

Spiritual direction in saint John Bosco

II – Contents and methods of spiritual accompaniment of the young in the praxis of Don Bosco

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In this second part I will provide elements which Don Bosco deemed important in the spiritual accompaniment of the young and the methods through which he lead them in the way of holiness.

1. A baptismal journey

1. The contents and the methods of spiritual accompaniment are those that belong to the community educational experience, as adapted to the needs of the single young person. Don Bosco's inspiration is nurtured by that spiritual thought that has as its immediate points of reference saint Alphonsus of Liguori, Francis de Sales, saint Philip Neri and the spiritual school of the Catholic Reformation. In his writings we have clear convergence with the content offered in *Homo apostolicus* and other ascetical works, where saint Alphonsus presents the goal and the path that the spiritual director has to indicate on the way to holiness: to consolidate the process of conversion with useful weapons that help overcome temptations, overcome passions, mortify the senses and purify the heart; how to educate to prayer and sacramental practice; get moral orientation according to the state one is in, in the exercise of virtues; verify that real progress take place. In particular, Don Bosco is inspired by *Istruzione della gioventù nelle pietà cristiana* of Charles Gobinet,¹ by *Guida angelica*,² and *Considerazioni* of Pasquale de' Mattei, that celebrate the six Sundays of saint Louis.³ Here we are dealing with publications composed between 1600 and 1700, written by experienced educators, rich in concrete proposals, able to present the Christian life in an attractive manner, which Don Bosco felt fitted well within his vision.

2. The *Giovane provveduto* contains the main guidelines of the formative proposal of Don Bosco. In the introductory meditations, he underlines those themes that trace *a method for spiritual*

¹ C. GOBINET, *Istruzione della gioventù nella pietà cristiana*, Torino, Maspero e Serra 1831; il testo originale, *Instruction de la jeunesse en la piété chrétienne*, risale al 1655; l'autore, che era teologo, educatore e rettore del Collège du Plessis-Sorbonne, tra le diatribe del suo tempo si tenne a debita distanza dalle posizioni dei giansenisti e dei gesuiti e preferì ispirarsi a san Francesco di Sales e al domenicano Luis de Granada.

² *Guida angelica o sieno pratiche istruzioni per la gioventù*, Torino, Tamperia Reale 1767.

³ P. DE' MATTEI, *Considerazioni e pratiche devote per celebrare con frutto le sei domeniche in onore di San Luigi Gonzaga della Compagnia di Gesù ... accresciute di tre domeniche, che servono per compire la novena di detto santo*, Novara, Rusconi 1843 (edizione originale: 1766).

accompaniment: 1) get a clear idea of God the Creator and of the reason for which we are created; 2) reflect on the preferential love God has for the young and the need to correspond to him; 3) become aware how important youth is as an appropriate moment to start a virtuous journey; 4) understand the value of *obedience* as the first virtue, in an educational and Christological perspective; 5) acquire the sense of the sacred, respect for the «Lord's temple, a place of holiness, a home for prayer» and for the sacred ministers; 6) go beyond human respect and openly live your faith; 7) train yourself in meditation, in spiritual reading, in the study of catechism, lend an attentive ear to the Word of God which is food to the soul.⁴ Don Bosco also teaches certain *defensive techniques*: 1) escape at all cost idleness; 2) avoid bad company and choose good and challenging friends; 3) take your distance from foul and dishonest language; 4) get away from immoral persons and places.⁵ He goes on to suggest the «*how to behave during temptations*», to react in face of objections that deny virtuous commitment in youth.⁶ There are also short *daily meditations* that nurture perseverance in goodness.⁷

Even the devotions have a formative intention. *Most Holy Mary*, a «strong support» for the young, grants to her devotees all the necessary graces for their well-being. In Her, must one confide so as «not to commit mortal sin anymore», to «conserve the holy and precious virtue of purity», to «avoid bad company».⁸ Saint Louis is presented as the model of Christian life offering to the young: 1) what does perfect contrition mean; 2) how important it is to mortify the senses and the spirit of penance; 3) how to defend the «virtue of purity»; 4) how to get rid of the inordinate love of the things of this world; 5) how is the commandment of «material and spiritual charity» lived in relation to my neighbour; 6) what level should reach the love of God and the fervour for «spiritual things»; 7) how important it is to give oneself to God, without delay and fully; 8) how to live union with God; 9) how to approach death in a serene way.⁹

3. At the basis of journey, Don Bosco puts the firm decision of «giving oneself to God». The young person is invited not to postpone, but to convert and enter into a process of baptismal ownership (*appropriazione battesimale*). The formulas used are simple «*Serve the Lord with gladness*»; «Happiness, Study, Piety» («*Servite Domino in laetitia*»; «*Allegria, Studio, Pietà*»), yet the contents are demanding and high. The rector should above all create those conditions where the young can decide to «find time for God», «to be good in youth», to observe the

⁴ G. BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà...*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp. 1847, 5-19.

⁵ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 20-26.

⁶ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 26-29.

⁷ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 31-50.

⁸ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 51-54.

⁹ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 56-71.

commandments as from adolescence. The aim is to arrive to a radical conversion, a drastic detachment of the heart from sin, and a generous adherence to baptism. In the *Giovane provveduto* and in the narrative texts of Don Bosco we find this radical approach, adapted and made meaningful to the youth of his Oratory. It is an obligatory passage if one needs to be introduced to interior life. What follows is accompaniment in view of strengthening the progressive and unconditional openness to the what the Spirit shows, service to God *in laetitia* and in a movement of perfection.

2. Union with God and the pedagogy of prayer

1. The other qualifying commitment within accompaniment in Don Bosco is the formation to the *sense of the presence of God*. His spiritual tradition considers the exercise of God's presence as the initial step before any form of prayer. It gives access to divine intimacy, to live constantly in the face of God, even if you are in the midst of the most varied activities. As we can see from his educational approach, Don Bosco aims at committing his young in this exercise, which offers a faith-full reading of events and human story. God's presence can be seen in the beauty of creation, experienced in the intimacy of prayer and Eucharistic communion; it is recognized in personal events of life, in the history of the Church and that of humanity. The sense of God the Father, present and active, dominates and attracts the mind and the heart of Don Bosco and his youth.

2. Based on this scheme, the saint develops his *pedagogy of prayer*. The practices of piety are means to reach the *spirit of prayer*. In the *Giovane provveduto* he offers simple tools so as to sanctify each action during the day; he teaches to do everything for the love of God, «carefully fulfilling» one's duties and «keep God as the only reason for each action»; he exhorts and imitates saint Louis of Gonzaga, model of prayer since childhood, his «spirit of prayer and devotion». He values the sensibility of the adolescents and the romantic tastes of his time, but he aims exclusively at forming the young to live *union with God* in a way which is loving and unitive (*affettiva e unitiva*). His aim is to help them live in a *state of prayer*, through ordinary practices of piety, short prayers, «visits», examination of conscience ... this prayerful spirit sustained with «ardent charity», this union of permanent love, that involves our thoughts, unifies our affections, directs our daily actions, and human relations, is the goal of his spiritual endeavour. Even the same recreation periods are presented as activities «accepted by the Lord». This is one of the aspects that is so evident and effective in the three *Lives*. About Dominic Savio he writes: «It seemed to be part of his very nature to converse with God, and no matter where he was, or what

noises or games might be going on around him, his recollection was never disturbed». ¹⁰

3. The two pillars of spiritual life

1. The experience of forming adolescents, strengthened in Don Bosco the conviction about the *potential of the sacramental pedagogy*. The sacraments were for him «the most valid source for youth»: «If you can show me a boy who frequently receives the Holy Sacraments, it will be enough to convince me that he will pass through the years of youth, reach the age of manhood and maturity, and, if God so disposes, arrive at a venerable old age, and all during that time will be an example to those who know him». ¹¹ They form the «secure basis», the indispensable foundation of his educational system: «I believe that I am not exaggerating if I assert that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing (Confession and Communion)». ¹² Don Bosco's insistence is rooted in his understanding of the situation of the young: pre-adolescents and adolescents who need interior calm and serenity, a constant moral support in face of temptations, discouragement, sense of guilt and self-withdrawal; they need to be trained to control their passions, to defend and strengthen «purity», to build virtue and reach a state of inner serenity that will help the edifice of the own personality.

Young people have to learn how to make the best use of the *sacrament of Reconciliation*: not a difficult way to «put in order» «the things of the soul», re-gain peace with God and the life of grace. For this aim he offers practical suggestions on the examination of conscience, on the way to reach perfect contrition, on the trust in the confessor, what should be done after confession that it may be rendered more fruitful. ¹³ The *complete trust in the confessor* («a father, who ardently desires to procure all the good possible and who seeks to defend you from all sort of harm»), to go «frequently» to him and to follow his advice, are strategic elements that help progress in virtue and in holiness. ¹⁴ In the educative environment of Valdocco, sacramental confession is a privileged moment within personalized companionship, that verifies the progress made and the interior resistances, offering encouragement to move on. ¹⁵

¹⁰ BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 62.

¹¹ BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 68.

¹² G. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucce Francesco d'Argentera*, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Fran. di Sales 1864, 100; cfr. anche G. BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, G.B. Paravia e Comp. 1861, 24-29.

¹³ Cfr. BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 94-97.

¹⁴ BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 24-27.

¹⁵ È in questa prospettiva che don Bosco presenta il rapporto tra Domenico Savio e il confessore-direttore: «Cominciò egli a scegliersi un confessore, che tenne regolarmente tutto il tempo che dimorò tra noi. Affinché questi potesse poi formarsi un giusto giudizio di sua coscienza, volle, come si disse, fare la confessione generale. Cominciò a confessarsi ogni quindici giorni, poi ogni otto giorni, comunicandosi colla medesima frequenza. Il confessore osservando il grande profitto che faceva nelle cose di spirito, lo consigliò a comunicarsi tre volte per settimana e nel termine di un anno gli permise anche la comunione

For this reason, as Pietro Stella points out, in the *Giovane provveduto* Confession has «a rich surrounding of practices and devotional formulas, whose aim is to give the right importance to the Sacrament». ¹⁶

2. The second pillar of the spiritual life in Don Bosco is *Eucharistic piety*. On one side he is convinced of the efficacy of the sacramental grace, yet, on the other, he puts into place a pedagogy that creates convergence between frequent communion, moral commitment and growth in charity. For example, the Eucharistic resolutions (*fervori*) of Dominic Savio are presented as the result of the meeting between the action of grace and the dynamism of a heart educated in faith, rendered sensible to the interior motions of the Spirit, living them in a way that is “worthy” of Eucharistic communion. The first communion of Dominic is presented as the *festive meeting* between two lovers, within an interior climate of *deep recollection*, which goes beyond the emotional intensity of the moment. In fact, the “souvenirs” written on that day seem to be an affirmation of the *absolute primacy of the love of God*. In a practical way it is understood as affective friendship, a solid and irremovable baptismal choice: «Death, but not sin». Of course, the most appropriate answer to the gift of Christ in the Eucharist is total self-giving, here expressed in terms that are congenial to the simplicity of the child. Don Bosco is convinced that the right understanding of the Eucharist and receiving it with the right disposition, generates a new mentality, an irreversible decision, a fruitful moral tension towards good and perfection.

3. In this vision we can grasp the insistence on the *daily participation in the mass* and on the *Eucharistic devotion*, being it derived from the *deep sense of the real presence* and the *strong desire towards strong and loving union with Jesus*. Following a consolidated practice, the saint envisages a form of participation in the mass which is aware of the moral meaning of the various rites and moments; he educates the young to live them by reciting prayers that paraphrase the texts of the missal, aiming at involving faith and senses in view of a more congruent Christian life. Thus, for example, during offertory the young person is invited to offer himself with the bread and wine: «I offer you in this same time my heart, my words, so that in the future I may desire nothing and talk about nothing else if not that which has to do with your holy service». ¹⁷ Then, he is invited to communicate or at least to make «the spiritual communion, which consists in an ardent desire to receive Jesus»:

quotidiana. [...] Aveva con lui una confidenza illimitata. Anzi parlava col medesimo con tutta semplicità delle cose di coscienza anche fuori di confessione» (BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 68-69).

¹⁶ STELLA, *Valori spirituali del “Giovane provveduto”*, 116.

¹⁷ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 89.

«My dear and good Jesus, since I cannot receive the Holy Host, nonetheless come to take possession of me with your grace, that I may always live in your holy love. The grace that I only ask you is to be able to stay away from bad company, because if I have the privilege to frequent good companions, I will also become good and can save my soul».¹⁸

The same dynamism can be seen in preparation to and in thanksgiving after communion: acts of adoration, faith and charity are suggested, promises and offerings aimed at profoundly shaping conscience and affections relating to the gift of self to God:

«I love you with all my heart above all else, and because of love of you I love my neighbour as myself, and I forgive with all my heart all those who have offended me».¹⁹ «I promise that for the future, you will always be my hope, my comforter, you my only treasure [...]. I offer all myself to you; I offer you my will, that I may not desire anything unless it is pleasing to you; I offer you my hands, my feet, my eyes, my words, my mouth, my mind, my heart, all myself to you, guard all my sentiments, that each thought, each action will have no other aim if not that which is of greater glory and spiritual advantage to my soul».²⁰

Similar thoughts are offered in the *Atti da farsi nel visitare il SS. Sacramento*, all intended to strengthen an growing belonging to the Lord and to a transformation and conversion of life.²¹

These are texts which come to us from the devotional literature of the time, thought out within the formative efforts put in place by Don Bosco, in his educational model. They have a particular value and shed light on the way the saintly educator moved on to engage the interior life of the young, their relationship with God and Christian perfection.

4. The mortification of the senses and the building up of virtues

1. Another important area of the spiritual journey is that which concerns custody and *mortification of senses*. In the second edition of the Life of Dominic Savio, Don Bosco added a whole chapter dedicated to this,²² so that it will take away any misunderstanding regarding the prohibition of afflictive penances (penitenze afflittive) presented in the previous chapter. He affirms that true penitence does not consist in doing extraordinary things, but in the *perfect accomplishment of one's duties for the love of the Lord*. In the biography of Luigi Comollo (1844)

¹⁸ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 91.

¹⁹ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 100.

²⁰ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 102.

²¹ «Vi adoro umilmente e vi ringrazio [...] Gesù mio, io vi amo con tutto il mio cuore: mi pento di avere per lo addietro tante volte disgustato la vostra infinita bontà. Propongo colla vostra grazia di non più offendervi per l'avvenire. Da oggi avanti voglio essere tutto vostro; fate voi di me quello che vi piace, solo imploro il vostro amore, la perseveranza nel bene, e l'adempimento perfetto della vostra volontà» (BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, 104-105).

²² Capo XVI: *Mortificazione in tutti i sensi esterni*, in BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico* (ed. seconda, 1860), 76-83.

he had described the attraction of his friend towards penances, noting, though, that «external acts of penance » revealed his fervour, since, «if exterior actions derive from the abundance of the heart, one needs also the know that the heart of Comollo was continually occupied with loving thoughts of God, true charity towards neighbour and an ardent desire to suffer for the love of Jesus Christ»²³. These expressions give us the key to interpret the true sense attributed to penance and mortifications in the religious understanding of the time. The general impression that one finds in the book, in fact, is that of a Christian life which is complete and virtuous, animated by ardent charity and a lively evangelical spirit which is translated in the day-to-day as moral and spiritual force. *Mortifications and penances are not appreciated for their own sake, but for their instrumental and ascetical value*: they are meant to keep passions under control, to correct defects, to help virtuous growth, to nurture love of God. Because of the need of shedding light on this exemplary Christian integrity, Don Bosco will again publish after ten years, adapting it, the life of Luigi Comollo. To help the young understand that «whoever fears God leaves no stone unturned in that which can help him advance in the way of the Lord»²⁴. Even successive writings of the saint contain this direction: mortification is above all an ascetic and pedagogical tool that helps dominion of self, control of the senses, correction of shortcomings and the building up of virtues. But it has to be lived within the *perspective of an ever more intense love of God*: it is not a matter of «chastising the flesh», but of giving back a sense of equilibrium and balance to the body, and also strength as a tool of fidelity to the Christian call and a more authentic relation with God and neighbour.

2. In the spirituality of Don Bosco, classical ascesis is reformulated within a vision that connects with adolescents, correcting possible misunderstandings, constantly bringing it back to the *concrete day-to-day living*, that it will not only be accepted but joyfully embraced, according to the state of each one. He applies to the young the teachings of saint Francis de Sales. Thus he presents “*positive*” *mortification*, out of which useless rigidity is put aside, centered on the conditions of life and the duties that derive from the state of each one. This is one of the characteristic points of the formative proposal of Don Bosco. He does not present the «exact» fulfilment of one’s duties from the point of view of an ethical imperative, but from within the transcendental horizon of those who, wanting to live a life of faith in Jesus Christ, they conform to him in lovingly free obedience. Don Bosco takes into consideration a myriad of duties, all of them derived from their own state and condition.²⁵ As a consequence, he suggests to the

²³ [G. BOSCO,] *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù scritti da un suo collega*, Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, 1844, 37.

²⁴ G. BOSCO, *Cenni sulla vita del giovane Luigi Comollo*, Torino, Tipografia P. De-Agostini 1854, 7.

²⁵ Cfr. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi*, 120.

young to avoid fasting and rigidity, but to take most care «in applying themselves to study, attention during classes, obedience to the superiors, accepting life's difficulties, like heat, cold, wind, hunger, thirst», overcoming these difficulties accepting them as external “necessities” from a bigger force, accepting them serenely «for God's love»²⁶. On the same level he puts the duties that derive from the precept of evangelical charity: employ «great kindness and charity» towards neighbour, tolerate his defects, «give good counsels and advice»; «be a servant to your friends, bring them water, clean their shoes, give your service during meals [...], sweep the refectory, the dormitory, carry the garbage, carry bundles and trunks». Besides, all these things, according to Don Bosco, need to be done «*with joy*» and *with satisfaction*. In fact, «true penance does not consist in doing what we do like, but what pleases the Lord, and promotes his glory»²⁷.

The ascetical quality of these existential situations is guaranteed by the intention with which they are lived: «That which you have to necessarily to suffer, offer it to God, thus it become virtue and merit for your soul»²⁸. This is the way Don Bosco teaches how to give superior meaning to what life demands, serenely accepting it and directing it to a spiritual goal.

5. Service and apostolate and vocational discernment

1. Part of this daily reality is also *charity towards neighbour*, both in the form of loving acceptance, tolerance, patiently bearing the other, forgiveness, and also in the form of *generous and disinterested*, calm and joyfully lived. «Polishing the shoes, cleaning the clothes of his companions, being of service to the sick, sweeping and other similar acts were for him [Dominic Savio] a pleasant hobby».²⁹ Don Bosco gives importance especially to the delicate attention of Dominic towards those who were «without any attention by their companions» because they were «rude, stupid, less educated or grieved by some displeasure», who «suffer the weight of solitude when they have stronger need of the consolation of a friend»: «ha approached them, entertained them with some good words, giving them good advice. [...] All those who were sick in some way, asked for Dominic to be their nurse, while those who were afflicted drew comfort from talking to him».³⁰ I believe it is quite meaningful that Don Bosco added to the rule of the Compagnia dell'Immacolata a small rule regarding the availability to be of service in

²⁶ BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi*, 120.

²⁷ BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi*, 123.

²⁸ BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 75.

²⁹ BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico* (ed. seconda, 1860), 82.

³⁰ BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 61-62.

the community,³¹ gave importance to those who took care of their companions: «Those who were in need of moral help were accompanied like *clients* and for them all means that Christian charity suggested were put in place so as to lead them on the way to virtue ». ³²

Even in the life of Michael Magone, importance is given to «active charity towards his companions», with a special reference aimed at spiritual companionship: «the exercise of this virtue is the most effective means to help us grow in the love of God». ³³

2. Next to «temporal» charity, Don Bosco suggests the exercise of *spiritual charity*, that is apostolic action. In his vision of formation, the attention towards the «spiritual good» of the companions is an integral part of the journey of Christian perfection. «The chief recommendation given to Dominic, to help him to attain perfection – writes Don Bosco in the Life of Dominic Savio –, was to endeavour to gain souls to God, for no action is more meritorious than to co-operate in the salvation of souls, for which Our Divine Saviour shed His Precious Blood». ³⁴ This note amply confirms the vision Don Bosco entertained of spiritual life: it is not only a matter of giving attention to one's own interior life in a process of purification, growth in virtue and union with God, but to perfectly conform oneself to the Divine Saviour even in the universal salvific movement and the offer of one's own life.

Don Bosco spiritual director communicates to the young his same missionary passion and teaches them his method, marked as it is with salesian meekness which seeks to gain souls through friendship, happiness, active service, educational assistance, schooling and profession formation, catechesis, spiritual attention.

6. Vocational discernment

1. Within this scheme of things that vocational discernment takes place. Attention is fundamentally given to certain criteria, briefly offered in the life of Michael Magone: «In relation to you becoming priest or something else, this all depends on the *progress in your studies*, on your *moral behaviour*, and from the *signs you give of your being called* to the ecclesiastical state». ³⁵ The autobiographical witness of the doubts during his youth, brings in other indicators that help the discernment process: the evaluation of the style of life, attachment of the heart,

³¹ «Nelle conferenze si stabilisca qualche opera di carità esterna, come la nettezza della chiesa, l'assistenza od il catechismo di qualche fanciullo più ignorante» (BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 83).

³² BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 84.

³³ BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 47.

³⁴ BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 53.

³⁵ BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 14.

presence or absence of certain virtues.³⁶ Don Bosco also knew the classical principles of ignatian discernment, which he synthesizes in the *Cattolico provveduto* (1868), published under his name, but put together by don Giovanni Bonetti.³⁷

The theme of vocational discernment appears late in the *Giovane provveduto*. In the first edition we do not find and hint to it; in the renewed edition of 1863 we have a *Prayer to the Blessed Lady to get to know my vocation* (*Preghiera alla B. Vergine per conoscer la propria vocazione*); only in 1878 Don Bosco adds a specific chapter on the theme: *Il giovane nella scelta dello stato*³⁸. In a schematic way, he offers those essential elements of vocational discernment. The objective is clearly to *seek the will of God*, «imitating Jesus Christ who proclaims that he came to do the will of the Father». He offers the «*most appropriate means* in view of a prudent indication»; they are three: 1)

«a spotless childhood and youth, or repentance thorough sincere penance»; 2) «humble and persevering prayer»; 3) getting advice from «God-fearing and wise people, especially the confessor, stating the case with full sincerity and also your dispositions».³⁹ Furthermore, the moment a decision needs to be taken, Don Bosco suggests an *increase in prayer*: «turn to God with special and fervent prayer; let the holy Mass have this intention; let this intention be at the centre of holy Communion. You can also do a novena, a triduum, some abstinence, visit a sanctuary. Go to Mary, who is the Mother of good counsel, to saint Joseph her spouse, the Custodian Angel and to your protector saints. It would be a very goods thing, if you can, have the Spritual Exercise or some day of retreat». It is them necessary *to let disappear any delay with decision and courage*, basing yourself on the unconditional adherence to divine will: «Make a proposal that you follow God's will, no matter what will happen, and irrespective of the disapproval of those who judge according to the world».⁴⁰

3. That is, that at the centre of vocational discernment, we have the same baptismal dynamism in view of which the spiritual director needs constantly lead the young to strengthen his spiritual journey. Reading the various phases of the life of young Bosco, for him to arrive to choose his state and the spirit with which he receives the cassock, gives us a clear picture so as to capture his point of view. He shows us how

³⁶ Cfr. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, 98: nonostante il desiderio di diventare prete coltivato dalla fanciullezza e la sua propensione verso lo stato ecclesiastico, gli rimanevano dei forti dubbi: «Non vole[vo] credere ai sogni, e la mia maniera di vivere, certe abitudini del mio cuore e la mancanza assoluta delle virtù necessarie a questo stato, rendevano assai difficile quella deliberazione».

³⁷ G. BOSCO, *Il cattolico provveduto per le pratiche di pietà con analoghe istruzioni secondo il bisogno dei tempi*, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1868, 585-587; la dipendenza dagli Ignazio di Loyola è evidente (cfr. IGNAZIO DI LOYOLA, *Esercizi spirituali*, nn. 169-187, 318-319).

³⁸ G. BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri...*, Nuova edizione accresciuta, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana 1878, 75-77.

³⁹ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto* (ed. 1878), 75-76.

⁴⁰ BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto* (ed. 1878), 76.

important it is to have a *clear orientation towards God, complete trust in Him*, a determined detachment from self. When he recounts receiving his cassock, we see two movements of the spirit: to get rid of the old man, and to put on the new man; *purify heart and mind* («How many old things I need to get rid of!») in view of a *radical change of perspective* («To put on the new man, to start a new life, all according to God's will»). It is a *second conversion* in the sense of a full and unconditional acceptance of divine will, making sure there is no space left for the old man, in a way that «justice and holiness are the constant objects» of one's thoughts, words and actions.⁴¹ The way he recounts how uncomfortable he was during the sumptuous dinner that day, confirms the contrast between the radical demands of the ecclesiastical state and the previous style of life, which now seems so empty: «Those people, how can they be part of someone who that same day has put on the habit of holiness to give himself completely to the Lord?».

But the initial enthusiasms need to be defined in a concrete life programme: «*The style of life I had lived up to then had to be radically reformed*. My life in the past had not been wicked, but I had been proud and dissipated, given over to amusements, games, acrobatics, and other such things. These pursuits gave passing joy, but did not satisfy the heart. I drew up a fixed rule of life ...». The rules centre around ascetical indispensable attitudes: get away from all occasion of sin, dissipation and vainglory; practice and love one's own personal space («*ritiratezza*»); temperance and sobriety; commitment to get culturally enriched and a Christian mentality as opposed to the spirit of the world; defend the virtue of chastity «with all my strength»; spirit of prayer; daily exercise of pastoral charity, evangelization, as one of the primary duties come that belong to the mission just embraced.⁴²

These are precious indications in view of the spiritual accompaniment of the young.

In synthesis:

- 1) D. Bosco borrows from the catholic tradition duties and areas of action of the spiritual director, adapting them to the formation of the young; in the *Giovane provveduto* he offers to the young practical ways for a spiritual journey, which has as its dynamic nucleus a process of baptismal ownership.
- 2) A fundamental area of accompaniment is formation in prayer, which starting from the exercise of the presence of God and the practices of piety, helps the acquisition of a spirit of prayer, union with God and towards the state of living prayer during the day.

⁴¹ BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, 101.

⁴² Cfr. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, 102-103.

- 3) Another duty of the spiritual director is to form in sacramental practice. D. Bosco insists on the importance of Confession for the sacramental grace and because of the trustful intimacy that is established with confessor-friend. The same for the importance given to the Eucharist as a pedagogical experience: the saint brings in a reciprocal relationship the fruitfulness of frequent communion, moral commitment and growth in charity; besides, his vivid sense of the real presence convinces him of the affective and mystical dimension of the Eucharist devotion.
- 4) Part of spiritual direction is also the area of mortification of senses, which D. Bosco directs within the day-to-day reality (pedagogy of duty) as a tool for “temperance”: a balanced and serene control of the body and of the senses; strengthening of virtues; as a way of “unification” and expression of “offering” oneself to God.
- 5) Also, direction in D. Bosco directs the young to live the exercise of charity towards neighbour and active service, both temporal and also spiritual, through commitment to “gain souls for God”.
- 6) D. Bosco indicates some criteria for vocational discernment, insisting very much on the absolute availability (disponibilità) to God’s will and on following him in an integral way, which demands a radical reform of life.