THE SALESIAN LAY DIMENSION TODAY: DON BOSCO'S DREAM AFTER 150 YEARS

1 - Introduction.

Starting from dream at nine years of age, we will see how, in some phrases of the narrative, links can be found between laity and dream.

These links must be a sign of a leading laity in the Church and in the Salesian Family, as emerged from the recently concluded Synod of Bishops.

We will draw insights to think about elements of reflection of our being Salesian laity.

In the dream at nine years of age the whole Salesian Family was generated.

I will refer to the following texts:

- ***Strenna 2023 – Rector Major Don Angel***
- ***Presentation Strenna 2024 - Rector Major Don Angel***
- ***Lay Believers in the Church and Family of Don Bosco - Antonio Boccia***

2 - The dream at nine years of age.

The "dream" in God's pedagogy, is a way of speaking to us and revealing His plans for us.

Below is the text of the dream made by John Bosco at the age of 9, as told by Don Bosco himself.

Don Bosco will accept the path traced by the dream by becoming co-responsible with God for the plan He had for him.

This dream will accompany Don Bosco throughout his life.

"I seemed to be in a vast meadow with a huge crowd of boys who were fighting, swearing, stealing, and doing other blamable things. The air was thick with flying stones, hurled by youngsters who were fighting. They were all abandoned boys, devoid of moral principles. I was about to tum away when I saw a Lady beside me. 'Go among those boys,' She said, 'and work.' I approached them, but what could I do? I had no place to gather them, but I wanted to help them. I kept turning to some people who were watching from a distance, and who could have come to my aid, but no one paid attention or gave me any assistance.

I then turned to the Lady. 'Here is a place,' she said, and pointed to a meadow.

'That's only a meadow,' I said. She replied: 'My Son and His Apostles did not even have a place to lay their heads.'

I began to work in that meadow, counseling, preaching, hearing confessions, but I saw that almost all my efforts were in vain. I had to have some building where I could gather and house those abandoned by their parents and those despised and rejected by society.

Then the Lady led me a little further to the north and said: 'Look!' I did so and saw a small church with a low roof, a small courtyard, and a great number of boys.

I resumed my work, but since the church was becoming too small, I again appealed to the Lady and She pointed out another church, much larger, and a house adjacent to it. Then She took me closer, to a field that was tilled and that lay almost opposite the facade of this new church. 'In this place,' She added, 'where the glorious martyrs of Turin, Adventor and Octavius, suffered martyrdom, on these clods soaked and sanctified by their blood, I wish that God be honored in a very special manner.'

So saying, She put out Her foot and pointed to the exact spot where the martyrs had fallen. I wanted to leave a marker there so as to find the place again when I returned, but I could not see a single stick or stone. Nevertheless, I kept the place clearly in mind. It coincides exactly with the inner corner of the chapel of the Holy Martyrs, previously known as St. Anne's Chapel; it is the front left corner as one faces the main altar of the church of Mary Help of Christians.

In the meantime, I found myself being surrounded by a very vast and ever-increasing number of boys, but, as I kept looking to the Lady, the premises and the means were also growing accordingly. I saw then a very grand church on the very spot She had pointed out as the place where the soldiers of the Theban legion had been martyred. There were a great many buildings all around, and in the center stood a beautiful monument.

While these things were taking place and I was still dreaming, I saw that priests and clerics were helping me, but after a while, they left. I tried everything to get others to stay, but after a while they too left me alone.

Then I turned once more to the Lady for help. 'Do you want to know what to do to keep them?' She asked. 'Take this ribbon and bind their foreheads with it.'

Reverently I took the white ribbon from Her hand and noticed the word Obedience written on it. I immediately gave it a try and began to bind the foreheads of these volunteers. The ribbon worked wonders, as I went ahead with the mission entrusted to me. All my helpers gave up the idea of leaving me, and stayed on. Thus was our Congregation born."

I will not dwell on the whole dream but on two aspects, in my opinion important for the topic we are dealing with.

2.1 - Recounting a Don Bosco who is real and not unattainable

In the narrative, a certain preoccupation of Don Bosco appears evident in the face of the difficulties in his eyes in having to resolve fights among the boys.

Don Bosco worried? If this seems strange to us, it should make us reflect on when we sometimes present a saintly Don Bosco from the get-go, unafraid of anything in dealing with various situations.

By doing so we risk telling a Don Bosco far from reality, while it is necessary to present a real Don Bosco, with his concerns and limitations.

Only in this way will we be credible and he will continue to be interesting to young people because they will see him close and not unreachable.

2.2 - Don Bosco's feeling of helplessness in the face of difficulties.

The other aspect I would like to emphasize is the feeling of uneasiness he has when, those who were his collaborators in the dream, leave at one point.

But the Teacher, who was guiding him in the dream, suggests that he fix ribbons on the foreheads of those people and from that moment they will never leave.

From these two emphases we can draw a first conclusion about the relationship of the "dream" and our being Salesian Cooperators.

To deal with difficulties in daily life, Don Bosco relies on the suggestions Jesus gives him and the concrete help of Mary.

Moreover, we can say that the ribbon with the inscription "obedience" represents the commitment to share Don Bosco's mission.

For us Salesian Cooperators, the ribbon is the Promise we made.

With it we have committed ourselves, with an obedience to Don Bosco's invitation, to be God's Cooperators, trusting in Jesus and Mary, in the common mission in the service of young people, in communion with the whole Salesian Family, in the situations that our state of life now, in this present moment, calls us to live.

3 - Salesian Laity

Let us now dwell on the aspect of secularity, or rather, the figure of the Laity

3.1 - Synod of Bishops.

Pope Francis on Oct. 9, 2021, initiated a worldwide journey of reflection and deepening "For a Synodal Church" at the Vatican, which concluded with the celebration of the Plenary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023, and then moved on to the implementation phase.

The goal of the synodal journey has been to comprehensively involve the entire People of God, for an internal listening to the Catholic Church and external listening to other Churches, as well as to other believers and those who do not believe.

The themes identified for this path are: **communion, participation, mission.**

Referring to theologian Yves Congar, ***the Pope invites everyone to give life to a "different Church" which does not mean to "another Church."***

It is about a great need to renew the ecclesial fabric, innovating without breaking with the past and identifying new ways of living “belonging” without flying high over the heads of believers.

In fact, there is a real risk that lofty expressions may remain somewhat abstract terms if synodal praxis is not cultivated.

Will it really be possible in praxis to establish an increasingly participatory and communal style in ecclesial life, at every level?

How to combine the different sensitivities, gifts and approaches in such a way as to truly become "fellow travelers," in the adventure of the Church and all humanity?

What about our role as the Association of Salesian Cooperators and the Salesian Family?

The work to be done is not a short to medium term project. It requires years and perhaps generations.

It is a matter of spreading in all the groups of the Salesian Family in the specific that concerns us closely and more generally, in the movements, parishes a style of confrontation capable of accepting different ideas, sometimes even conflicting ones, but without losing that evangelical spirit of respect for the person that takes precedence over the defense 'regardless' of personal, political and religious ideas.

However, we must be honest in saying that we make this journey in the knowledge that the believing people are not used to this, neither ecclesiastical hierarchy nor lay faithful.

3.2 - The Lay Person in the Church and in the Salesian Family.

It could be said that Don Bosco's intuition of asking for help from many, including the Laity, to carry on his work of saving the young, is perpetuated even after his death and, in an almost prophetic way, takes a new impetus thanks precisely to the Second Vatican Council, which introduces a new perspective regarding the Laity.

No longer exclusively recipients of evangelization by the clergy, but equally responsible, therefore co-responsible, with the presbyters and the whole Church, in common pastoral action each according to their own vocational specificities.

This renewal began in 1961 with the advent of the Second Vatican Council and is still ongoing.

This is why today the synodal attitude to be taken in the Catholic Church and consequently in the Salesian Family, as far as the laity are concerned, is an important moment of discernment on the many issues that concern the internal world and the Church itself at the beginning of the 21st century.

The figure of the Laity that Vatican II gives us is outlined in:

Lumen Gentium [31]: *"By the **name of the Laity, is meant here the whole of Christians** to the exclusion of members of the sacred order and of the religious state sanctioned by the Church, that is, the faithful, who**, having been incorporated into Christ by baptism** and constituted the people of God and, in their measure, made sharers in the **priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ.** They carry out their own part in the **mission of the whole Christian people** with respect to the Church and the world.*

The identity of the Laity seems clear to me, but the term "lay person" continues, even today in some circles, to be misunderstood, especially because of its theological basis and its lack of correspondence with pastoral reality.

And, again, according to the Apostolic Exhortation **Christifideles Laici [No. 9],** we, the laity, belong to the Church, just as we are the Church, which already places us in a privileged position.

To be and to belong implies much more than being mere listeners receiving the instructions of pastors or participating in some other function.

It is striking that this No. 9 proposes a positive description of the vocation and mission of the lay faithful, which shows an attempt to overcome a certain negative understanding of the concept.

3.3 - Charism, Vocation, Secular Character.

The Lay person is a person of three belongings.

Belonging to Christ.

It is not because of a particular role in the parish, in the CEP (Educative and Pastoral Community) or CE (Educating Community), or in a group of the Salesian Family, that we are lay persons. It is not the function that makes us lay people, but we are lay people because at the origin of our mission there is the vocation.

A vocation that comes from the heart of God. It is God who, in the moment in which he created the world with its own autonomy, thought of secularity. So that someone in the world could bring the world to God.

For this reason, today more than ever, it is necessary for the laity to take back their own vocation.

Belonging to the Church.

Because the post-Council Church is not a monopoly Church of a few people, of a privileged caste, but it is a community-communion Church made up of charisms and ministries and among the charisms there is that of the Laity.

Charism means free gift of the Spirit, I like to define it as "the breath of the Holy Spirit", for the good of the community. The charisms are continuing to write the history of the Church and the charism of the laity plays a leading role in this history.

Let us think of our direct experience when we speak of the Salesian charism.

By choosing to belong to the Salesian Family, we undertake the commitment to safeguard Don Bosco's charism by continuing, with our work, to write pages of Church history that speak of the Salesian Movement.

Belonging to the world.

The world is where we are “called” to work, to fulfill the mission of the whole Christian people.

But what makes me a lay person? What is my secularism based on? and above all, am I aware that, as a lay person, I am called to carry out a specific task in the Church?

Because spending your life to live the mission in the world is not to imitate the priests or, as a lay person in the Salesian Family, I have neither to be the altar boy of the priest nor the servant of the Director, and especially not "delegate" responsibilities to the Delegates which are instead proper to the secular nature of the Association of Salesian Cooperators.

The pastoral action of the laity cannot and must not replace that of priests, rather it completes it, not because it is ineffective or poor in content, but because it is an expression of another vocational specificity in the Church which is the ministerial one.

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 40th WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS: *"How can one not read in the story of the "servant Jesus" the story of every vocation: the story* ***that the Creator has planned for every human being****, the story that inevitably passes through the call to serve and culminates in the discovery of* ***the new name, designed by God for each individual****? In these "names",* ***people can grasp their own identity, directing themselves to that self-fulfillment which makes them free and happy****."*

Vocations complement each other because each one expresses in its own way the richness of its own spiritual life, lets the Holy Spirit breathe for the good of the Church.

It is important to stop and understand this aspect in order to be able to talk about co-responsibility, otherwise we will continue to make responsibility of the role prevail over co-responsibility in the service.

This also applies to our governing bodies such as the councils at several levels and those of animation such as the Consultas.

Just as there is a co-responsibility of the laity there is a co-responsibility of the clergy.

It is necessary that the laity overcome the laziness of living exclusively the specificity of their own task. Only by truly living their specific vocation, will they be an expression of the charism they received as a gift. And above all they will make use of the three great gifts received in baptism: the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of Christ.

These three gifts are not medals to be placed on the chest and displayed in solemn ceremonies or in the meetings we have. They cost sacrifice because when the Lord gives gifts, they require commitment. They are not given, to compete, to those who are the best but to those who serve the Lord best in everyday life.

But the characteristic trait of the Laity, which most expresses our Salesian Laity, is its secular nature because paradoxically one is not a Layperson in the Parish, Oratory, Centers, Unions, but outside these places.

Inside it is easier to be Christian with those who already share our faith.

The difficulty is out in the world.

The laity is the outpost of the Church to allow the Church to get where it probably never would. The Church, through the laity, can get to where the laity already are. The lay person need not go into the world because he already lives in the world.

Lumen Gentium [31]: *"**What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature.** It is true that those in holy orders can at times be engaged in secular activities, and even have a secular profession. But they are by reason of their particular vocation especially and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes.* ***But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.*** *They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations.*

They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world ***from within as a leaven****. In this way* ***they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity****. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer."*

The problem is that the laity, at times, escape from the world and see the Church as a refuge. They barricade themselves in their own groups and cut ties with the outside world.

But the lay person, by vocation, cannot escape from the world but must lead the world to God by dealing with the things of the world, otherwise the world moves away from God.

Those three belongings mentioned earlier cannot be separated. The laity cannot ignore belonging to the Church and to the world.

The life of faith cannot be separated from dealing with the things of the century.
Unfortunately, all this often has in the background the difficulties that arise from a Church which, closed to secularism towards the world, becomes a clerical Church, where the laity is defined only as "non-cleric".
For a large part of the Church, the "lay person" is the inexperienced, the uninformed specialist.

Unfortunately, this has generated an attitude, in some lay people, who in pastoral practice feel inferior to priests, not being able to compete and contribute in the decisions of parish priests and directors to offer their own specific contribution as lay people.
More than half a century after the Second Vatican Council, it is necessary to renew ourselves, this is the appeal of Pope Francis.

4 - The dream and 150 years of the ASSCC.

We saw how in the dream at 9 years of age, there is a glimpse of what would later be the Association of Salesian Cooperators, thus an expression of Salesian laity that cannot be considered alien to the figure of the lay person according to the Church.

The dream of little John Bosco marked his life forever; it is not a simple tale.

Jesus and Mary point him to the mission, which is to bring young people closer to the Lord, especially those who are "in peril" as Don Bosco himself called them.

Don Bosco senses that he needs others to share his mission and involves a significant number of people, mostly lay people.

This "dream" is not a simple story but becomes a prophecy of what will be the Church outlined by the Second Vatican Council where the laity are called to play a leading role in the life of the Church.

4.1 - The dream as memory of the origins

The involvement of the Laity is always present throughout Don Bosco's life to the point of imagining or dreaming of a mixed congregation, made up of "consecrated and Laity together for the salvation of the youth in danger." He tries in every way, several times, taking several years, to get the Holy See to approve this idea of a congregation. But the Church at the end of the 19th century did not approve, indeed it strongly urged Don Bosco to desist in this thought of his, inviting him to change the regulations that referred to this presence of consecrated and lay people together.

Thus, after the approval of the constitutions of the Society of St. Francis Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, in May 1876 the Holy See approved the Regulations of the Salesian Cooperators.

Project of Apostolic Life Art. 4 §1: " §1. *The Association of Salesian Cooperators is approved by the Apostolic See as a public Association of the Faithful and shares in the spiritual patrimony of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. The members actively collaborate in its mission, in the name of the Church, under the authority of the Rector Major as Don Bosco's Successor, in a spirit of fidelity to its Pastors and in collaboration with other ecclesial forces."*

Thus, an association predominantly of Lay persons "separate" from the congregation but intimately "connected" to the spiritual patrimony of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, in which Don Bosco envisions Salesian laity just as we saw earlier in saying of the figure of the lay person in the Church according to the Second Vatican Council.

*In a very explicit manner as we read in the reface of the first Regulations of the Salesian Cooperators: "From the very beginning of the work of the Oratories in 1841**, there were enthusiastic and keen priests and laymen who came forward to help** for there was a great harvest to be reaped among boys in danger of losing both faith and morals. **These co-helpers, or Cooperators, were to be found throughout our history to support and sustain the works God gave us to do**. All endeavored to work and fit into our way of life and customs, but there was a general request for a set of Regulations that would serve as a basis and a bond to help preserve uniformity and the spirit that prevailed in our institutes. We hope that this desire will now be satisfied by the present booklet. These are not rules for the Festive Oratories or for educational institutes (which can be found elsewhere): **they are a bond by which Catholics who so wish may join the Salesians and work according to a uniform and stable pattern (thus preserving these qualities in the scope and traditional practice of their work)**. May God, so rich in grace and blessings grant many favors to all those who help to win souls for our Divine Savior, doing good to young people so much in danger, preparing good Catholics for his Church and good citizens for society, so that all may one day find themselves eternally happy in heaven. Amen. Turin, 12 July 1876."*

The Cooperators with Don Bosco's Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians give birth to what would later be called the Salesian Family.

4.2 - 150 years of the ASC.

What we are dealing with fits in with our 150th year of the founding of our Association, which will be celebrated on May 9, 2026.

Beyond the historical fact, the activities and commemorations we carry out, the World Council has decided that this three-year period should be an opportunity to revitalize our identity and mission as Salesian Cooperators.

We will do this, and in part it is already happening, using three verbs:

- ✓ **Remember** where we came from;
- ✓ **Renew** our commitment; and
- ✓ **Relaunch** our mission on behalf of young people and families, especially the poorest and most abandoned, which we propose to all Salesian Cooperators, to all Centers, from all parts of the world, with the motto: ***" A dream, a promise and the future "***
- ✓ **A dream**, that of Don Bosco, which invites us to look back to the origins in order to continue looking forward;
- ✓ **A promise** that we formulated at the time as a sign of our commitment to young people as lay people in the Church in Salesian style, and that we are called to renew every day by responding to the new challenges that the world poses to us;
- ✓ **And an exciting future** that awaits us, so that we can continue to realize Don Bosco's original dream, giving life to our PVA in a world that is constantly changing, thus being an evangelical witness to every young person the Lord makes us meet.

This approach of the triennium is reflected and summarized in three words that the Lady in the dream, presented as Teacher and Mother by her own Son, says to him:

- ✓ **"Look":** how important it is for us to be able to look, and how serious it is when we fail to "see" young people in their real situation, for what they are (both in their most authentic and beautiful form and in their most tragic and painful form).
- ✓ **"Learn":** become humble, strong and robust, because you will need simplicity (in the face of so much arrogance), and strength (in the face of so much that you have to face in life). This is about the robustness that is resilience (that is, the ability not to let yourself be discouraged, not to let your arms fall off as a sign that nothing can be done).
- ✓ **"And be patient**": give time to everything and let God be God.

Let us take a step further as we approach the conclusion of this discussion.

4.2 - AND IT IS A DREAM THAT MAKES YOU DREAM (Strenna 2024)

Borrowing the text from the presentation of the theme of the Strenna for 2024, we can find insights for all of us to think about a renewed expression of Salesian laity in light of the dream at 9 years of age.

The underlying perspective is this – of not only looking at the dream as a vocational project handed over to Don Bosco regarding what would happen in the future, but looking backwards, seeing even the tears during his Mass at the Sacred Heart in Rome as a re-reading of his life, seeing how the Lord is the protagonist, how he holds everything in his

hands, and how this dream has something that interacts with the dreams of the Salesians, his sons and daughters, the entire Salesian Family and especially the young.
And in this sense the Dream makes us dream and think about who we are and for whom we are today:

- ✓ Each of Don Bosco's choices is part of the larger project: God's plan for him (dreams). So, no choice for Don Bosco was trivial.

- ✓ Many of us are unaware that God has a dream for each of us, a plan that is designed, tailor-made for us by God himself. The secret of our much-desired happiness is precisely the meeting and matching of two dreams: ours and God's.
    - *Understanding what God's dream is for us is first of all realizing that the Lord has given us life because he loves us regardless, just as we are, limitations included. We must believe, therefore, that God wants to do great things with each one of us! I am precious because, without me, there is something that cannot be achieved; people that only I can love, words that only I can say, moments that only I can experience!*

- ✓ God speaks in many ways, he achieves great things with 'simple instruments', including deep within our hearts, through the feelings that move within us, through the Word of God accepted with faith, explored patiently, internalized with love, followed with trust.
    - *This is why it becomes important to learn to listen to ourselves, to decipher our inner movements, to give voice to what is stirring within us, to recognize which signals or 'dreams' reveal the voice of God to us and which are the result of wrong choices.*

- ✓ In life, choosing, dreaming, deciding are all things that involve taking responsibility for the consequences of that choice. All this produces anxiety, discomfort and even fear.
    - *Among the expressions that recur most frequently within the biblical texts is certainly 'do not be afraid'. Predominantly the words of God or one of his messengers, it introduces, in the majority of cases, a call to vocation, that is, the invitation to realize a life project that involves the one receiving it totally. What is interesting is that it often precedes or responds to the feeling of fear that overwhelms the recipient of the message. This stems from the perception of inadequacy with regard to the proposed mission.*
    - *In this regard how powerful that most felicitous expression of Pope Saint John Paul II to young people continues to be: "do not be afraid."*

- ✓ The "Make yourself humble, strong and energetic" to which we have already referred, also serves us in overcoming the temptation to easily abandon commitments or to wait for everything to rain down from above without taking the necessary responsibility. This must be warded off with ***strength*** and disarmed with the ***humility*** of those who are aware of their limitations but also know that they can count on so much potential and the constant presence of God.

- ✓ Young people are often influenced by the dreams of others: of parents? Of friends? Or by societal conditioning? With the certainty of what has already been said about ***God having a dream for each of us,*** a plan designed, tailor-made for us by God Himself, ***it is then necessary to explore young people's dreams with them***: life has a reason to be lived and we must believe in the beauty of who they are; we must open ourselves up to desires as great as God's dream is great for each young person and strive to realize them.

- ✓ Young people are called to become who they really are: their identity is the fullness of life that calls them to holiness even now!

The formative process we are initiating with this reflection, as already mentioned, will serve to renew our Salesian secularity by starting again from the roots in order to live the present in the secular realities where we are present.

Only in this way can we trigger processes of growth as Christians, as Salesians and as an Association.

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