

# Salesian Family Spirituality Days

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## Salesian Spirituality in practice: Borgo Don Bosco, family home

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I am a Salesian Cooperator, chief psychologist in the 're-attach the wings' programme at Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco.

Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco opened in 1948 in Centocelle, a suburb of Rome, taking in sciuscià, or war orphans, whom the Salesians collected off the streets as Don Bosco did in Turin. I grew up at Borgo; I was born in that suburb and began attending the oratory. I then became a leader and soon after a Cooperator, along with my fiancée Agnese who was also a leader. I was 24 and she was just 20. In our discernment, guided by a Salesian who was our spiritual director, we grew as a couple and as a family, Salesians deep down, and we wanted to dedicate ourselves to less advantaged youngsters. So we began to collaborate with the reception centre for children who were there instead of receiving a prison sentence. This is why I gained a degree in psychology. Two years later we married and left as international volunteers with VIS. We were sent to Albania to work with an educative and pastoral community made up of sdb's, fmas and volunteers. We spent two years there, experiencing the problems of the civil war but also seeing miracle wrought through the application of the preventive system with young people who had no idea of God and no one to guide them. In this dangerous time we really felt we were "children in their mother's arms". When we returned we had no idea really what we would do, but knew that we wanted to continue in this spirit, while at the same time we had 4 children. We trusted and along the way our direction open up for us.

This introduction was necessary because my work now at Borgo comes out of life experience, from a missionary mandate, and a dream that Don Bosco put in both of our hearts. At the end of the 1990s the Salesian community at Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco, at the request of the Province, began to rethink its presence in the area seeking to rediscover its fidelity to its original mandate: looking after the poorest youngsters in a way that was obviously adapted to our times. With a group of sdb's and laity we studied and prayed over a two year period at the end of which Providence played its part and we opened a family home for teenagers, offering them semi-autonomous arrangements, a movement of families that could be trusted and worked together, a centre for psychological help and, in 2008, a day centre at Termini where we had a group of experts working in Salesian way then shifted to Borgo.

At the moment, in the programme we call "Reattaching the wings" we take in more than 200 young people at risk each year, and there are some 30 staff and 100 volunteers. These particular activities for kids in trouble are linked with the rest of the work, and the oratory which is the heart and centre of all our vocational training. Every day we have an experience not unlike St Paul writing in Hebrews and recalling the experience of Abraham and Sarah: "remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without realising it" (Heb 13:2). That has become our motto and we often contemplate it when we bring in boys and girls but also many volunteers and families who play their part, including by taking some into the intimacy of their own homes. We have been aware that Don Bosco and Mary Help of Christians also bring us

youngsters who have known and come across them in their countries of origin! Some time after taking them in we have learned that such a youngsters was already a child of Don Bosco!

We begin each day with the staff at the Reception centre by reading the Gospel of the day and with a passage taken from a book to do with Salesian formation for that year. We take it in turns to comment on this then entrust the day, the kids and our plans to Mary and the Lord, and then hand out tasks to people. How often it has happened that we have been able to contemplate that what we was experienced, seen, put up with or brought about by Don Bosco can be linked, *mutatis mutandae*, with what we experience today, beginning with his dreams, enthusiasm and decisiveness in doing good for young people whatever the cost. It is up to us then to tackle the day knowing that the Lord is there in whatever happens. In the staff room we have put up article 19 of the Salesian Constitutions: "The Salesian is called to be a realist and to be attentive to the signs of the times, convinced that the Lord manifests His will also through the demands of time and place. Hence his spirit of initiative: "In those things which are for the benefit of young people in danger or which serve to win souls for God, I push ahead even to the extent of recklessness."

I am constantly aware that if Don Bosco had been a great educator but not a man of faith, not a saint, he could not have done the same things. My everyday experience of meeting people in terrible situations challenges me as an educator, psychologist, but especially as a human being and believer in the Risen Lord. It challenges me and forces me to go to the roots of my Faith so that I can give reasons for the hope that I am trying to lead those who feel they have no escape towards. Without Faith and Hope how could I, I often ask myself, believe in the possibility that every young person could change his or her life? Believe that in every young person – yes including those before me whom I look in the face and who get up to all kinds of things, despite so many failed attempts – there is some point accessible to good? That also amongst the so-called bad apples there can be good seed?

In his constant relationship with God Don Bosco found strength, reason, motivation. Through my relationship with God and feeling that I am loved in a unique way I can discover that the other is my brother and sister and that it is worth investing each day in loving my brother and sister in a special way, through encountering the other, encountering God. I am discovering that Don Bosco set up a community because only in community relationships can we celebrate our daily encounter with God.

The most difficult kids are a challenge to our faith, and the limit to our acceptance is in our ability to accept them, an ability we see grow to the extent that we trust in Him who loved these kids first and has entrusted them to us. These youngsters become our masters because in their eyes we glimpse God's gaze. Through them we encounter Him. In their dreams we glimpse God's plan for them. And walking with them we are constantly urged to grow in our capacity to love, grow in Faith and in Charity.

We have no experience of sheep and shepherds but we can contemplate the personalised educational plans for our kids in the family home and try out and try out yet again all our strategies to help them discover the personalised love of the Good Shepherd and the greatness of Don Bosco who chose Him as the icon for his Salesians, called to love each of them as God loves them.

The challenge then is to move from unconditional acceptance and from love that shows up for the kids as interest in them as human beings and in their story, to preparing them to encounter God. Here too Don Bosco was our teacher: we are aware – with the help of the recent Strennas of the Rector Major – that it is worth daring to do this.

The kids know we pray for them in the morning, speak to them about God and that we are interested in their religious affiliation when we take them in just as we are interested in the other aspects of their story. We invite them to be part of Salesian feasts, to send an sms to Don Bosco, to discuss faith in their groups and these little seeds prepare the ground. It is the Spirit who then suggests the way ahead to them and to us. At times we have to wait and seize occasions for moving from witness to proclamation.

We have retreats together where we involve them, and invite them to understand that we educate through words and deed but especially through who we are, the value we have within and that shine through or not apart from anything we do. It is by being with them, simply patiently, that we can seize occasions which present in order to reach their hearts.

We become better witnesses knowing that through Don Bosco and his sons Providence has worked miracle after miracle and today it is up to us, in our little way, to continue with the same approach and the same Faith: the youngsters and their families are not ours, the works are not ours but we are instruments, through each one's daily contribution, for Don Bosco's charism and the memoirs of the Oratory to continue... Other chapters, other books, but the same chief characters: Providence, Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco... the kids!