an atmosphere of spontaneity, joy and friendship, knowing how to be demanding in what is asked of them and kind and patient with them as they respond. Being young in years and in your way of thinking, and above all through your generosity and enthusiasm for the Lord you are in a privileged position to bear witness to your vocation as a consecrated person and to attract some young people to follow the Salesian way of life. For you, who are close to the young, it is important to learn right from the start to suggest to them the possibility of a vocation.

To love the young and to know how to work with them look at Don Bosco. Your task is not only to be a friend of the young people but also to be their educator and pastor. Don Bosco will teach you what to do. Be devoted to Don Bosco: study him, imitate him, pray to him and above all love him!

Love for the community

The place where you will find Jesus, Don Bosco and the young is your community. Article 52 of the Constitutions in fact says: “the confrere pledges himself to build up the community in which he lives. He loves it, despite its imperfections, and knows that in it he finds the presence of Christ.” God has put you in the community entrusting you “with brothers to love” (C. 50). Accept them therefore from God’s hands and try to build up good relationships.

Living with them you will discover not only their good qualities and wealth of experience but also their defects, due also to the difference in age, culture and formation. It is possible that you will experience the difficulty of living together. Don’t look for the perfect community; you will never find it! Instead, what we want is a community which is in continuous conversion, renewal, formation. Play your part in community life, collaborating with everyone, bringing your contribution of enthusiasm and cheerfulness, getting used to reflecting, planning, organising, assessing. Be open to asking for advice and to learning from others.

Among the significant people who are at your side in your community you will seek out your confessor; then there is the Rector who is close you to accompany you. Open your heart to them and let them guide you. It is presumptuous to believe that you are capable of discerning your life without anyone guiding you. They are the “instruments through whom the Lord is working” (C. 104). With their accompaniment you will mature in your life as a consecrated Salesian, assuming the commitments of the mission with a sense of responsibility, living a simple life without seeking comforts, keeping on good terms with everyone and using the means of social communication with prudence and a spirit of sacrifice. The monthly chat and spiritual direction undertaken with simplicity and humility are a blessing from God. It is important to have a personal plan of life, prepared with the help of the Rector, with whom each month you can assess the progress you are making: it is one way of assuming responsibility for your formation.

Conclusion

This then was what I had in my heart to say to you so that joyfully and to the full you might have an experience of Salesian life. “*Love is everything, nothing is greater than love.*”. The centrality of Jesus in your life, love for Don Bosco and for the young, a life lived open to your confreres and especially to the Rector and to the confessor will ensure fidelity to your vocation. It is up to you to take up the task of making this experience a formative one and to identify the ways and means to make it such.

I entrust you to the intercession of Blessed Michael Rua and I assure you of my closeness and prayers.

Affectionately in Don Bosco
Fr Francesco Cereda