



General Secretariat For the Synod of Bishops



Salesian Spirituality

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I have gladly accepted the invitation to share the experience and vision of communal discernment and synodality in Salesian spirituality. I must immediately point out that in our sources we do not have a theoretical and systematic explanation left to us by our Founders, but rather a life experience, a praxis rooted in the gift of our charism, that is our preferential love for little ones, that is, the poor, especially the young, and women.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, and with the direct intervention of Mary Help of Christians, St. John Bosco and St. Mary D. Mazzarello made the presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd perceptible to the young; He who knows us, who calls us by name, who gives life in abundance.

We live this charism in community and as a community animated by the spirit of family. In it we find space to pray, think, plan, work and celebrate together, valuing and integrating the contributions of the different generations. Our style of relating is inspired by the Christian humanism of St. Francis de Sales that our Founders tried to elaborate in a vital way and that, from generation to generation, is enriched by our listening to the new educational challenges and in by our walking together with the Church. In a network with many lay and religious women, we seek to bear witness to a new evangelically inspired feminism in today's society (cf. *Evangelium Vitae* 99) and to educate women to build, in collaboration with men, a culture of life, encounter, and reciprocity.

The event of the Second Vatican Council, with its rich reflection on the dignity and vocation of the human person in God's plan and on the ecclesiology of communion, has also urged our Institute to reflect more deeply on the globality and complexity of the educative endeavor, which is always a “choral” event that requires synergy, coordination, and synodality.

In this light, in recent years, a new manner of animation and governance that we have called *coordination for communion* has matured within the Institute. This happened through the long and patient work of reflection and exchange especially in the General Chapters after Vatican II and now formulated in the *Formative Project (formation handbook)* of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: "Coordination, which is essentially an action ordered to “seeking together”, facilitates personal unification and community convergence, demands and favors a planning mentality that requires serious and continuous validation; it is a relational strategy that awakens latent energies and allows for greater organizational agility. Since coordination is fundamentally a way of facing or encountering others, it connotes personal life and relationships."¹ And this style of seeking together is based on a journey of discernment in light of the Word of God, an interior school that shapes life according to the Spirit; it is, at the same time, a source of missionary boldness, insofar as it sustains the commitment to develop new responses to the new poverties of today's world (cf. VC 73).

¹Progetto formativo 136-137.

At the school of the Founders: St. John Bosco and St. Mary D. Mazzarello

The Founders of our Institute are convinced that God's will is discovered in prayer, in a process of listening to the Spirit and in a journey in which individuals and the community as a whole are concretely involved. Without using the term synodality, they inaugurated *in practice* a synodal style for communal life and educational mission.

Don Bosco, a man guided by the Holy Spirit, was very attentive to the signs of God in circumstances and events. To those who asked him, for example, what his pedagogical method was, he replied: "I have always gone forward as the Lord inspired me and circumstances demanded".² Fidelity to this criterion of discernment also accompanied him in the foundation of our Institute.

After a long journey of prayer and personal discernment, he reached out to and involved the General Council of the Salesians, at that time called the *Superior Chapter*. He consulted and involved everyone in a process of discernment: "In May 1870 Don Bosco, having called the Chapter together, recommended that they pray for a month in order to obtain the necessary enlightenment to know whether he should take care of the girls, as he was from time to time urged to do. At the end of the month, he gathered the Chapter again, asking each one for his opinion; all agreed that it was appropriate to also do this good".³

When he realized that this was God's will, he set to work and involved many other people: He confided in and gave responsibility to Maria Domenica Mazzarello, co-founder of the Institute; he involved Don Domenico Pestarino, a diocesan priest, who had been accompanying the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in Mornese for some years; he solicited the collaboration of the Sisters of Saint Anne, founded by the Marquis of Barolo, to draw up the Constitutions of the Institute and to give consistency to their religious life in the early days at Mornese; he chose Salesian directors who had the mission of ensuring the quality of the community's spiritual life and committed himself to forging a family atmosphere where everyone, even if young, felt co-responsible for a common mission.

In Don Bosco, therefore, the FMA have a model of listening to the Spirit and of involving people. It is interesting that Don Bosco, as Founder, is not alone in carrying out his original inspiration; he does not enter into the smallest details during the founding process, but he allows others to intervene, even though he is the first to carry out the work. He allows the very life of the primitive community to contribute to its configuration. He does not draw up the rules by himself, but asks for the contribution of others, while assuming the role of legislator. He knows how to welcome and "make use", in a certain sense, of all the stimuli that he finds within the circumstances of history, in order to bring to completion a work that he knows is of God. He knows how to wait for long periods of time, how to let people and projects develop at their own pace, and how to give autonomy and freedom to Don Pestarino, to Maria D. Mazzarello and her young sisters. As Founder, he is also a true educator, who helps people grow and gives them responsibility.⁴

The first community of the FMA in Mornese was configured, from the beginning, as an open and cooperative community, where girls and teachers (Sisters and lay women) along with spiritual directors shared the same project in a mutual attitude of trust and co-responsibility in the search for God's will. All this begins in the awareness that each person possesses resources within that must be awakened and enhanced so that each one might express themselves fully for God's glory and in service of the common educational mission.⁵

² *Memorie Biografiche di don Bosco* XVIII, 127.

³ SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIO, TAURINEN, *Beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Joannis Bosco Sacerdotis Fundatoris Piae Societatis Salesanae. Positio Super Virtutibus. Summarium*, Romae, Typ. Salesiana, s.d., 68.

⁴ Cf POSADA Maria Esther, *Don Bosco Fondatore dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in MIDALI Mario (a cura di), *Don Bosco Fondatore della Famiglia Salesiana. Atti del Simposio (Roma-Salesianum, 22-26 gennaio 1989)*, Roma, Edi-trice S.D.B. 1989, 303 e ss.

⁵ cf ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Nei solchi dell'Alleanza. Progetto formativo delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Leu-mann (TO), Elledici 2000, 133-135. From here on out abbreviated: *Progetto formativo*, followed by the page number.

Involvement, co-responsibility and the enhancement of each person's resources is evident both in daily moments and in the making of important decisions in which the contribution of each person is valued. Mother Mazzarello herself will always be a model of trusting others and of awakening the participation and co-responsibility of all the sisters and young people. In fact, not only does she, as mother and superior, have much to communicate to the sisters and girls entrusted to her, but they also have much to say and teach her. Ever attentive to this school of life, she often asked the Sisters and girls "What do you think?" and "What would you do in this case?", questions manifesting wisdom and a constant "seeking with."

Already in the first weekly conference after the founding of the Institute, she urged her sisters to "be of help and counsel to her; and therefore each one had to and could manifest her own views and opinions, so that everything might proceed better in every way".⁶ This attitude creates a benevolent atmosphere, where each person knows that she is welcomed, listened to and loved and, therefore shows herself for what she is, without fear. At the same time, each person matures in taking up, with responsibility, the commitment to contribute in the building up of the community, even in the distinction of the roles and tasks proper to each one.

This participatory style in the community's organization and mission characterized the original community and still characterizes the Institute today. When, over the years, situations of rigidity and individualism have threatened the Institute's life its fidelity to our charism, these situations have been overcome in correlation with the Gospel, with the magisterium of the Church and with the art of communication and animation typical of Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello and their successors.

A Praxis of Synodal Discernment

Discernment is a constitutive element for the life and mission of the Institute of the FMA. Our Founders were persons of discernment who — as we have seen — were well-versed in the art of stimulating involvement and co-responsibility. In many General Chapters discernment has been emphasized and proposed for reflection by the communities. In a special way, General Chapter XXI (2002) chose the theme of discernment as a strategy, an approach and a transformative force.⁷

An attitude of discernment enables one to listen wisely and to read reality with faith in the daily experience of God. This requires that we engage a life of prayer, profound listening to God in the Word; that we reread the events of our daily lives in light of the Word and our charism in order to perceive the Lord's steps, his invitations to continual conversion and interior freedom; that we be committed to our life's project at once personal, community and educational.⁸

I would now like to provide concrete examples of the way in which the Institute lives discernment in an ongoing synodal process.

- **The personal conference** with the Superior is considered a privileged moment for strengthening communion, discovering God's will and deepening the spirit of the Institute in practical life. It is an irreplaceable element - according to Don Bosco's thinking - for personal and communal growth in the identity of the FMA.⁹
- **Community discernment** is a form of participation and strong co-responsibility. Each one is called to make her own contribution to making the best choices, even accepting with serenity the eventual sacrifice of personal opinions and initiatives. The superior animates this search in such a way as to promote fraternal union and, when she deems it necessary, the make conclusive decisions that best

⁶ *Cronistoria dell'Istituto FMA* II, 11.

⁷ *Atte CG XXI* (2002), n. 30.

⁸ *Atti CG XXI* (2002), n. 34.

⁹ Cf *Costituzioni* art. 34; *AMBITO PER LA FORMAZIONE, Il colloquio personale momento privilegiato per la crescita personale e comunitaria nell'identità di FMA*, Roma, Istituto FMA 2020.

favor the implementation of the common mission. Each FMA is called to own these decisions and to collaborate in carrying them out.¹⁰

- **Monthly circular letters from the Superior General.** These letters constitute a monthly appointment, of both official and formative character. Depending on the events, this moment is also a way to share information. Through circular letters, the Superior reaches out to the communities, conveying orientations and reflections that touch mainly on operations, are attentive to the charism and mission of the Institute, and in profound harmony with the Church's journey and that of consecrated life today.
 - Circulars thus become a privileged space for meeting, confrontation and openness to the signs of the times. They are a significant means of communion and accompaniment in the Institute.
- **The community project, community and provincial evaluations:** These are significant moments in which the communities and the provinces look together for ways to concretely live out the mission in daily life and then verify these paths in light of the word of God and the steps taken.¹¹ In educational environments, the importance of the choice of lay collaborators is felt. These collaborators are offered a gradual preparation, so that they may become co-responsible for programming and educational goals according to the spirit of the "preventive system".¹² These experiences of discernment, programming and evaluation are considered key moments of participation at all levels because they enable correlation, reflection and the detection of the most appropriate ways to live and work together, faithful to the charism within a plurality of circumstances.¹³
- **The Council at the local and provincial levels** is a privileged space for participation, discernment and co-responsibility. It becomes a school of formation because it fosters maturing in interpersonal relationships, in shared mission and in the ability to govern. It enables us to listen to both reality and the Spirit and to seek appropriate choices together.
- **The General Council:** The organizational model of the General Council reflects this strategy of discernment as it aligns to coordination for the sake of communion; it involves the sharing of reflections, careful discernment, collaboration with sisters who participate in various areas of animation and government, meetings (both informal and/or scheduled), and assembly gatherings of the General Council with their collaborators. The sharing and implementation of common commitments strengthens collaborative bonds, arouses new energies, nourishes convergence, and makes it possible to avoid unilateral, parallel paths that could generate confusion in the provinces.¹⁴
- **The General Chapter** is an important experience of discernment of God's will for the Institute, lived in a meaningful synodal process. Its implementation is a powerful time of validation, reflection and orientation for a communal search for God's will. Each sister is called to be involved in this process by making her own contribution. The sisters, who are called to represent all the Provinces and Visitatories of the world, humbly listen to the Spirit and study problems related to the different socio-cultural contexts in order to make decisions together that will increase the vitality of the Institute, in fidelity to the spirit of its origins and in response to the challenges of the various contexts.¹⁵
 - This methodology of involvement and preparation is also experienced at the General Chapter as a method which begins in the concrete experience of the communities as they reflect on the theme of the Chapter in docility to the Spirit and with attention to the various situations. An international team then gathers the contributions of the communities and elaborates the

¹⁰ Cf *Constitutions FMA*, art. 35.

¹¹ Cf *Regulations FMA*, art. 24 e 55.

¹² Cf *Regulations FMA*, art. 59.

¹³ Cf *Progetto formativo*, 147.

¹⁴ Cf *Progetto formativo* 141-142.

¹⁵ *Constitutions FMA*, art. 135.

Working Document for the General Chapter. In this way, the Chapter reflection is not constructed at a desk, but reflects the life of the Institute with its hopes, difficulties and differences according to the various continents. The decisions that are then made by the Chapter Assembly are proposed to the communities in their lived reality so that these decisions might be shared, chosen, and lived.

- In an intercultural Institute such as ours (we are present in 97 countries on all five continents), the chapter dynamic must include plenty of time to listening so that all might express themselves and so that there might be sufficient mutual understanding so that, from diversity, communion might be maintained and cultivated.
- **Interprovincial Conferences:** these have arisen from the commitment shown by groups of Provinces within the same territorial or cultural area to share paths and projects relative to formation and mission. These conferences promote processes of reflection and research relative to common problems. At this level, the advantage of an inter-cultural encounter makes possible the acquisition of a broader view of the realities in which one works¹⁶ and of finding ways to enculturate certain processes initiated by the Institute at the general level.
- **The involvement of the Institute in the reflection and elaboration of documents through an interactive and participatory methodology:** as was the case with the *Formation Project* of the Institute of the FMA (2000);¹⁷ the *Orientations for the Educational Mission* of the FMA (2008);¹⁸ the *Orientations for the Economic Management of Goods in the Institute* (2017);¹⁹ the *Orientations for the Formation Stage of the Juniorate* (2017);²⁰ the document on Personal Colloquium (2020)²¹ and other documents. Individual FMA, communities, formators, formative communities, educating communities, young people, and, for some documents, the laity were involved in the reflection. The criteria that guided the reflection from the beginning have been those of listening to reality, involvement, participation, intergenerational and intercultural engagement, in creative fidelity to the charism and magisterium of the Church and of the Institute. The process of drafting these documents has been for the Institute a strong instance of ongoing formation, an occasion for growth in reciprocity and communion, an experience of the Holy Spirit.²²
- **The process of the new configuration of Provinces in some parts of the Institute.** Another concrete example of discernment and synodality in the Institute is the process that has led to the unification of some Provinces, as is the case, for example, in Brazil. From nine Provinces we have become four. The entire process began with two questions/proposals from the Superior General, and then all the communities were involved in the reflection and concrete steps. Beginning with the publication of "Re-expressing the charism in Brazil," the process of re-expressing the presence of the FMA in that great country was begun. "It was a fruitful time of openness to the Spirit, of attention to the questions rising from the world of Brazilian youth, of a common search for what could have best guaranteed the continuity of the educational presence in the new conditions of our religious and educating

¹⁶ Cf *Progetto formativo* 143.

¹⁷ Cf *Progetto formativo* 9-10.

¹⁸ Cf ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Perché abbiamo vita e vita in abbondanza. Linee orientative della missione educativa delle FMA*, Leumann (TO), Elledici 2005; Cf BORSI Mara, *L'animazione della Pastorale Giovanile nell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1962-2008)*, Roma, LAS 2010.

¹⁹ Cf ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE- AMBITO ECONOMATO GENERALE, *Orientamenti per la gestione economica dei beni nell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Roma, Istituto FMA 2017.

²⁰ Cf ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Orientamenti per la tappa formativa dello Iuniorato*, Roma, Istituto FMA 2017.

²¹ Cf ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Il colloquio personale momento privilegiato per la crescita personale e comunitaria dell'identità di FMA*, Roma, Istituto FMA 2020.

²² Cf COLOMBO Antonia, *Lettera circolare n. 798*, dell'11 febbraio 2008, in DE VIETRO Franca ed., *In comunione su strade di speranza. Circolari di Madre Antonia Colombo*, Milano, Paoline 2009, 121.

communities, in the historical, social, economic reality of Brazil in the Third Millennium." The need to share the charism among the FMA, the laity and the youth, within a new structure of animation, capable of responding to the calls of the educative-evangelizing mission, led to the new configuration of four Provinces.

Importance of handling disagreement and conflict and of formation in keeping an open attitude

Disagreement and conflict are possible in a process of discernment. It is important to give time and opportunity to express oneself, to allow even diverging thoughts to settle, to listen with attention and respect; to bring choices and decisions to maturity in reflection and prayer; to focus on what unites in the awareness that unity prevails over conflict (cf. EG 226).

In these moments the prudence of the one who animates the process (Superior of the community or of the province...) is decisive for promoting communion, respecting the freedom of each person and for making, when she deems it necessary, the conclusive decisions that best implement the common project.²³ In the style of synodality, it is necessary to welcome and value differences / different points of view. They should not be denied or concealed, but received. The important thing is not to lose sight of the perspective that is grounded in communion. In order to arrive at convergence and to be persons of communion and reconciliation, despite different points of view, the sisters are called to make progress in the ways of dialogue, clarity, mutual hospitality, in a constant process of conversion of heart and mind according to the Gospel.

The "spirit of family" and "passion for the mission" open the heart to God and overcome partial views in order to arrive at a confluence. In this sense "it is possible to resolve and transform conflict into a link in a new process" (cf. EG 226).

Disagreement and conflict, if well managed, can become an opportunity for growth for everyone: they can arouse thoughtfulness, deepening, new research; it can be an occasion to verify whether we are on the groove of the charism or closed in on ourselves and trapped within our "thoughts" and "views". Disagreement and conflict can help us to make the paschal transition from the individualistic "I" to the communitarian/ecclesial "we".²⁴

In order to live this logic, it is crucial that we always tend toward the goal: we are a community for the mission. This requires an awareness that every community is an apostolic community in which concerns and hopes, prayer, the goals of pastoral action and material goods are shared in view of the Institute's mission. This requires a willingness to participate, co-responsibility and mutual communication, in serene and loyal encounter and in a harmonious integration of personal values.

Key insights from spiritual tradition and practice that are helpful for developing synodality and the synodal process in the Church at this time

- Attentive listening to God, to people and to our ever-changing reality;
- Coordination for communion as a style of animation proper to those who believe that in each person there are resources to be valued and developed to serve the common mission;
- A family spirit that creates a climate of trust and openness, of reciprocity and co-responsibility;
- Welcoming and valuing differences;
- Listening, sincere and open dialogue, discernment in the Holy Spirit, prayer, planning and shared formation can foster a journey "together" and the construction of an inclusive "we" in view of the mission.

²³ Cf *Constitutions FMA*, art. 35.

²⁴ Cf SINODO DEI VESCOVI, *I Giovani, la fede e il discernimento vocazionale. Documento finale*, Leumann (TO), Elledici, 2018, 128.

- Awareness that as a community/institute we are "God's people on a journey." We are aware and responsible for having received a charism for the good and vitality of the Church. Therefore, we live communion in the Institute as the People of God; not in a self-referential community closed in on itself, but open to the mission of the Church and in the Church.
- The sapiential mediation of those who are constituted in authority both at the level of accompaniment of individuals and at the community level.