

Giornate di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana

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EXPERIENCING SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY IN RIONE AMICIZIA, A SUBURB OF NAPLES

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In this final year of preparation for the Bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth we are reflecting on his spirituality and how to live it today in our various situations. This is why I have been asked to share with you the experience of fourteen years in the Salesian Oblate Sacred Heart Community in Naples.

We have been active in the St John Bosco parish and oratory run by the Salesians, since 1999, lending a hand in parish ministry, catechetics and the oratory. For a number of years I have been teaching religion at the junior secondary school there and in a number of other quite difficult areas. We are located in a popular neighbourhood in Naples which features many young families and therefore many young people.

Salesian spirituality: embodied in a particular setting

Fitting into this scene is something we have done gradually and over time, and this has allowed us to move from where people were surprised to where they now are curious. It was surprise when the work opened, but now we are able to sincerely share what we are experiencing today. I still recall meeting a sixteen year-old who, after watching us for a week, asked us why we were there and suggested it might be more convenient to go somewhere else because there, with them, we would find “nothing very nice”! The young man needed to have his hope re-awakened ... for indeed his view of things was pretty much realistic. This area suffers severe social problems tied to unemployment, illegal labour where there is work, for the most part, with no guarantees and difficult hours; any escape from this seems to be only by leaving the place and this means that some of the best energies are haemorrhaging from our suburb. This precarious scene also involves family relationships, couples often showing emotional instability, taking on parenthood too soon, when they are still immature. Parents have great difficulty in bringing up their children. No surprise then that there is a high rate of school drop-out, and school is seen as a place that limits rather than frees young people even though there are some who succeed, pass their final exams and even some who succeed at university. The social context also means that some fall into crime, tempted by easy money.

A “Da mihi animas”: experienced in daily life...

I believe these years spent at Rione Amicizia have been a strong experience of Salesian spirituality in daily life. Our intense apostolic work has been an expression of Don Bosco's pastoral charity experienced through the specific overtones of the founder, Salesian Bishop Giuseppe Cognata. So the “Da mihi animas” has been coloured with the evangelical overtones of “Pick up the pieces left over so that nothing gets wasted” (cf. Jn 6:12) taking in the little

ones and the poor, being companions on the journey and a silent and discreet presence to young mothers, the youngest children in humility, simplicity and familiarity.

The “Da mihi animas”, further enlivened by the Pauline motto “Caritas Christi urget nos” “The love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14) which inspires the Salesian Oblates, has become a daily encounter with so many faces, so many stories that have revealed the face of Christ to me. This has encouraged me to love with a generous heart, courageously and firmly point out goals for growing up, share joy and suffering, work with tireless enthusiasm and form hope.

This is how these years of mission at Rione Amicizia have become a real training ground in holiness and encounter with the God who loves life, offers himself in Oblation, because he is the Good Shepherd. Apostolic activity has been marked by the task of establishing positive human relationships, approaching families through the welcome we give their children, including the youngest of them, setting up a local network of interest in the parish and oratory through encouraging and supportive presence.

It is through simple apostolic gestures like this that, day by day, we have sought to proclaim the presence of Jesus who takes care of his people and is a neighbour to all, offering his life as a gift of love. Apostolic involvement has been a daily incarnation of the Gospel petition “May your Kingdom come” following the politics of the Our Father as Don Bosco wanted it; this commitment to helping the Kingdom of God grow amidst young people and families, promoting human and religious development, is where I have met Christ, sometimes clearly and evidently, and at other times in the suffering of the seed that must die so that life can sprout.

... enlivened by hope ...

Living out the “Da mihi animas” in this kind of setting means rejoicing at tiny results without being discouraged by failures, trusting in human resources and God's grace and in humble, patient, hidden work; it means sharing joys and anxieties of youngsters and families, continuing to sow and never giving up.

The years I have spent at Rione Amicizia have been years where Salesian spirituality has been lived strongly under the banner of hope: hoping and continuing to struggle to sow Christian values even in the face of quite difficult situations. Hope and trust in the inner resources of young people has helped us continue because while some might have chosen useless paths that they have paid with their lives for there are others who, with all the objective situations of frailty, have grown, learned a trade, and take an active part in the life of the oratory so they can give back what they have received.

... witnessed to through communion

So I can state that in this setting it has been possible to have a real experience of the spirituality Don Bosco has passed on to us and I would like to conclude by highlighting one aspect which I believe is not secondary but the basis of a real spiritual experience: communion in mission.

All the apostolic work we carry out at Rione Amicizia is marked by a deep experience of communion. The first element of communion is the Oblate community which is a strong point for mission; the youngsters and much more the families have perceived this as a sign and guarantee of the goodness and beauty of a life harmonised by the presence of God. Also significant has been the experience of communion within the Salesian Family. The Salesian Oblates community has always worked together with the other SF groups in the neighbourhood: Salesians, Cooperators, Don Bosco Volunteers, Volunteers With Don Bosco, so that the parish and oratory can be a stable educational setting and a support for young people and their families. Communion in living out the Salesian mission has been, therefore, a true experience of shared spirituality.

Experiencing Salesian spirituality as an Oblate at Rione amicizia means nourishing our hearts with hope, and for this area which has been so violated physically and in its people, there is hope of redemption; giving oneself constantly and with passion to spark in the hearts of so many young people and young families the desire to do and be something better, to broaden the horizons of personal and cultural existence, discover that it is possible to dream of a better and different future.