

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN SAINT JOHN BOSCO

I – SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTION THAT DON BOSCO OFFERED TO THE YOUNG

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Once we approach Don Bosco to study him from the point of view of spiritual companionship of the young, we soon come to discover how difficult it is to distinguish in him those attitudes, methods and contents that qualify him as educator, from those that characterize him within the context of spiritual direction.

In this first part of my paper, I will present some reflections relating, first, to the intimate relationship that exists between the educational mission of Don Bosco and the way he spiritually accompanied the young, and secondly, to the consequences that this connection has to salesian formation.

1. Don Bosco's companionship in the salesian educational environment

How do we detect the characteristic traits of the model of spiritual companionship practiced and taught by Don Bosco? By observing the saintly educator in action, in the global formative environment of the Oratory, and the way he interacted with the young.

1. Don Bosco is a pastoral educator (pastore educatore), who does not limit himself to traditional activities (homilies, catechism, confessions and Eucharistic celebrations) or to personal contact with single young persons. His immediate aim was *to create an educational environment*, a well organized one, rich with formative proposals and human interactions. Within it he sought to bring in both adolescents and young people so that they can be “gained” by God, being accompanied, step by step, within a process of Christian formation, a *holistic educational process*. In the Oratory, and in the other salesian houses, the meeting between the educator and the young person happened within a clearly defined educative pastoral community.

In this *holistic formative environment*, companionship did not only happen at the moment of personalized dialogue and the sacrament. It is connected, integrated and convergent with all the other formative inputs that are put in place. It is strictly in unison with the educational process and the various rhythms of the daily life. In Don Bosco's vision and in his model of community, the one who accompanies and the accompanied meet each day, in an informal way in various environments, have frequent conversations, share moments of work and play, in a context of reciprocal knowledge of each other, frequently marked by strong friendship which paves the way and facilitates openness, trust and availability.

Spiritual fatherhood is the extension of educational fatherhood, benefitting from communal learning processes, dedication, loving presence, understanding and

integration. For the single young person, Don Bosco, the confessor and the spiritual director, is also the one who has welcomed him in an affectionate manner, sustains, instructs, educates, encourages him to give the best of himself in the community and in his daily commitments. The young person is accompanied by assistants, formators and young friends, with whom he can share the same ethical movement, the same spiritual values, in a stimulating and generative exchange.

We also need to affirm that in view of Don Bosco's educational vision and practice, all that he proposes to the young is aimed at their being "educated in a Christian way". Therefore, his educational enterprise, his paternal and friendly caring attitude is not reduced to the pedagogical and assistential dimensions: *his action tends to favour a formative companionship that finds its highest expression in spiritual companionship*. If we take away from the Preventive System this positive tension, we will be reducing it to mere social service, a more or less efficient series of suggestions towards educational practice. In so doing, something essential is missing, that will otherwise help us to understand the historical fruitfulness of his pedagogy; risking to compromise, right from the starting point, the efficacy of any educational experience that is inspired by him. Spiritual companionship, in view of Christian perfection, *is an essential and necessary component of salesian pedagogy*.

2. Companionship between the Saint and the young has *different shades and tonalities*: the relationship he establishes with the young of the festive Oratory, is of a certain type, where he meets them only on a Sunday and during confession. Different is the bond he tries to build with those who day and night live within the educational community. Of a more intense and profound nature is the understanding that he establishes with those young people who belong to formative groups, in view of a vocational discernment. A very profound and trustful spiritual friendship is to be found with those who decide to join him in his salesian mission. With all of these, like a "faithful soul friend", Don Bosco seeks to create those favourable conditions that will facilitate *a confidential and intimate meeting, which is rendered more intense and fruitful within the sacrament of reconciliation*.

We know that, all in all, his educational method is *neither elitist nor selective*, since it is characterized by a *strong missionary drive*. If possible he would like to reach all the young, starting from the most poor and abandoned, those who have lost hope and the "dangerous" ones, those who are far off the right track, to bring them all back to God, offering them gradual journeys that are adapted to each one of them. Don Bosco aims at creating lively communities in which cordial relationships and continuous presence, together with the empathic presence of the educators (salesian assistance), can generate "trust-full" and friendly relationships. His aim is to conquer the heart. For this reason, he puts into place ways of communicating, language and experiences where, on one side, all can feel that the Oratory or the salesian presence is their home, where they feel happy, and, on the other side, all can capture the joy and attraction of the Christian

proposal. In this way, the desire matures to “break away from the devil”¹, “to give oneself to God” and to forge ahead on the way of perfection.

3. Besides this, also in this area, the preventive dimension is essential to the formative model and method of Don Bosco: both in view of protecting, and in view of promoting. It is historically documented that there was a gradual lowering of age of those who were on the receiving end of Don Bosco's work. The Oratory of the first years (1843-1849) aims to take away from the streets, on festive days, those young workers between the age of 14 and 20. As from 1850 at the Oratory there is mainly the presence of pre-adolescents, from 11 till 15 years of age. It was not only a sociological factor (there were other new group experiences that attracted older young people), it was a choice matured by Don Bosco himself that through experience he understood the importance of *spiritual preventiveness* (*preventività spirituale*). Gradually he arrived at the conclusion that Christian formation of the young is much more assured and became solid, the earlier spiritual companionship started. Like so many others in his time, he discovers how receptive children and pre-adolescents are, so the importance of formative action and adequate spiritual companionship. They are capable of generous and complete self-giving, they can be easily impressed, positively open to the values of the spirit, conversion of the heart; they are ready to live their baptismal choices and to be led by the Holy Spirit, being open to God and to the effect of his grace. He would say one day: «If I have to educate a boy who is not yet 14 years of age, I can make of him anything I want»². *With pre-adolescents Don Bosco has acquired the most surprising spiritual results*. The lives of Domenic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco witness to this. It can also be seen in the lives of his most faithful followers, Rua, Cagliero, Francesca, Bonetti and others, whose hearts were conquered and transformed by him as from pre-adolescence, through a friendship which was close and affectionate, through careful and efficacious spiritual companionship. «A boy is very fortunate – he writes in relation to the “spirit of prayer” in the life of Francis Besucco – if he has been trained in prayer and likes it. The fountain of divine blessings is always opened by prayer. Besucco belonged to the number of these boys. The assistance given him by his parents from his earliest years, the care taken by his teacher and especially the help of his parish priest all produced the desired end in our Francis»³.

Among the great spiritual charismatic directors in the history of the Church, one can say that Don Bosco is the one who in a very explicit way has dedicated himself to pre-adolescents and has matured a method that they can be spiritually accompanied, thus creating a school of spiritual formation for the young that has great historical resonance, both within and outside the salesian world. Today, one gets the impression, that the Salesians have completely forgotten it.

¹ Cfr. G. BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales*. Seconda edizione accresciuta, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1866, 18.

² G. ALBERTOTTI, *Chi era Don Bosco ossia biografia fisio-psico-patologica di Don Bosco scritta dal suo medico Dott. Albertotti, pubblicata dal figlio*, Genova, Poligrafica San Giorgio 1929, 13-14.

³ G. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera*. Edizione seconda, Torino, Tipografia e Libreria salesiana 1878, 95-96.

4. Naturally the formative process, so solidly founded during pre-adolescence, is further strengthened with *a type of discreet companionship*, discreet yet efficacious, thanks to the profound understanding and spiritual convergence that has been formed during the previous years between director-confessor and the young, but *also in virtue of the qualities of the educational environment* of which the young are part of, and also due to the active participative role that is given to them. Because of this Don Bosco wanted educative communities which were aware of their primary role, responding to the demands of the young's heart and fervent in spirit. He wanted salesians to be present, dedicated and exemplary; ardent formators and also respectful, open, patient and constant. He insisted that attention is given to detail, that formative moments and proposals are multiplied, in a climate of great freedom. He insisted that the beauty of virtue is frequently referred to, and also the joy that follows out of a grace-filled life. He encouraged all to "offer themselves completely to the Lord" and to embark on a spiritual journey. The desire to move on and the decision to be led by a spiritual guide are the joint fruits of the action of the Holy Spirit within the heart, of the commitment of the educators, of a stimulating environment, the example of the companions, of the quality and depth of certain unique experiences (retreats, spiritual exercises, meetings...).

At this stage we realise that in many ways we are quite distant from the model of the classic spiritual direction, where the disciple meets the master and to him he opens up his heart. Here the main role is that of a challenging educational environment, together with the zeal of the pastoral educator (pastore-educatore), who engages himself in the search of the flock, through varied means, establishing significant and cordial relationships, assuring all that which can help the disposition of the heart to eagerly desire the spiritual life.

All this has been transmitted until very recently in our salesian tradition. For over one hundred years, spiritual companionship of pre-adolescents and adolescents has been a priority, to the point that each salesian house had *a confrère particularly dedicated to this task, the "catechist"* (who was not simply a "pastoral animator"). Great care was given to this choice, on the basis of the human and apostolic qualities. His mission was to be *side by side with the rector in the spiritual leadership of the community and in personal formation processes*. He had to be vigilant regarding the moral aspect of the environment, assure the Christian dimension of formation: catechesis, prayer life, sacraments, preparation to the feasts, monthly retreats and the annual spiritual exercises. He was to encourage the various religious associations (Compagnie), guaranteeing formation within them. He was called to find moments of personal dialogue with each one, suggesting texts for meditation and spiritual reading, following with special care candidates with vocational aptitude. Those among us who have been educated as young boys in salesian houses before 1971, have experimented the efficacy of this methodology of companionship and, probably, they owe it to the attention of the catechist the great fortune of having undertaken a spiritual journey, the joy for meditation and prayer, the choice of embracing a salesian vocation.

5. With the Special General Chapter (1971) we saw the disappearance from the renewed Constitutions and Regulations (1972) of those very clear traditional figures (beginning from the central form of government of the Congregation). In the name of pastoral renewal and of a «courageous and profound re-dimensioning» responsibility has been given to the *educative community*, built on shared

corresponsibility between religious and lay educators, between the young and their families, together with the annual pastoral project and its evaluation; but there were no more reference persons of this sector. *Thus, came to disappear a consolidated educational and pastoral praxis* which had concrete institutional roles, with proposals and initiatives shared all over the salesian world. A “decentralised” choice which left the initiative to the local level. The Congregation, through its General Chapters and its documents, only offers inspirational principles, without entering into detail, suggesting pastoral-educative projects, declarations of principles. Today, after a period of forty years, the reading of these texts helps us to understand the real situations and the honest intentions behind them, but also a certain type of abstractedness of certain “operative guidelines”. We are in a position to take stock of the situation, to have a more serene understanding of our educational tradition and how the way it was articulated might have been perceived as out of touch and formal, unrelated to the new scenario. Having these roles been abandoned, though, there was no replacement through alternative concrete figures and formation processes, that could recover the pastoral dynamism and the charismatic aspects which the former experience brought with it.

Thus, I believe that *it is not enough to say that it is important to bring back a more attentive pastoral care and systematic Christian formation of the young, together with spiritual companionship*; it is not enough to propose seminars, masters and workshops on spiritual direction. We need to *reflect regarding the persons who are called to take on this ministry within the educative pastoral communities*, on the ways, times, forms and initiatives. And this needs to be translated in *choices of government*, revisioning of our organisations and regulations of our houses, in *defining roles and duties* in a very clear way. Otherwise, it will get down to pure pious exhortations and good intentions; leaving everything to the goodwill and sensibility of the single salesian, who in his turn is forced to look out for other sources and other pastoral practices. In this way providing for himself formation moments outside the official ones, outside the educational rhythm of the salesian house. In these years we have witnessed – with consolation, but also with amazement – various significant initiatives by some more zealous confrères and sisters, who felt duty bound to start schools of prayer, to establish formation groups or movements, to found centres for spirituality, oasis and contemplative communities, but outside of the salesian institution.

In synthesis: 1) Spiritual companionship of the young by Don Bosco takes place within a formative integral environment and within an educational process aimed to favour their “Christian education”. It is part and parcel of educational interaction; spiritual fatherhood is the continuation of educational fatherhood. 2) The type of companionship proposed by Don Bosco has various grades, depending on the those to be reached and the condition they are in; it has as its central moment the sacrament of reconciliation; it aims to reach all the young, to bring them to God and help them embrace Christian perfection. 3) Spiritual direction has a definite preventive dimension, since it engages with pre-adolescents with whom surprising results can be achieved. 4) The formation process continues into adolescence, thanks to the relationship established with the confessor/director, to the qualities of the educational environment and to the active role given to the young themselves; all this calls

for communities which are both aware and fervent, salesians who are dedicated and present, plurality of proposals, an ability to present spiritual life in an attractive manner; Don Bosco, for this vision, had defined clear roles and formative commitments. These were abandoned after SGC XX. 5). Today we need to take stock of the situation: exhortations are not enough, institutional decisions are indeed necessary.

2. The attitudes of the spiritual companion and the accompanied

We can say that *spiritual companionship is an essential part of salesian assistance*, as it was understood by Don Bosco. Saint Francis de Sales in the foreword to the *Introduction to the devout life*, twice he uses the term “assistance” (*assistance*) to qualify the role of the spiritual director, whom he calls «conductor» (*conducteur*) and «faithful friend», sometimes «guide» and «custodian angel»: he is the one who *shows the way and leads (conducts), warns, counsels, teaches, directs, examines, corrects, heals, consoles, protects (preservare) from harm and strengthens (consolidare) what is good*. His role goes beyond simple friendship or counselling, since it consists in sharing of personal experiences with the aim of offering passionate reasons (*stimoli appassionati*) that encourage abiding in the interior journey, determined to move on, with a convinced heart and with spiritual joy. Here we find great convergence with the model of companionship as presented by Don Bosco.

1. The attitudes of the spiritual companion coincide with those *characteristic traits of the salesian educator, as outlined in the writings on the Preventive System*. It is worth re-reading these texts from the perspective of spiritual companionship. Formation is assured, says Don Bosco, only «if the educator applies himself with zeal in his mission»; he «is one who is *consecrated to the good of his students*, so he should be *ready to face any difficulty*, any demand so as to achieve his aim». Let the director and those who assist, «like *loving fathers* speak to (the young), be their guides in every moment, let them counsel and correct with love». Their actions and their attitudes are inspired by Christian charity, which «is benign and patient, accepts everything, hopes everything, and bears any suffering». «The director, therefore, should be *consecrated to those whom he educates*, never should he take on commitments that take him away from his mission, on the contrary, he should always be with his students». In this way, «having gained» their heart, he «can exercise over them great influence, warning them counselling and even correcting them». ⁴ The relationship that is established between the salesian formator and the young should always have the imprint of «the *deepest friendliness (cordialità)*», since «*familiarity* leads to love, and love leads to *confidence*. It is this that opens up the heart and the young reveal everything without fear [...], they become honest in confession and outside, and they are readily open to all that is asked from them by the one whom they know he loves them». But familiarity is built «*especially during recreation*»: ⁵

⁴ G. BOSCO, *Il sistema preventivo nell'educazione della gioventù*, in P. BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, Roma, LAS 1997, 258-266.

⁵ G. BOSCO, *Due lettere da Roma, 10 maggio 1884*, in BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore*, 378 e 384.

«Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of the friendly approach. The teacher who is seen only in the classroom is a teacher and nothing more; but if he joins in the pupils' recreation he becomes their brother. If someone is only seen preaching from the pulpit it will be said that he is doing no more and no less than his duty, whereas if he says a good word in recreation it is heard as the word of one who loves. How many conversions have been brought about by a few words whispered in the ear of a youngster while he is playing. One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. This confidence creates an electric current between youngsters and their superiors. Hearts are opened, needs and weaknesses made known. This love enables superiors to put up with the weariness, the annoyance, the ingratitude, the troubles that youngsters cause. Jesus Christ did not crush the bruised reed nor quench the smouldering flax. He is your model [...] If we have this true love, we shall not seek anything other than the glory of God and the good of souls».⁶

This *friendly and paternal presence* for Don Bosco is an essential component of the salesian pastoral model. In the *Memoirs of the Oratory* he comments on his own reaction when in Castelnuovo he experienced this distance from the priests.⁷ The same goes for the behaviour of the superiors in the seminary, that even if they loved him, yet that was not enough: «How many times I desired to talk to them, to ask advice or to help me in my doubts»; they were too austere, distant, and all this fomented in him the desire «to soon be a priest and spend time with the young, accompanying them, and serving them in every possible way».⁸

2. We also find in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* those attitudes that characterize the ideal model of companionship according to Don Bosco. He hints at them by embodying them in certain personages within his account. First of all when he presents the *spiritual assistance* given to him by his mother: from her he receives the first religious instruction, introduced to prayer and carefully accompanied to the first confession and communion. His account emphasizes the mother's formative role, presenting her an example of *personal spiritual guide*. We have a model of an educational relationship able to establish, through reason, religion and loving-kindness, an intense communicative flow that reaches the mind, the heart and the conscience of her son.

«My mother *coached* me for days – he writes while recalling the attention given to him by his mother as an 11-year old – and brought me to confession three times during that Lent. “My dear John,” she would say, “God is going to give you a wonderful gift. Make sure you prepare well for it. Go to confession and don't keep anything back. Tell all your sins to the priest, be sorry for them all, and promise God to do better in the future” [...] At home, she saw to it that I said my prayers and read good books; and she always came up with the advice which a diligent mother knows how to give her children.» The evening of

⁶ BOSCO, *Due lettere da Roma*, 385.

⁷ «Se io fossi prete, vorrei fare diversamente; vorrei avvicinarmi ai fanciulli, vorrei dire loro delle buone parole, dare dei buoni consigli», G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di san Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di A. Giraud, Roma, LAS 2011, 75.

⁸ BOSCO, *Memorie*, 105.

that same day, «amongst the many things that my mother repeated to me many times was this: “My dear son, this is a great day for you. I am convinced that God has really taken possession of your heart. Now promise him to be good as long as you live. Go to communion frequently in the future, but beware of sacrilege. Always be frank in confession, be obedient always, go willingly to catechism and sermons. But for the love of God, avoid like the plague those who indulge in bad talk.” I treasured my mother's advice and tried to carry it out. I think that from that day on there was some improvement in my life, especially in matters of obedience and submission to others. It was not easy for me to be submissive because I liked to do things my way and follow my own childish whims rather than listen to those who gave me advice or told me what to do».⁹

There could always be the objection that Mamma Margherita's action could be more interpreted as “religious education”, and less as “spiritual companionship”. However, the general context in which Don Bosco produces his biographical memoirs, the aims and the audience of his story, somehow tend to confirm that he perceives this educational moment as true and proper spiritual initiation. Maternal assistance is taken to mean the first important moment of spiritual companionship. Infact, he moves from within the art of pedagogy to *spiritual mystagogy* and *personal witness*. In the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Margherita emerges as an icon of family ministry, which in its turn proves to be an inspirational source of the formative model of the Oratory.

3. Later on, at the treshold of adolescence, the meeting with that “fatherly heart” that Don Calosso was, will codify a decisive spiritual progress in the spiritual life of Giovanni. The old priest *introduces him to the dynamics of interior life*. Reading his account of the meeting and dialogue that went on between the two, we are soon reminded of so many other dialogues that Don Bosco himself will hold with the young: his particular way of lovingly fixing his regard on them, in a way that opens wide their mind and their heart in a reciprocal empathic rapport. Don Bosco gives great importance to the positive effects that holds this *educational friendship with Don Calosso* and to the symbolic value given to it:

«I put myself completely into Fr. Calosso's hands [...]. *I bared my soul to him*. Every word, thought, and act I revealed to him promptly. This pleased him because it made it possible for him to have an influence on both my spiritual and temporal welfare. It was then that I came to realise what it was to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of one's soul. I had not had one up till then».¹⁰

In the behaviour of the old priest that approaches the young man with a pastoral heart, ready to be interested in him, an intense bond of fatherhood and sonship progressively develops between the two. There is trust from the disciple whose heart reveals its thoughts, ready to obey. Here we notice some of the classic characteristics of spiritual companionship. The consequences of which we are aware, help us to capture both the impact this fatherly welcoming attitude and the formative experience that Don Calosso exercised on the heart of Giovanni: «From then on *I began to savour the spiritual life*; up to then I had acted

⁹ BOSCO, *Memorie*, 68-69.

¹⁰ BOSCO, *Memorie*, 71.

in a purely mechanical way, not knowing the reasons».¹¹ He goes through a type of *spiritual renewal* that gives life to his inner consciousness. There is life flowing between a father who welcomes in a generous way and a son who feels loved, and who experiences in a profound way within himself a type of *birth in God and to himself*. Giovanni, at the age of 14 - 15 years, is encouraged to *move further on in the depth of his own self*, where he can “taste” the beauty and the joy of spiritual life. In this type of companionship, there is a component of teaching, correction and encouragement, being this typical of a certain educational relationship: «Amongst other things he forbade a penance I used to practise: he deemed it unsuited to my age and circumstances. He encouraged frequent confession and communion. He taught me how to make a short daily meditation, or more accurately, a spiritual reading».¹² It is not merely a matter of simple catechesis on God, on the virtuous and moral life. It is rather an accompaniment of the young person towards a kind of faith that is more alive and ardent. The adolescent is helped to be more conscious of himself, of his deep-seated desires; he is sustained in purifying, directing and orientating them towards God. In all this he experiences satisfaction, joy, enlightenment and a happiness about life which are completely new...

4. According to Don Bosco, the outside image of self is very important, the way of being and presenting oneself, the way of establishing relationships with the young. The theologian Borel plays a role on the *Memoirs* as a model of this “salesian” style of relationship, full of sympathy and joyful, together with interior depth and willingness to communicate: «He appeared in the sacristy with a smiling face and a joking manner of speaking, but always seasoned with moral thoughts. When I saw the way he celebrated Mass, his bearing, his preparation, and his thanksgiving, I realized at once that here was a worthy priest. [...] When he began to preach, I noted the simplicity, liveliness, clarity, and fire of charity that filled all his words». The result was that «we all raced to go to confession to him in order to speak of our vocations and receive some advice. I too wanted to discuss the affairs of my soul with him».¹³

5. In the biographies of Domenic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco we find interesting aspects of method on how to prepare the terrain in view of spiritual companionship. Right from the very first meeting, Don Bosco seeks to *create those favourable conditions in view of a formative relationship*, establishing with the young a channel of communication which has an affective tone to it. In an intelligent and intuitive way, he puts into action psychological processes aimed at clearing away prejudices and mistrust, creating space for *trust (confidenza) and reciprocal sympathy*. He promotes a reassuring dialogue, aimed at getting to know the person. He is interested in his story, his condition, his character and aspirations. He does his best to understand the desires and the needs. He *invites him to raise his regard*, opening up for him significant horizons of meaning. Finally, he makes himself available to help in a concrete way in view of finding solutions to problems, fulfilment of desires. In this manner, the young

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ BOSCO, *Memorie*, 116.

person feels understood, welcomed, loved and sustained. As a reaction within him there is gratitude, trust, desire to abandon oneself and collaborate in this educational venture.

The rest will follow, having been introduced in the Oratory environment: rich in formative proposals, significant human relationships, liveliness, expressions of freedom, within which the young person gradually arrives to be conscious of his own interior reality, with its lights and shadows, needs and desires – as we discover in the life of Michael Magone. The trust in his educator-friend will bring him to the point of *opening up his heart, free from resistances*, towards an ever deeper availability. The one who accompanies can thus *uncover the interior horizons, indicating paths and journeys* that will render the young free from conditioning elements, so as to accede to the higher levels of the spirit, by responding to God's appeals. The biographies of the three young men, in line with the account relating to the friendship with Don Calosso, outline this high moment within which the young person *perceives reality in a new light*. Values and experiences that were previously lived in an epidermic way, or only mechanically, now acquire a new meaning. In this way the young person is conducted to take on board joyfully and without any further delay the spiritual journey.

For example, the description of the change that took place in Michael Magone, in his way of feeling and acting after the general confession, is a concrete expression of the efficacy of *spiritual assistance* put in place by Don Bosco. During the first month spent in Valdocco, faithful to the promise made, he tried to fulfill his daily duties, but without any enthusiasm. His heart was somewhere else, as Don Bosco himself writes: «In the first few days the only things he really enjoyed were the recreations. To sing, to yell out, to run, jump, play around were the things which most appealed to his lively nature».¹⁴ Little by little, the presence and the friendship of a good companion, the environment with its valuable and stimulating messages, the encounter with other young persons, morally and spiritually solid, lead him to the consciousness of his own interior state, putting him into an uncomfortable *crisis*. Being accompanied in a wise and delicate way by Don Bosco, he is encouraged to go through a conversion of the heart.¹⁵ Thus he moves on from a distressing and unclear state of self-guilt, discovering the Christian understanding of sin and God's mercy. He decides to «break off with the devil». Fear gives way to love, in a generous offering of self to the Lord. Happily and freely he finds himself introduced into the realm of spiritual life. Don Bosco describes in clear terms the sense of peace of the young man, his joyful experience, fruit of inner freedom. As from that moment all reality has a new sense of light and meaning to it. There is some kind of transfiguration in the way of understanding both self and life. Michael continues to remain lively in recreation, but he is also the first to accomplish his daily duties, more careful and ready to be of service towards his companions.¹⁶ Don Bosco shows how Michael's new attitude is generated out of a «spirit of living faith», «exemplary care», «an uplifting attitude in all practices of piety», lived with recollection and fervour: God's love has taken possession of his heart and this has changed him.¹⁷

¹⁴ G. BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1861, 15.

¹⁵ Cf. BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 16-24.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 33-39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

After this first decisive step, which is nothing short of the rediscovery of the baptismal state, there lies open the experience of the spiritual life.

6. In the biographies of these young men, Don Bosco explicitly refers to the *attitudes that can render fruitful a relationship of spiritual companionship*. Having in mind the young, he very much insists on the importance of choosing a «faithful soul friend» with whom to establish «*filial trust*» (*filiale confidenza*). He frequently comes back on this point, since he considers it as the qualifying element of his educational experience. In reaction to the sacrament of confession, he points to the *climate made up of serene relationships*. «My dear young people – he writes in the Life of Michael Magone –, remember that the confessor is a father who ardently desires to help you as much as possible and who tries to keep every evil far from you. [...] I can even assure you that the more open and sincere you are with him, the greater his confidence in you will become and the more likely will he be in a position to give you the best advice possible for the welfare of your soul. [...] I have stressed these matters lest the devil tempt you to keep back some sin when you go to confession».¹⁸ It is the first step. Yet Don Bosco *tends to identify educator, confessor and spiritual “director”*. For this reason that he insists so much on trust (confidenzialità) in this relationship: «Go to your confessor regularly, pray for him, follow his directions. When you have chosen a confessor who is able to understand and help you, do not go to another unless you have solid reasons for doing so. Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your trust, you will always lack a friend for your soul».¹⁹

There is a word for confessors inviting them to «*receive with loving-kindness*» the young who come to confession, *helping them* «to open up their conscience», insisting «that they frequently go to confession», sustaining them with every «way so that they put in practice the advice given»; *correcting* «with kindness» never to tell them off. He ends up giving an advice out of his own experience, aimed at clearing any psychological doubt about the past, any sense of guilt, that does not give an objective impression of self and can compromise the necessary calm needed to build oneself from inside: «When you have gained their confidence, prudently find out whether all their confessions in the past were well made. [...] Invite the penitent to ponder the state of his conscience well from when he was seven up until he was ten»²⁰. We need not forget that in the educational environment of Valdocco, *the appeal for trust goes well beyond the objective moment of the sacrament*; it concerns the whole experience and the varied meetings between the young and the educator. For Don Bosco the relationship between the confessor and the young is not to be separated from the educational process as a whole. All these aspects enter into the process of formative companionship in the wider sense.

In the lives of Domenic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco we find more defined indications. In that of Savio we read on the insistence of confidence and faithful *trust* (*affidamento*). Right from the very first encounter, being eager to listen to Don Bosco’s advice with whom «*full trust*» (*piena confidenza*) has been established, Domenic asks: «“Well, what do you think of the matter; will you take

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

me to Turin to study?” I replied that I thought there was very good material to work upon. “And what do you think you can make of it?” Seeing that he fully grasped my meaning I said: “Something beautiful and acceptable to God”.²¹ Don Bosco is more explicit when he comments on the disposition of the young man when he meets him the second time, as if to suggest that this was the secret of his spiritual progress: «Once he arrived at the Oratory, he came to my room, in order to place himself, as he said, *entirely in the hands of his Director*».²²

Identical is the reaction of Francis Besucco, who upon his arrival in Valdocco, wanted to do a general confession: «*I want to put my soul in your hands, I want to reveal to you everything that is on my conscience so that you can with greater surety give me the advice best adapted to help me save my soul*».²³ It reflects a total giving of self. *The trust in the educator, seen as a friend and loving father, creates in its turn availability and disposition.* We are aware that trustful self-giving of the educated, within the system of Don Bosco, is mainly the result of the way the educator renders himself present: his ardent charity, his way of doing things and charitable availability, ability to be empathic, generous and cordial readiness to be present and spend his time with the young and for their well-being. It is the quality of this personality, his concrete actions that gain the heart of the young, and render him worthy of trust and confidence. All these elements he considered them as having a determining effect. He frequently recommended them to the salesians, presenting them as well in his autobiographical personal journey as aspects that helped realize the oratorian mission. He did it by recalling the youthful rapport with Don Calosso. He commented it in a more emphatical way reminding the spiritual direction with Don Cafasso: «for six years had been my guide, was also my spiritual director. If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest *in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life*».²⁴ The dialogue with his teacher at the end of his studies at the Convitto, is an impressive witness of the unconditional *obedience* and of “*holy indifference*”. These he presents as expressions of a mature Christian call, a basis for the fulfilment of divine will: «I want to see the will of God in your choice, and I don't want my desires in it at all».²⁵

In synthesis: 1) Accompaniment is an integral part of salesian assistance; the attitudes of the salesian who accompanies are those which characterize the Preventive System. 2) A fundamental trait is personalized attention, affection (intimità materna) that matures into spiritual mystogogy. 3) Another characteristic is that of paternal adoption, that shares the journey, educational friendship through which light can be shed, and dynamics of interior spiritual life can be set in place which generate in God and to self. 4) It is also important the way we introduce ourselves to the young, a relationship which has the imprint of sympathy and joy, together with a witness of deep personal depth

²¹ G. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1859, 35.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ G. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera*, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales, 1864, 101.

²⁴ BOSCO, *Memorie*, 126.

²⁵ BOSCO, *Memorie*, 133.

and desire to communicate it. 5) Don Bosco is a model: he embodies in himself the educator, the confessor and the spiritual director; he insists of welcoming the young lovingly, on kindness, generous heart and the attention to little details, true affection, in a way that the young can trust and confide, that they be part of the formative processes through obedience which is alert and joyful.