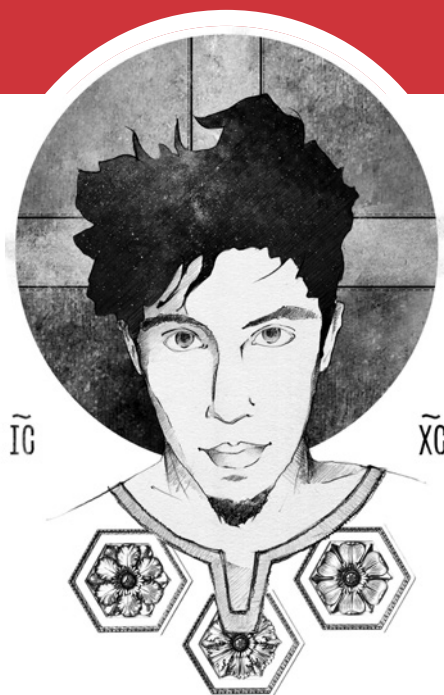


FLASH

Salesian Youth Ministry Animation

Number 5. December 2023



First proclamation and salesian youth ministry

Fr. Miguel Ángel García Morcuende

Youth Ministry General Councilor

YOUTH MINISTRY SECTOR
Salesiani di don Bosco SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA



First proclamation and salesian youth ministry

Fr. Miguel Ángel García Morcuende

Youth Ministry General Councilor

1 Some endeavours seem to remain fruitless

For years, we have been experiencing an increasingly rapid social transformation of great significance. Many structural aspects of some societies are undergoing a real revolution. Socialisation models, roles, the hierarchy of prevailing values, formulas for interaction, expectations of young people, family structures, etc. - all of this is in a process of evolution. At the epicentre of these changes, which they sometimes suffer and more often represent, are adolescents/young people.

In everything that concerns the life of faith, we experience many mixed feelings. **Some of our educational-pastoral efforts do not seem to bear fruit and young people do not always respond to pastoral initiatives.** It is true that the basic Christian

experience - the ways of love and salvation laid out by God - remains the same, but the landscape in which it is expressed has changed radically.

Our adult gazes are not unconcerned gazes but gazes where uncertainty sometimes prevails: "What else can we do? The view from difficulty of 'not reaching everyone' can easily shift to viewing adolescents/young people as problematic subjects. On some occasions, this view can be irritating as we are confronted with targets who do not respond to our proposals.

The key point is to rethink our Salesian Youth Ministry (SYM) in order to recover the original meaning, starting point and goal of the new journeys of faith. To this end, words beginning with prefixes such as "re", "con", "in" or "inter" are a sign of vitality, movement and adaptation. Words such as recon-

version, reorganisation, redimensioning or revitalisation are entering into the pastoral reflections of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life, as well as among lay Movements and Associations.

2 The Questions we carry within us

[a] Based on this reading, we ask ourselves: how can we plan and carry out educational-pastoral processes and initiatives **to propose the core message of the Gospel to young people who do not know Jesus Christ, to those who know him but have distanced themselves from him, and to those who believe that they already know him sufficiently and live a routine faith?**

These are the questions that we all ask ourselves, even when we think of the adolescents and young people in our Salesian house: How can we arouse an interest in Jesus Christ in those who frequent our formal and informal educational institutions? How can we accompany so many hundreds of them so that they can take a step towards a first adherence to him? How can we awaken a “first act of faith”, a “first conversion”, on which the Christian being can grow? We are talking about the *first proclamation*.

But in what sense is this proclamation *the first*?¹ In a qualitative sense, **“it is the main proclamation, the one that must always be heard again in different ways and that must always be proclaimed**

¹ The expression “first proclamation” is quite recent. It came into decisive use only in 1979 with *Catechesi Tradendae* (nn. 18-20). From the 1960s onwards and throughout the 1970s and 1980s the expression most commonly used was evangelization, which replaced the earlier missionary preaching or pre-evangelization. It is also called pre-catechesis, pre-catechumenate, kerygmatic catechesis, kerygma or kerygmatic proclamation, or even first evangelization.

again in one way or another” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 164).

It is necessary to remember that our houses are full of unconverted young people (including the “baptised and not evangelised”) who are nevertheless blessed by the goodness of the presence of God who desires the salvation of all of them. For the Salesian, the young person is always a sign of hope, not primarily because they have their whole life ahead of them biologically, but because everyone should have the opportunity to explore faith wherever they are. *We are convinced that the living encounter with the Lord is not only the “beginning”, but is the “centre” and the “heart” of our SYM.*

[b] Perhaps we should reconsider **the presence of the first proclamation as an essential element of evangelisation**, and it would force us **to review its mutual relationship with the other elements that make up the overall process of evangelisation of young people**. This would help us to realise the specificity of each of them and the interaction between them all.

Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975), one of the first documents of the magisterium to speak of the need to promote the first proclamation, expressed in number 24 a series of these elements of evangelisation which are always complex. An updated re-reading speaks of:

- Commitment in the service of humanity in order to change mentalities, environments, cultures and structures.
- Witness by deeds (so necessary for the credibility of words) and witness with explicit words, i.e., the first proclamation and all kinds of oral interventions.
- The itinerary of Christian initiation of children, young people and adults in which the following are integrated: personal prayer, starting from the Word of God; the adapta-



tion of the catechumenate and/or educational itineraries or catechesis; the experience of community through celebration and prayer in its various forms; formation and ministries and/or services; the concrete demands of following Jesus Christ (change of life in terms of attitudes, feelings and habits).

- The personalisation of the experience through the opening of the young person's heart to Jesus Christ, i.e., initial faith and conversion. An openness that cannot be forced or assumed because it is an existential decision that sometimes begins with simple curiosity, interest and goes as far as the first adherence of faith.
- The reception of the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) and all those various pastoral initiatives planned in the light of the spirituality of the processes (Educational-Pastoral Project).

[C] From the outset, this list makes us realise that there are specific elements that speak to us of **Christian initiation into the faith** (witness and first proclamation); on the other hand, there are specific elements **that nourish and permanently form the faith** (catechesis and itineraries of education in the faith, celebration, etc.). The two elements, although closely related, are not the same thing.

In other words, **the SYM must pay attention to the complementarity and intimate relationship between all these pastoral actions.** This articulated set of elements (i.e., organic pastoral care) cannot be disjointed if evangelisation is to bear multiple fruits. In the SYM, in fact, no area is completely autonomous, none can be understood in isolation, but each has its own time. *There is a difference between planting and nurturing faith: two distinct moments that need different spaces and methodologies.*

Is it possible to generate the initial faith in Jesus Christ in an adolescent through a catechesis on the theology of virtues, or through the solemn Easter Vigil, without an initiation into the Paschal Mystery of the Lord? Hardly. What is not relevant as a pastoral proposal in initiation may not help (as it is), it may even be counterproductive at this point.

So, what would happen if we were to think of a specific and determined educational-pastoral action, aimed precisely at creating real possibilities for encountering Christ and fostering an operative conversion? Such practical mediation is what we are talking about when we speak of the first proclamation.

[d] Salesian praxis is based on a particularly important principle in evangelisation: **the principle of integrity**. Since the processual or gradual character of human and Christian maturity is governed by the principle of growth-maturation of all the dimensions of the person, in the same way, the implementation of each of the elements of evangelisation must have the same dynamic. *It is a mistake to reduce youth ministry to only one of the elements*, promoting only one aspect, for example: in a parish there is the conviction that the catechesis offered is “evangelising”, but in reality it is a memorization type of catechesis without the celebrative aspect and without any commitment other than living in the parish premises. Or, when the itinerary of initiation into the faith is reduced to a sacramental itinerary (reception of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist).

On the other hand, the first proclamation, although necessary, cannot take the place of the entire SYM. *There are other areas of interest that refer to other dimensions of the Salesian educational-pastoral action* (aspects that have to do with the formation of healthy, balanced and caring people; formation in stable

attitudes and structures that enable them to act as free and critical persons; the community-associative experience as a concrete ‘initiation’ to community, civil and ecclesial commitment; the accompaniment of each young person in the concrete search for his or her own vocation, etc.). The SYM helps to gradually shape the identity and personality that a young person lives, from his first experience of God to his insertion into an adult Christian community.

3 Preconceptions, perhaps dear to us, but which today are proving ineffective

It would not be wrong to recall some resistance to the first proclamation, the stage that the Church proposes to awaken faith and first conversion:

[a] On the one hand, some claim that proposing adherence to the person of Jesus Christ “is what we have done all our lives”. “Most of us have given catechesis and spoken about Jesus Christ as a matter of course”. Indeed, it is a question of “teaching the truths of faith”, without opening up a space of fraternity, mutual welcome and hospitality to the young people. In addition, the first proclamation cannot be assimilated or reduced to systematic catechesis. And when we think about it, we can sometimes be subject to pastoral inertia of repeating the same old things (because of what worked before). In truth, when pastoral complexity, for whatever reason, is not digestible, the most normal reaction is to reduce, to simplify.

[b] In the same way, it is said that only and exclusively long and reflective pastoral processes can articulate and develop a more mature, critical and committed faith.

[c] Finally, others say that pastoral care must above all seek to ensure that “no one is dis-

turbed". We live in a polychromatic setting and our houses are open and inclusive. "We must be careful not to impose our faith. Let's soften the pastoral proposal, let us propose some minimums". In any case, "let those who have the charism of the first proclamation do it".

But can this first Christian vocation (that is, the first proclamation) be sincerely discarded?

4 A pedagogy to restore the affective bond with Jesus

If we want to deploy an evangelisation that is effective, experiential and rooted in the person of the young person, we must understand that the first proclamation is not only a stage in a journey of accompaniment, but **the "founding value" (Jesus Christ) that must be present in all the processes of evangelisation: in the SYM as its backbone, and our projects as its main motivation.**

If the imperative of being an evangeliser is for all, the first proclamation as such is not a charism of a few. To regard it as an optional activity is, therefore, an attitude that runs counter to the very nature of missionary and evangelising action. The first proclamation is the core element and, by definition, *it can and must be done by every baptised person; it is incumbent on all of us.*

But it is also a proactive, respectful and questioning option that must also permeate our SYM. Therefore, **what general conditions can serve this purpose**, i.e., conversion and an act of faith or adherence to Jesus? In principle we advocate two of them:

4.1. If we want to reconnect with the young people of today in an attractive and credible way, **we need a wide range of diversified proposals** to get in touch with those who participate only fleetingly in church life (reduced

in many cases to mere attendance) and with those non-believers who do not usually go to Church. This opens up an immense field of possibilities for educational-pastoral action.

The first proclamation as a pastoral action has a specific pedagogy and needs a time frame in which each phase involves the others; separated they lose their vigour and only together do they mutually support each other and sustain the evangelising mission. Each one can be characterised with a verb from "person to person": to arouse, to witness and to present.

I. The concept of evangelisation, which is linked to humanisation, has been profusely underlined by *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In this line, the **FIRST TIME and STARTING POINT is to create real possibilities of contact with those authentically human experiences, the most intimate of the person.** The Christian proposal must connect with the central questions of young people's lives and, being a point of contact perceptible to them, it opens them up to other possibilities. The first area of proclamation is interpersonal, human relationships. Without this, the subsequent time would have no continuity.

In this sense, the first dialogue of the first proclamation consists in connecting with the questions, desires, limits and possibilities of the young person. It is a question of starting from their own research - or from anthropological demands that are particularly open or ready for something more. This point of contact is called by various names: in French, *'pierres d'attente'* (the waiting stone), referring to the stones that in a building are left in the open air on the side walls so that they can be joined with the future building that will follow; in English, *'stepping stones'*, referring to the large stones placed in the torrent that allow one to cross it without getting soaked; among the theologians of the first centuries (patris-

tic period), the *'semina Verbi'*, which would be found in all cultures and among all peoples.

This area of human experience, well accompanied, develops the capacity to ask questions about the inner universe; it stimulates self-motivation and the question about the meaning of life; it opens up to 'a beyond' of oneself; it allows one to distance oneself from things in order to look at them in depth; it helps one to live from the logic of gift and love for one's neighbour; it enables one to perceive the spiritual values present in culture in general. And this transcendent openness will become increasingly operative as soon as it begins to sense God on the horizon.

This starting point can be **accompanied thanks to several concrete proposals of our SYM**: environmental accompaniment; the powerful solidarity dynamic of the pastoral ministry that takes our young people out of their comfort zones; the work around charismatic/Salesian values such as familiarity, trust, realism or optimism; the continuous offer of training, proposals, initiatives and deep, genuine, lasting life experiences (e.g. the Salesian Good Morning/ Good Afternoon). It has more to do with short-term communicative actions such as dialogue, opportune encounters, the Salesian courtyard, the testimony that emerges in a conversation, etc.

We are talking about a Gospel under construction, which must embrace the flesh of history and that of our young people. And therefore, it seeks to rediscover the everyday (the value of the small and the culture of "detail"), presence in the midst of young people and closeness and personal attention ("conversation rather than lecturing"). It is an affective and effective accompaniment. For this reason, we must have a deep understanding of the mysteries of young people's lives!



II. After the rooting in the human person comes a SECOND TIME: **witnessing to one's own Christian experience**. It is a matter of letting the young person hear and see, if he wants to, the direct account in case it arouses interest in him. Speaking from one's own experience: "I want to share with you what has been given to me, what gives me meaning and makes me happy". It is not "telling my life" but what the presence of Jesus teaches me, what he has brought into my life.

It is the logic of someone introducing a friend to a friend. We do not come to bring something foreign that sounds strange but is part of the story of the people who tell it. We are talking about what is at the centre of the person, what is most personal, intimate and authentic, the most personal of each person, and at the same time the most valuable. It responds, in short, to the auditory character of the origin of the transmission of faith, which was the pioneering practice of the Church: we are talking about something that is proclaimed, that is preached. Faith comes, in Paul's classic expression, from "hearing the proclamation" (Rom 10:17). One does not evangelise by giving a witness of love without words, without a concrete proposal and invitation.

This second step begins with **open Christian SYM actions**, sometimes not linked to long processes. They begin and end at defined times, but the key is the invitation through witness: Easter celebrations with young people; meetings, campaigns and round tables for reflection, living together and prayer; the Taizé experience; solidarity actions, especially in the poorest and neediest sectors; training groups and tutorials in schools. In other words, it is the putting into practice of the mystagogical principle. An experience is lived and the experience becomes the basis for a reflection, an apprenticeship, or even a new change of direction in life.

We need to share our own life experiences, loosen up the language, talk to young people about our faith and what it means for us. We are not only urged to "speak" about Christ and speak well but to make him present in our lives. I think we have lost the habit and have forgotten to speak in a natural way about what is essential in our lives. We have instilled fears that paralyse us. And if we do not know how to talk about faith among ourselves, as believers, any discourse to non-believers will sound artificial. In this sense, the question that marks our capacity or incapacity to evangelise is: *Have I spoken to any young person about my relationship with Christ or with God lately?*

In other words, **proclamation is wrapped up in witness and word**. Admittedly, we prefer to rest on speeches and proposals that are too factual, doctrinally, morally or spiritually, developing a "linear teaching" of a catechetical type. In reality, *in the real practice of the first proclamation, the truly reliable witness can only count on his or her living convictions (not only intellectual certainties), the transmission of a life lived with meaning, and, yes, the power of the Word*. Thus, proclamation today must also be a provocation for the apostle: "Whoever wishes to preach must first be ready to be moved by the Word and to make it flesh in his life" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 150).

"The first objective is not so much to make others believe 'like us', but to make them believe *that we really believe in something*, in Someone who makes possible our joy in living and the pleasure of coming into contact with those who are looking for this joy and pleasure" (Pareydt, Luc, *Witnesses for our time. Attractive Christians*). **For the evangelizer, the encounter with Jesus is not only the explanation for the first decision, but also the reason for faithfulness.**

III. The THIRD STEP is **to present Christ who is living and present**. It is not a question of



transmitting a memory, nor news about someone who we are told existed *in illo tempore* and appeared to certain people, but Jesus, Lord and Saviour. His presence cannot end up being just a three-dimensional hologram, but a real presence. It asks questions and sets things in motion: "And what do you say about him?" (Jn 9:17). "But who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8,29).

In this third step, it is a matter of accompanying the young person to recognise that the humanity of Christ is similar to his humanity, but with the difference that it is the bearer of a new life - divine life - and inviting him to enter into communion with Him so that it may reach him, fulfil him and make him a sharer in the life of God. Thanks to Him, his most rad-

ical desire for the absolute, in a word, the most authentic happiness, is realised.

In the Gospel accounts, there is a reference to the characters who approach Jesus and obtain from him a physical healing and the forgiveness of their sins: the blind man of Jericho, the leader of the synagogue in Capernaum, the Roman centurion, the hemorrhoid, the people with leprosy? None of them had a clear awareness of the divine identity of Jesus, let alone of the Trinitarian God, and yet *they feel the concern to be asked by Someone, Jesus, and they open themselves to him.*

Even today, some of our young people who do not have a clear identity of Jesus open themselves to Him and listen to Him with attention, attentiveness and sincere interest.



Therefore, for a first adherence to Jesus, a well-articulated theological proposal is not necessary.

In the practice of the SYM, this proclamation is played out above all in **the presence of an Educational-Pastoral Community** that offers real spaces for personal accompaniment, for approaching and living the faith (Spiritual Retreats for young people, vocation meetings, “CampoBoscós”, World Youth Day, Schools of Prayer, Missionary Volunteers). An EPC that allows itself to be challenged by the Gospel and that welcomes young people who have been initiated in order to strengthen and sustain them in their faith, a community in which they can celebrate, proclaim, live and share their faith.

4.2. If the first proclamation is not a broad and detailed presentation of the contents of the Christian faith, but, as it appears in the

New Testament writings, has a narrative character in order to speak to the depths of the young person, attention must be paid to **the language we use in the anthropological and cultural sense**. A narrative, poetic and even metaphorical language generates an encounter with the inner movements of human desire, creating space for the imagination. Therefore, even if evangelisation is not a question of communication strategies, but of spirituality, even those are important.

For this reason, we must now move beyond argumentative and discursive methodologies. *This transformation from experience, narration, questioning, news... stimulates the imagination of young listeners.* And this proposal is not new because the very language of faith has always been symbolic: the light, the white tunic, the Easter candle, the liturgical colours, etc.

The degree of personal involvement offered by a narrative approach is greater because it

does not seek to convince the listener but to involve them; it also offers easier access to abstract and complex concepts; it contains emotions and therefore favours the memorisation of the story on a cognitive level; it creates a new world in the mind of the listener, a story can generate other stories. In short, it is a question of *moving from the pastoral care of ideas to the pastoral care of storytelling*.

5 Educating the faith response: progress and setbacks

Adherence to Christ is always a personal decision, never “automatic” or “inherited” or received, as we may have been accustomed to. **Today, a basic living faith cannot be taken for granted**, no firm Christian conviction can be presupposed in the recipient. Mental habits, linguistic usages, practices of piety, a respectable number of concepts and expressions of faith have changed.

Often, we meet *young people who do not understand the importance of faith in their personal journey toward adulthood*. It is a challenge, but also an opportunity for us to move away from a “compulsory” Christianity. It opens up the possibility of a proclamation under the sign of grace, of surprise, of the free discovery of the treasure of faith and the pearl of the Gospel.

This is why we speak of the first proclamation as a new name for the *kerygma* proclaimed by Peter and Paul, as recorded in the texts of the New Testament. But it is not just an explicit oral proclamation of this kerygma, a few words or exact formulas, but a dynamic, growing ministry, under the action and guidance of the Spirit; an accompaniment to the freedom and responsibility of the person. Therefore, **each moment or step advances in a spiral, with twists and turns, and not in a straight line**. The Christian life has a compo-

nent of adventure that must be released in the heart of the believing life.

An adventure based on the imposition of Christ’s call, which is realised according to the intuitions, hopes and talents of each young person, and which is crossed by many meditations and much patience because it must live continually in a desert that tastes like a promised land. The experiences deepen more: they include progress and setbacks in a spirit of continual conversion: “The Christian is not born, he is made”. This formula of Tertullian’s finds its full relevance today.

A proclamation must not be under pressure to present “results” (figures, numbers, multitudes of people), nor must it be marked by the need for an immediate yes or no. On the contrary, it must be characterised by sensitivity to each individual’s time, to possible paths that do not coincide with one’s own, and even to mistakes. The time it may take is not determinable, it cannot be circumscribed or rigorously standardised, because we are dealing with people, each with a particular history and a particular nature.

6 The threshold to Christian experience and the vocational response

[a] The three times indicated above are interrelated. When the Young person makes progress in the positive reception of the first proclamation, we are at **the threshold to the Christian experience**. Subsequently, a more catechetical-initiatory action opens up, in which young people can decide in favour of the Gospel and complete or restructure their initiation. Therefore, it is not possible to ‘grow up’ without first being ‘born’; still less is it possible to become an adult and mature without having gone through the previous stages.

The *initial faith* is not the whole faith, and that is true. Therefore, the first proclamation is “an initial stage and certainly incomplete” (*Evangeliū Nuntiandi* 51) but clearly a *personal invitation* to make an act of approach, trust and existential commitment to Jesus Christ. The first proclamation is an act of trust in the person of Jesus Christ, an essential step towards finding one’s vocation.

The acceptance of Jesus into the heart of the young person is the embryo of a change of life that will lead to practical faith: the journey of education to faith is based on this experience of living reception of the first proclamation, the sacraments presuppose and nourish it, the witness and the commitment to the Kingdom are its consequence and outward manifestation. The project of life is his vocation.

If we want to avoid an ephemeral catechesis that does not take root in those who receive it (catechumens), we must ensure that initiation has a place to take root. **A “proclamation” that precedes “Christian initiation” so as not to leave the latter without a soil on which to take root and from which to develop permanently to bear fruit.** Christian initiation is, therefore, the field of action and consequence of the first proclamation. In other words, the whole edifice of Christian life rests on the ‘come and see’ (first proclamation): ‘look and stay’ (Christian community).

[b] In the understanding and practice of this first proclamation, then, **it is in a certain sense a question of renewing SYM.** At its root, our Salesian Youth Ministry is a practice of trust in one person: Jesus Christ, who has been accepted as the Saviour of humanity and my

life. Everything else – which is absolutely necessary and constitutive of evangelisation - will be a consequence that will be sustained, always from the point of view of the person of the young person, in his or her relationship of friendship with Jesus Christ.

The salvation offered by God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ is the re-establishment of our affective and existential bond with him. Jesus Christ offers us his personal love. Every possible pattern of the first proclamation is a proposal of love, an offer of the initial restoration of God’s affective bond with every human being. The acceptance of this bond can only be a free and personal response of each person.

Neither our witness in deeds – which is necessary but not sufficient - can kindle Christian faith, because it needs the word that points to Jesus Christ; nor can the power of the sacraments alone kindle faith unless everyone who participates in the liturgy has opened his heart, his intimacy, freely, consciously and permanently to Jesus Christ.



Conclusion: Interrupting time to ignite the new

In conclusion and paraphrasing the words of the first man to set foot on the moon, we could also say: the first proclamation is a *small step* for the witness who proposes it to a friend in his daily environment, but it is an *immense step* with incalculable consequences for a SYM which gives all of itself, with all its energies, at the service of all young people.