



The Salesian approach to young people



Let the young know they are loved

My belief is that in every young person there is an individual goodness, and where I cannot yet see it, then I am challenged find it. "You are young, you are precious, you are loved."

It all starts with my attitude to young people, my belief, value system and my spiritual development. My values, beliefs, spirituality, are "caught", by my being a role model for the young person.

I want to be engaged with the young and make a difference in their lives, so that they can grow up as honest, effective citizens of this world and the next. Citizenship is a very popular word today — but was used by Don Bosco 150 years ago.

Some sayings from past Salesian educators, starting with Don Bosco, come to mind: "It is not enough to love the young; they must know that they are loved." "Education is a matter of the heart, and we need to ask God for the keys."

How?

Meet them on their own ground: no matter what they are "doing". We saw in the popular film, how Don Bosco stole money from the young gamblers and encouraged the young people to chase him right back to base, where he introduced them to others, and eventually gave them their money back, with their promise of returning on the following days. Their motivation at the start was to get their money—still very relevant today—but we like to think that the atmosphere that was created in the "oratory" was such that they felt eventually at home. What an innovative way to begin a relationship, that perhaps, lasted a long time, and would bear fruit in Salesian principles being passed on to their children. This may be a "glossy" story, but it points out the creativity that sometimes we need to use ourselves, in contacting and making relationships with the young in today's world

Young people "in their liberty of spirit" can be found in the most "inappropriate" places, as we might see it, for many of us to contact them— around the betting shop, the local kebab/chip shop, the bowling alley, hanging on the corner, as they say "plotting", kicking a football, on a stairwell, smoking behind the school—where no rules but their own apply, where they think they can be themselves, where they don't want any adults to tell them what they should be doing. This approach can give them the friendship they need to face a harsh world, and that is very important. As we know, peer pressure can also lead them to behave in negative ways, break down any principles they have learned from home, school, church, etc., and can get them into "big trouble", the local adult population can actually become afraid of them, and see them as "gangs" of hoodlums.

It's up to those who feel daring enough, to find creative ways of making initial relationships, without judging, meeting them on their own ground, but longing to bring them on to our ground. Don Bosco gives us the inspiration on how to meet, start relationships and find ways of developing them, so that they let us "enter their door".

In formal set-ups, such as school, church or youth club, this is somewhat easier, because the young person is already a "captive audience", on our ground, but the same principle applies: become their friend, not their "mate" and create an atmosphere where they feel good about being with you.

There are many stories of how Don Bosco made inroads into relationships with the young and we can read them and still apply today the principles he used.

Have a friendly attitude. Use innovative ways of meeting them on "their ground", as the Salesian Constitutions say "in their liberty of Spirit". Be interested in their world, where they are on their journey, without judging. Listen without seeming nosy, trying to engage in their world, finding common ground. Make a positive developing relationship, being involved in their activities. "Go through their door, to bring them out your door."

It's a question of maintaining a fine balance, the tightrope walk that Don Bosco used as a young boy and referred to metaphorically many times in his life. Keep your eyes always ahead (on the vision, on the Lord). Never look down (think negatively). Never look back (regret, counting the cost).

Find situations, actions, no matter how small, to praise, encourage. Give them the large dream, and the small dreams to look forward to, "one step at a time"

Offer them what they need, mixed with what they want, starting from where they are.

Don Bosco didn't have many physical resources, but he used all his human ones.