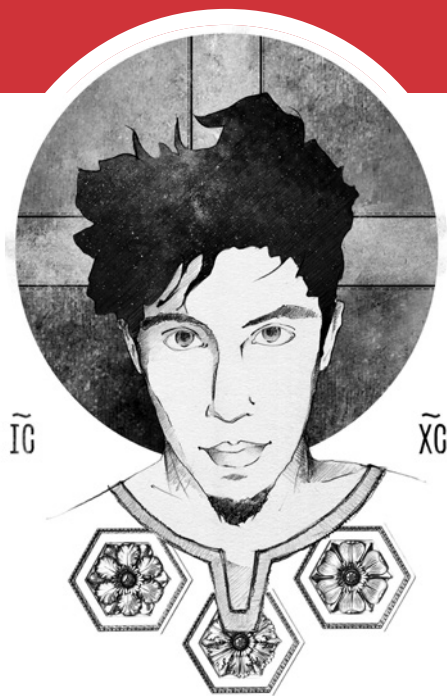


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Salesian Youth Ministry Animation

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Vocational animation

An inspiring principle and goal
of Salesian Youth Ministry

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Youth Ministry General Councilor

YOUTH MINISTRY SECTOR
Salesiani di don Bosco SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA



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1 Vocation animation

*Revitalise our efforts,
acknowledge new movements*

With «climate change» in our societies, values are shifted, passed on and sometimes disguised. This change seems inevitable and irreversible. However, we feel the responsibility to be proactive and to generate local and provincial educative-pastoral proposals that encourage each person to respond to God's plan with freedom, authenticity and determination.

In recent years, much has been said and written about vocation animation, in order to revitalise our efforts, acknowledge the new movements of the Spirit, open ourselves to the reflection of the Church and develop new understandings of accompaniment and vocational discernment. All of this is bound to have an impact on both hearts and pastoral practices.

It is time to break away from our certainties and our «nostalgia» («in our days we were ...»; «when I arrived, we were ..., we did ...»), convinced that what is new requires some change. (Mt 9:17). The «vocational emergency» experienced in many provinces requires real solutions. In this respect the emergency must be

understood as the ability to discover that something new is arising and to respond to this novelty in the best way.

I believe that the greatest difficulty in the service of vocation animation today, and we have said it from the beginning, does not lie so much in the clarity of ideas, but in two aspects: first of all, the **method of pastoral practice**; secondly, **the involvement of the whole Educative-Pastoral Community and, within it, the religious community in the «vocational culture»**. In short, if we wish to help young people to find Jesus, the best pastoral practice is to discover him through witness and the transformation that occurs in the people who meet him.

To do this, we will first of all explore the territory of our Salesian houses and the relationship between the care for Salesian vocations and the vocational animation. Then we will examine the «vocational culture» to understand the vocational narrative. Thirdly, we will identify the three stages of a vocational journey. Subsequently, the requirements for «vocational culture». Finally, some itineraries of the pastoral practice of the province, the religious communities and the Educative-Pastoral Communities.

2 Four microclimates for the vocational animation

A microclimate is a series of atmospheric variables that characterise a moderately small area or space. Before addressing the reality of the vocational animation, we believe it is useful to organise an interpretation of reality around four microclimates that can be observed in the Salesian houses. Every Salesian presence must be a microclimate in which it is easy to develop and strengthen a vocation. **What kind of microclimate are we?** And, above all, **what kind of microclimate do we wish to offer young people?**

First microclimate:

Great emphasis on Salesian vocations and little or no emphasis on vocations.

In these contexts, **the Salesians** notice with some concern that there is a decrease in vocations to religious life and an increase in the number of lay collaborators involved in the mission. The Salesians believe that one solution is to insist on the distinction from lay collaborators: the vocation to religious life is «above» that of lay people. The Salesians feel they are the owners of the charism.

Communities are normally separated from lay people «emotionally». The annual community plan does not seek to dialogue or incarnate in the new needs but guarantees the fulfilment of the requirements of religious life.

In this first microclimate, **lay collaborators** expect the Salesians to maintain their leadership position. They have a great respect for religious life, which they perceive as an ideal to approach and imitate. Within the mission they are dependent and have learned to wait for the Salesians to take the initiative or determine the direction. Lay collaborators perceive themselves as «minors» with respect to the charism.

In this context, a **vocational animation** is established to identify and recruit young peo-

ple: a «vocational animation by recruitment or enlistment». Above all, it organises vocational activities and prayers on Salesian vocation. We have nostalgia for past achievements, when there were a great number of Salesians; our hope is that «perhaps those times will return», a «vocational springtime» will arrive... but without doing anything that is operational.

Second microclimate:

Great emphasis on vocations and little or no emphasis on the Salesian vocation.

This microclimate is found in contexts where **Salesians** feel that their vocation is about to disappear. They appreciate the involvement of lay people and perceive it as the only option for the future of the Salesian mission. Young people and lay collaborators are invited to mature in the charism, but they hesitate to offer to embrace the religious life. Somehow this is thought to be an invitation to adhere to an «exhausted» lifestyle. They think that the charism will have to be sustained without the presence of the Salesians. The Salesians lack passion and appreciate other forms of life more than their own, because they feel that their religious life has become sterile.

In these contexts, there are more or less cohesive **communities**, where lay people contribute more to the quality of relations than the Salesians themselves, who tend to experience the internal and external dynamics of community life to a smaller extent. The mission no longer inspires the community and there is a strong temptation to take up an individualistic attitude. In short, these communities are lifeless. The main concern is the continuity and maintenance of current apostolic works.

In this microclimate, **lay people** admire the history of the Salesians, but they do not sense in them neither life in the present nor as a possibility for the future; however, they expect them to give off motivation and energy. Lay

people are involved in the mission and are attracted by the charisma. They try to respond to the challenges as best as they can. They accept positions of responsibility and animation, taking on the roles the Salesians have occupied throughout history, often feel alone in the face of the challenges of the mission.

Lay people must guide the works, impress their testimonial role, be in the world, take care of young people, ensure the transmission of the Salesian identity and maintain a preferential commitment to the poorest.

There is the risk that the communities will be content with the established order and over the years lose sight of the prophetic dimension that guarantees the Salesian vocation. The efforts of the **vocational animation** focus on encouraging lay partners to take on new commitments. It is well-structured and creative.

Third microclimate:

Little or no emphasis on vocations and little or no emphasis on the Salesian vocation.

We find this type of «soil» in contexts in which the vocational animation has been abandoned or totally neglected. In this microclimate, the **Salesians** focus on the management of educational works. They are generally unable to imagine a different future. They are very committed to what they do and avoid profound questions about their own vocation and do not dare to speak about it publicly.

Regarding the **communities**, there is usually little cohesion due to disappointment and fatigue. They feel fragmented by the maintenance of the Salesian Works. There are only daily emergencies. They maintain the external forms of community life, but rarely with effective internal dynamism. They show no interest in sharing with lay collaborators. They are willing to do anything to defend their stability and positions. These survival communities avoid welcoming or accompanying vocations, be they vocations of Salesians or

lay collaborators, and are endangered communities.

Most **lay people** are accompanied only at the beginning of their work in the Salesian presence. They do not have opportunities for ongoing and quality training that supports the charisma. They are not involved at the institutional level and, if they are, show little or no sense of belonging. They have always seen the Salesians as the owners of the institution. Some seek meaning and spirituality, but they do so with other church movements or in other places.

The identity and evangelising character of the works are not guaranteed. **Vocational animation** does not exist or exists only to make it seem like something is being done.

Fourth microclimate:

Strong emphasis on vocations and the Salesian vocation

This is a microclimate that fills us with hope. We find it in many contexts throughout the Congregation. In this microclimate, the **Salesians** are committed to enhancing their vocation. They are available to educate poorer young people. They are Salesians who are in constant spiritual and apostolic search.

In these contexts, many **lay people** love the charisma and identify with it because they have lived a high-quality Salesian formation and appreciate the value of the Salesian vocation. They are involved in conveying the values and teachings of the Gospel and, by living their spiritual journey with openness and willingness, they have nourished their own vocation. These lay people live their educational and Salesian vocation with sensitivity in the commitment to young people.

Regarding the **Salesian communities**, they take care of moments in which they deepen mutual relations and are willing to share their community experience with lay and young people. They adapt their schedules to ensure

meaningful moments of community life and open their times of prayer and retreat to people seeking experiences of spirituality. They commit themselves effectively to promoting and living their annual community plan and to nourishing the prophetic dimension of religious life in order to spend time with simple people and underprivileged young people.

Vocational animation focuses on all vocations. It is a dynamic ministry, which responds to the needs of young people and offers spaces for sharing the faith with them. In short, these are Works with a future in which Salesians and lay collaborators focus on the needs of people, share equal dignity among the various vocations, participate in the renewal of the mission and are willing to create an authentic vocational culture. As in the parable, «some produced a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold» (Mt 13:8).

3 Vocational culture

A pastoral care that leads to being in tune with what God's wants for our life.

[1] Today many young people ask themselves the same questions and do not always find the space to examine and deepen them.

The questions come from within, as internal movements that are often unable to interpret or recognise. Many times, we have all experienced the need for a person who could give us the necessary tools to go from this inner turbulence to trust in a meaningful life plan.

The concept of «vocational culture¹» can help us to enter into the proposal of an integrated and effective vocational animation for today. Today there is talk of a «culture of health», which leads us to know and appreciate what promotes a healthy life, developing the appropriate guidelines. There is also a

«sports culture» which realises the knowledge and appreciation of certain sports disciplines. We could speak of «digital culture», etc.

The «culture» of a Salesian house or province is, above all, the result of the interaction between people and is carried out in the manner and style of being a community; secondly, it allows to give order and meaning to what happens and to interpret the different experiences of everyday life.

In the same way, «vocational culture» refers to the environment, created by the members of an Educative-Pastoral Community (not just the religious community), which promotes **the conception of life as a vocation**. It is an environment that allows each person, whether believer or non-believer, to enter into a process where he can discover his own passion and his own goals in life. «Feeling the vocation to something» means feeling called by a precious reality, from which I can interpret and give meaning to my life. It involves not so much doing whatever we want but discovering what we are called to be and do.

The delicate point of vocation animation is to look for different ways to awaken, discern, nourish and respectfully accompany the young person so that he can make the important decisions of life **in the exercise of his own freedom**.

[2] Furthermore, when we speak of «vocational culture» in Salesian Youth Ministry, we intend to **promote a Christian experience that leads to harmony with God's desire for our young people**. This implies offering criteria and conditions that guide us to live life as a response to God's will, discovering the specific mission. We firmly believe that a reflection on the «vocational culture» in this sense can help us move personally and institutionally towards the «fourth microclimate» referred to in the previous point.

We can say that this vocational culture has some *fundamental components*: gratitude,

¹ The «vocational culture» was the theme of the *Papal Message for the 30th World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, celebrated on 2 May 1993. Since then it has been used in various documents and in the reflection on vocational ministry.

openness to the transcendent, questioning about life, availability, confidence in oneself and in others, the ability to dream and desire, amazement for beauty, altruism ... These components are certainly the basis of any vocational approach. At the same time, they are no different from the elements offered in an integral formation proposal.

But we should also speak of the *specific components* of this vocational culture. These are the elements that foster, among other things: the knowledge and appreciation of God's personal call (to life, to discipleship and to a concrete mission) and the paths of Christian life (secular and of special consecration); the practice of discernment as an attitude of life and a means to make a life choice; the relevant aspects of the Salesian charism itself. If we put aside these specific components, the so-called «vocational culture» would be too general and wouldn't achieve practicality. A good vocational culture must have a good foundation and at the same time aim for possible practicality.

4 Three stages of a process

Vocational proclamation, proposal and discernment

On the basis of a broader pastoral action, a vocational pastoral process can be developed that contains three ingredients of the following stages.

[1] The *vocational proclamation* is the **proclamation of life as a vocation**. We all have a vocation, and it is necessary for someone to help us to find it.

This «vocational kerygma» implies the proclamation of God's call, as a work that He is fulfilling in us, giving a definitive orientation to our lives. The contents of this «first proclamation» or basic proclamation are the fundamental and specific components we mentioned earlier. There is no doubt that a good «proclamation» is, in itself, a whole «proposal».

[2] The *vocational proposal* is an invitation to **discover God's will for one's life**. It is what can trigger the vocational spark, which leads a young person to start a research itinerary or to consider the possibility of beginning a concrete journey. As such, the proposal includes intentionality, as an appeal to the person's freedom. It must be done with *clarity, courage and respect*.

[3] *Vocational discernment* is the **path of clarification that a person begins starting from a vocational proposal he receives and from a vocational restlessness he feels**. Speaking of «discernment» in the vocational animation means helping young people to choose; it means facilitating the means and the tools so that they can discover, interpret, understand and welcome the presence and callings of the Holy Spirit in their real life. The elements that make up a process of discernment are *prayer, awareness of the life proposal, reflection, decision, action and the spiritual accompaniment* of this entire journey.

But we must not forget that the Christian vocation is a response that comes from the discovery, the gradual knowledge and the faithfulness to the person of Jesus. Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical *God is Love*, stressed that «being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction» (no. 1). The message of love of Jesus of Nazareth, alone, is capable of winning the heart of every person and of encouraging them to live their lives as a precious plan in the hands of God.

[4] In conclusion, every vocational animator must understand that he is a servant of the vocation of real people. **The important thing is that young people discover where God wants them and dreams for them.**



The «vocational culture», in this case, facilitates the fabric, network or atmosphere of values, certainties, convictions, practices and ideals rooted in the Gospel that create a way of perceiving and understanding oneself in the context of God's plan in general, and of vocation in particular. When an EPC creates the right environment, young people are more willing to listen to God's call in an attitude of faith and to embark on the adventure of making it materialise in their hearts.

Proclamation, proposal and discernment are three actions that are sometimes mixed,

even though it is useful to distinguish them on a pedagogical level. They are three stages of a process **that needs to be specified and offered within a pastoral plan** that aims to develop a vocational culture starting from an integrated and effective pastoral animation.

The concept of *vocation animation* aims to develop these components or dynamisms through which people are helped to question themselves about the meaning of their life, to discover the gift of the mission and to find their own specific vocation according to God's will.

5 Conditions needed for a «vocational culture»

[1] **Persistent prayer** is the basis of all vocational animation. On the one hand, for pastoral workers and for the whole Christian community: if vocations are a gift, we must ask the Lord of the harvest (cf. Mt 9:38) to continue to inspire Christians with vocations to the various forms of Christian life. On the other hand, prayer is an essential means to listen to and accept God's call; therefore, a fundamental task of all youth ministry is to help young people to pray. Prayer is the first and most effective means for vocational ministry.

[2] The «kerygma» or vocational proclamation which we spoke about earlier begins with *one's personal and community life*, provided it is lived in an authentic way. It is people, and not organizations, which promote vocations. There is nothing more provocative than the **passionate witness of the vocation that God gives to each one**; it is only in this way that those who are called trigger, in turn, the call-in others. We must strive to make our way of life with the Lord understandable. This is true for all vocations, because lay educators are also called to convey a true experience of the God of Jesus. This witness therefore invites our young people to assume a credible Christian life.

In the case of the vocation of special consecration, it is necessary to invite all Salesians to contribute to the creation of a «vocational culture» in whatever environment they find themselves. **We Salesians are the heart, memory and guarantors not only for the Salesian charism, but also for their own vocation.** There will be no vocations if we Salesians are not able to perceive ourselves as «good news» wherever we are and we are ready to unfold our existence as a commitment to this project. The European congress on vocations, held in Rome in May 1997, made a very

lucid observation: «The vocational crisis of those who are called is today also a crisis of those who call».

Consecrated life reflects values that attract many young people, such as total dedication, communion of hearts, spirituality and altruism. However, it is necessary for young people to perceive that **the real driving force of our consecrated life is the following of Jesus Christ**, which entails going out of oneself, radicalism, self-giving and inner unification. For this reason, our life must be transparent, meaningful and, at the right moments, it must also be expressed with words that reveal what moves us.

At the same time, we Salesians must **keep our presence among them**. In this way, they can come to know and understand our aspirations as a real possibility in their life, a strong life alternative for people of our times. Logically, this possibility must be accompanied by discernment, even though the responses may seem to be weak at the beginning.

[3] Another focal point of the «vocational culture» is the **renewal and revitalisation of community life**. Authentic vocational issues can arise in the EPC and, within it, in the religious community, where one's vocation, fraternal relationships, commitment to the mission and the acceptance of each and every one is lived and celebrated.

First of all, the **religious community** is a privileged place to recover quality time for listening and personal encounter with young people who want to be welcomed and listened to. In this sense, common dialogue and reflection are necessary to work on the ability to welcome vocations in one's community. Let us ask ourselves if our communities are educational environments that facilitate the search for and the strengthening of the meaning and purpose of the life of young people, by stimulating them to deepen their vocation as disciples of the Lord. Is our community life healthy,

intense, committed and responsible for the vocation we have received?

Secondly, the **Educative-Pastoral Community** also has a deeply vocational structure: it is the privileged mediation of God's call to the mission, it is a sign of Christ as missionary of the Father. The story of each Salesian house is intertwined with the small and large history of each person and his or her vocation.

Our life offers young people the opportunity to approach concrete testimonies of the different paths of the Church in their path of Christian growth: Christian couples, committed lay people, persons who are consecrated in contemplative and active life, ordained ministers. Close testimonies that make it possible to know both one's lifestyle and the personal, social and ecclesial relevance of one's life choice.

The vocational proposal arises, on the one hand, from the gratuitousness that comes from God and, on the other, from the need to make his Kingdom present. The vocational proposal has two reasons: a theological one - so that each person may discover the path that God has prepared for him - and a functional one - which we could summarise by saying that «without people there are no projects».

[4] At times, we identify the entire vocational animation with action alone. The three previous points were intended to express that pastoral action in this field that is not supported by prayer and witness of life is afflicted with inconsistency, as would happen in any other area of pastoral care. Furthermore, since vocation requires resistance and persistence, commitment and stability, we must go beyond the mentality or vocational sensitivity and possess a vocational practice, **a vocational pedagogy** with actions that make it credible and support it over time and space. This pedagogy deals with the importance of the itineraries of faith in Christian initiation, with the pro-

posals for accompanied community life and with accompaniment.

Trust in God is not opposed to the need for good planning and practice of the pastoral ministry. This vocation animation or ministry is a *transversal axis of our SEPP, as well as a specific task*. The axis of all youth ministry work is for each person to discover where God wants them to be. At the same time, it is necessary to have spaces, times, people ... who help make it a reality, which is to say, that vocational animation is also a specific task. We would like to see in every Salesian work an educative-pastoral practice that reaches «everyone» and «speaks to everyone» about vocation, however some tools are needed.

For this reason, a key aspect of «vocational culture» is the necessary link that must exist between **vocation animation within youth ministry**, so that all our efforts must converge in guiding young people towards an option of Christian life in a specific vocation of service in the Church. Youth ministry is, in itself, vocational, and vocation ministry cannot exist apart from youth ministry.

[5] If trust in God, who calls, works like a lung that gives oxygen to the vocational ministry, the other lung is **trust in the generous heart of young people**. Their hearts are made for great things, for beauty, for goodness, for freedom, for love ..., and this aspiration constantly appears as an interior call in the depths of their hearts. As Salesians, with the help of the pedagogy of itineraries, we must become the traveling companions of young people to show them how in everyday life Jesus knocks gently at the door of their hearts through their best intuitions, their brilliant thoughts, their desire to love and to be loved, their dreams and their ideals, their desire for freedom.

The many questions that young people have, their personal searches, their concerns, their hopes and their joys, even their own rebellion, can become God's privileged passage in

their life. They are *theological places* where Someone, much greater than their personal reality, in a strange and mysterious way, makes his way into the fabric of human existence and desires to depend on them to make them recipients of his love, to share his life and his Kingdom project with them, so that joy may reach its fullness in them (cf. Jn 17:13).

God's call, far from being an «intrusion» in life, consists in proposing a journey to follow, whose path puts into play the best of every young person. The call is nothing other than listening to the voice of God in the depths of one's heart. And to listen to it, one must be ready to take the risk of the adventure of life, with its beautiful but also difficult moments.

From this perspective, we were able to deal with two vocational approaches:

- The first approach focuses on the *people closest to our charism*, that is, those who, because of their bond with Salesian communities and works, are open to an experience of God, to meaningful community relationships and to service with young people.
- The second approach focuses on those who can be *attracted to deepening the Salesian vocation* as a fundamental life choice.

The proposal is aimed at those who ask ... and those who do not ask! Among the first, the young people of Bethany who ask him: «Master, where do you live?»; says the rich young man. «And among the latter, the fishermen at work on the lake shore (Peter, Andrew, James and John), or Matthew, who was sitting at the tax collector's table, like other Old Testament characters who were called even when» they were doing their own business»: Moses, Amos, Jeremiah ...

[6] Finally, to complete the map, let us not forget the promotion of the *vocation of special consecration*.

In this proposal, a concrete aspect of vocational animation is defined: to awaken and accompany people called to a concrete form of life (the ordained ministry, one's own congregation or movement), as a concrete way of following Jesus. What once seemed to be the only object of vocational animation, must now continue to be an important element, within the framework of a broader and more inclusive vocational promotion.

Thus, the conceptual map of vocational animation ranges from the promotion of all forms of Christian life, encouraging personal and community itineraries of growth in faith, to the particular commitment to propose and encourage concrete life choices. In this sense, the vocation to the priesthood and/or consecrated life is found in this context of vocational search.

6 Three paths to vocational culture

Pray, live and work

Starting from the quotation by Pope Francis (EG 107), we can indicate three paths to follow for a coherent vocational animation: living a contagious apostolic fervour, praying insistently and daring to propose. In summary: what can we do? **Pray, live and act.** These are strategies that aim to help young people build a choice-oriented ecosystem.

From the experience in the Salesian provinces, we suggest these three areas that are particularly appropriate and interconnected, at various levels.

All this implies that the **Province** must:

- set up a team or *commission for vocational animation*. It is necessary to recognise and be grateful that these teams can prepare reflections, promote activities and offer experiences, while maintaining enthusiasm for the service of vocational animation.

These teams should also be offered training that responds to the needs of our time;

- ensure that the Province's *coordinator for vocation animation* is in the best condition to carry out his specific mission;
- offer, *within the SEPPS*, places of reference and initiatives for prayer, accompaniment and vocational discernment;
- *invest in human and material resources* in the area of accompaniment and vocational discernment;
- define the *comprehensive process of accompanying young people in search* based on a plan that includes stages, profiles and roles of those involved, especially with regard to aspirantates, communities or vocational guidance centres.

Religious communities must:

- reflect and include in their *annual community plan* some specific commitments that specify the local opportunities for making the Salesian vocation known;
- offer *community experiences* to those who wish to deepen their Salesian vocation in order to share experiences of life and spirituality: to go from a «vocational animator» to a «vocational community»;
- create *welcoming spaces for young people* and strive not only to get to know them, but to welcome them and to spend their life with them, which is much more than offering them pastoral experiences, resources and opportunities;
- clearly express *the joy and hope of their vocational call to be what they are: Salesians*.
- encourage an attitude of *recognition, celebration and accompaniment* of young people who express a sense of call;
- be in contact with young people and thus *inject «vitamin M» (=mission) into their hearts, which will enable them to become the most*

direct witnesses of Jesus to their friends and peers;

- give visibility to the *elderly Salesians*, not as relics, but as witnesses.

This implies that in the **EPCs** it is necessary to:

- review *good practices in all sectors of the house* and examine which of these really have an impact on young people;
- promote formation in vocational culture throughout the educative-pastoral community, so as to contribute to a *deeper understanding of vocations*, overcoming the idea that only Salesians «have a vocation»;
- offer *concrete experiences of faith, service and community* suitable for each age group, condition and circumstances (Pope Francis formulates this in a more expressive way when he says that «the Christian vocation is necessarily born within an experience of mission» - 52nd World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 2015);
- *give priority to vocational activities* over other activities, in particular spaces and times for personal accompaniment, important moments (a missionary experience, a strong experience of prayer or Spiritual Exercises, an encounter with a significant person, an Easter celebration ...) and events with a Salesian impact (participation in a religious profession or ordination, a visit to a centre for young people at risk ...);
- show special care for the introduction of *vocational elements in all age groups*, but we have a privileged place among animators, volunteers, young collaborators, university students, students from recent years.

7 Conclusion

Many people may not know that oil prospectors have to dig an average of 247 wells to find a profitable one. *And they are not discour-*

aged by a series of failures. They keep searching, because they know that a single fruitful well is worth the whole series of unsuccessful searches. What about the Christian vocation? Will it be worth less than an oil well? And the Salesian heart? Will it be less profitable? We must not be discouraged in our vocational task of making the Lord Jesus known, loved and followed using all appropriate means.

Today's Church also needs Salesian vocations. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that the dynamism of vocational discernment does not end when a person leaves a formation house. Discernment is a spiritual task enlightened by the hope of knowing God's will; *it is a humble task, because it implies the awareness of not knowing, but it expresses the*

courage to seek, to look and to walk forward, freeing oneself from that fear of the future which is anchored in the past and which arises from the presumption of knowing it all.

Vocation is a lifelong process, regarded as a succession of calls and responses, a dialogue in freedom between God and every human being, which takes the form of a mission *to be discovered continuously in the various phases of life and in contact with new realities.* A vocation, therefore, is the particular way in which a person structures his life in response to a personal call to love and serve; the way of loving and serving that God wants for each one of us.

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