

Oratory-Youth Centre in mission



Introduction

Laboratory... Oratory... Lab-oratory!

From the *Memoires of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales* by Saint John Bosco:

“While all this was going on, we came to the last Sunday on which I was allowed to keep the Oratory in the field (5 April 1846). On that evening as I ran my eyes over the crowd of children playing, I thought of the rich harvest awaiting my priestly ministry. With no one to help me, my energy gone, my health undermined, with no idea where I could gather my boys in the future, I was very disturbed... As I walked I looked up to heaven and cried out, ‘My God, why don't you show me where you want me to gather these children? Oh, let me know! Oh, show me what I must do!’

When I had finished saying this, a man called *Pancrazio Soave* came up. He stammered as he asked me:

- ‘Is it true that you're looking for a site for a laboratory?’
- ‘Not a laboratory, but an oratory.’
- ‘I don't know the difference between an oratory and a laboratory, but there's a site available.’”

1846. An important date in the life of Don Bosco, a decisive moment in Salesian history. The Oratory is born: from the encounter between a crowd of children, prophecy of “the rich harvest” for the future of humanity, and the willingness of a young priest who felt himself called “to be a response” of salvation to these young people’s deep questions about meaning, life, and the future.

Through the humorous dialogue with Pancrazio Soave, Don Bosco, a born storyteller, gives the reader more than a factual account. The Filippi field is like a *promised land*. It is more than a *laboratory* or an *oratory* ... Therefore it is not really important how it is called. What is important is, “there is a *site* available”. The solicitude for the *da mihi animas* is present, an apostolic and educational passion. There is courage to dare new paths in order to reach the masses and to bring them the good news of the Gospel. This *site* is a physical “space”; but more than this, it is a space in the heart. It is making room for the young and the poor, opening our lives to them in order to build a tent, and make it a home.

Today, just like yesterday, we have the *site*. It is present in the hearts of many educators who believe in the Preventive System lived in different forms and ways, yet united in one thing, to “let the Gospel permeate this portion of humanity”. The word *oratory* evokes a whole world of meaning. It is like a narrative that continues through space and time, and whose plot is coloured by new faces and cultures. That is why we are called to continue the dialogue that began at the Filippi field, in our commitment to an ongoing re-interpretation of the oratorian proposal, knowing that its effectiveness lies in its capacity to be shaped and created according to the needs and questions of today’s young people.

Who knows but one day, we too, like Don Bosco, will need to explain to others what the term “oratorian” means and we will not find the right words. So, let us look for it. Together with the young, we will invent new words. Perhaps, it will not be *laboratory* or *oratory*, rather, and why not, a *lab-oratory*?

Part 1

The youth question

Premise

Description of youth with some common characteristics. Charismatic foundation of putting the youth at the centre. Reason why we want young people to talk about young people.

“Listening to the new generations and considering their situation is a valuable opportunity and an obligation for adults and for the Christian communities. A recurring criticism young

people have about the Church is it is always lagging behind with respect to the questions and problems of the young, rather than anticipating them as it was in the past. We must learn to listen to them in order to understand their priorities that often do not coincide with ours (...) The youth phenomenon is contradictory ... it is not easy to decipher, and this is the reason why we must exert effort to put ourselves at their level in order to feel the beating of their mind and heart.”¹

Young people as protagonists

Among the things that are said about you, young people, it is stressed that you find it difficult to assume responsibility and to carry out commitments up to the end. Among others, they call you the motionless generation. They say that you are good in consuming but not in planning.

*What elements can you say in defence of your generation?*²

Young people and adult models

They say that adults act like you, denying their adulthood.

What do you see and what would you want to find in adults that you know and with whom you interact?

Young people and listening

You say that no one knows how to listen to you and that you feel the need to express your world.

In what issue would you like to be heard and in what way?

Young people as digital natives

They say that since you were born in the digital era you are flexible, adaptable, always looking for contacts and consensus, you build your identity from your social profile, always tending to the external.

Do you agree with this label? Does it clearly fit you? Do you find yourself in this description? What would you add or remove?

Young people and happiness

“The fundamental question of every person is: how can I become human? How do I learn the art of living? What is the way to happiness?”³

What does the art of living mean for you? What is the key to happiness and the way to reach it?

Open questions

Starting from their answers, identify the unspoken questions, or the questions between the lines. Read deeper into their answers and bring out the weaknesses and the effective interventions.

To conclude, we highlight the importance of directly listening to young people so we can become mediators and offer them criteria for interpretation so as to accompany them to a high standard of life and of holiness.

Part 2

The oratorian proposal is holistic

Premise

In the oratory, the roots of the Salesian vocation

- The oratory is the “mother cell” of Salesian work since it is the first educational institution founded by Don Bosco, historically and by virtue of its apostolic importance.

¹ RAVASI GIANFRANCO, *Emerging youth cultures. Preparatory document for the Plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture*, Vatican 2013.

² We suggest questions of this type, but adapted according to the different socio-cultural youth contexts present in the places where we work.

³ RUSSO A. – COFFELE G. (a cura di), *Divinarum rerum notitia. La teologia tra filosofia e storia: studi in onore del cardinale Walter Kasper*, Studium, Roma 2001.

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- It is the theological place of the Salesian mission that flows from Jesus Christ and his Gospel.
- **It is not** only a work, or an institution among others **but** the “spirit” of being present in whatever setting, with the missionary heart of the *da mihi animas*, in search of the poorest youth.
- It is a constant appeal to what the Salesian, the FMA must be.

The oratory “home” of the young

- The Oratory-Youth Centre is a proposal of nonformal education characterized by the method of the Preventive System
- It offers a formation rich in human and Christian values which comes in a range of activities suitable for different age groups and environments
- It is a microcosm of society that is welcoming, joyful, open to young people’s expressions of life

The oratory as an environment of holistic education

A. The educator’s integrity: *the oratory is in you*

The integrality of the oratorian proposal depends most of all in the integrity of the educator, rather than on contents. The grace of unity that makes evangelising by education and educating by evangelisation inseparable springs forth from a heart imbued with pastoral charity, the dynamic centre of the Salesian spirit.

This integration takes place in the person who lives the Preventive System, by unifying his/her action on the *da mihi animas*.

B. The young person’s integrity: *good Christians and honest citizens*

With this in mind, the relationship between human and Christian values is not manipulated, nor is one subject to the other; rather, both are harmonized and integrated in the anthropological vision of Christian humanism and re-read in the light of the principle of the Incarnation.

All of this sheds light on the Christian vision of salvation as the unique and integral salvation of the whole person and of all of humanity, the intimate link that exists between evangelisation and human promotion. (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 37-38).

For this reason, the oratorian proposal reaches **all** young people and “**the whole**” young person:

All young people:

- Because it is for all young people, regardless of origin, religion or culture
- Because it is popular and a meeting ground for all social classes
- Because it rules out any procedure for acceptance, classification, inspection, admission, discharge
- Because it responds to the multiple interests of young people
- Because it is based on freedom of response
- Because it reaches especially the young people who are “far away” by offering a variety of proposals and different membership levels according to the various age groups.

“The whole” young person in all its dimensions and vital needs:

- Physical
- Affective/relational/social
- Cognitive and cultural
- Spiritual/vocational

C. The integrity of the educational proposal: planning

In the light of the Incarnation, young people are at the centre of the educational plan, that they may mature in all the dimensions of their personality according to God's plan in Christ and in docility to the Spirit.

The criterion of *Integrity*

- *Guides and motivates* the Educating community in developing the educational plan
- *Directs* the processes, strategies and the community's style of relationships
- *Is the basis* of the **oratorian criterion** that leads educators to constantly believe in the holistic salvation of the young, enabling the educators to dedicate their own lives *to* the young and to share *with* them the Gospel of joy. The **oratorian criterion** shines in the **oratorian heart** at whose centre is the *da mihi animas* of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello
- Puts *experience*, as a school of life, at the centre of its proposal. In fact, experience is a reality that is lived as a process that unifies the person's various forms of energy: cognitive, emotional, motivational, in order to learn to choose what is good, in freedom and responsibility to oneself, to others, to God (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 87)
- Is *shown* in choosing the **preventive criterion** that runs through all the educational processes and strategies, that is,
 - as criterion for the planning, carrying on and evaluation of the educational practice
 - as criterion for reinterpreting the goal in the light of present day complexity and pluralism in a multicultural and multi-faith situation (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 43)

A holistic educational project takes into consideration the four educational frames of reference of the *Guidelines for the educational mission*.

- **The evangelisation aspect**

It aims at taking seriously young people's quest for life by offering them an itinerary of education to faith suitable to their situations and attentive to the ecumenical and interreligious conditions.

The Educating community commits itself to offer a good cultural mediation that assures the proclamation of the Christian message in an intelligible way, as an "experience of Christ's love", so that the young may gradually know Him as the meaning of life.

For this, what is offered to the young must stimulate them to question the meaning of their existence, to accept life as a gift, and lastly, to accompany them to assume responsibility for their life. (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 48)

- **The cultural aspect**

Culture and history determine the place of commitment for an oratory that is meant to be a point of reference for the faith, to form consciences that are enlightened and able to inculturate the Gospel. Culture means "the totality of the forms of social life that are carriers of meaning and that give shape to conscience", "that for which the human person becomes more human".⁴

Young people develop reasonableness when they are helped to develop critical thinking and the search for truth through dialogue.

Their minds open up to knowledge and to respect of self and of others, to the development of personal autonomy and critical thinking, to the capacity to make decisions and to assume responsibility (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 44-45)

- **The social aspect**

The oratory, a miniature of society, is an educational setting where the Christian vocation and mission are lived through the gift of oneself to others expressed in social, political and administrative

⁴ Cf Casati L., *Essere credenti oggi. Le sfide al cristianesimo nell'attuale contesto culturale*, in *La fede in discussione*, ed. Litostampa, Bergamo, 1998, 8; GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Discorso all'UNESCO* 2 giugno 1980.

Introduction to the third step of the process *Oratory-Youth Centre* responsibilities. This commitment is pedagogically fruitful and forward-looking: it looks at the present but in view of the future. The world of the young is not detached from the social reality, rather, is its reflection. Therefore, the oratory encourages young people to become aware and to engage in justice, charity, and the promotion of Christian values.

In the Salesian oratory educational relationships are characterized by loving kindness and reasonableness, thus forming adults and young people that make of their lives a gift to others and open themselves to receive the gift of others in reciprocity. (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 50-52).

- **The communications aspect**

The Oratory is the setting of youthful expression in all its forms: games, sports, music, theatre, volunteering ...

These activities make the young grow and develop their capacities. They also create occasions of sharing with their peers and the educators. They educate the young to respect themselves and others and to engage in social commitment.

In this digital age, we give special attention to the area of communications. The virtual world has to be understood in order to foster relationships and encounter, to guide people to overcome barriers and interpersonal conflicts. It is necessary to pay attention to young people's need to communicate, to educate them to interpersonal dialogue, to openness that respects their originality, to group life as the place where authentic relations are learned, to rediscover the family, to share in a community of faith, to make positive use of the social communications media and to value theatre, music and art. (cf *Guidelines for the educational mission* 54)

D. The integrity of the educational environment: The oratory community

The Oratory is formed by the *Educating Community* which shares its goals and works for the convergence of the different educational interventions. The community is a typical choice of the Preventive System where young people and educators are on the same journey of personal growth.

It is a community of faith, able to witness to the values that it proclaims, thus becoming a reference point in a fragmented and relativistic society. In a community that is committed to *form others and to form itself*, dialogue and encounter between the different generations are promoted. The community becomes the mediation between families, the territory, the local Church.

Within this community, the group is the privileged place of young people's holistic education. The group is the space where people are active subjects engaged in relationship with others, and where one becomes in contact with the Church and the world of culture. The group becomes an experience of Church when it gives space to the Word of God, celebrates the sacraments and becomes an experience of community.

Part 3

The Oratory-Youth Centre, an educational setting on the frontier, with a missionary nature

The Oratory-Youth Centre (OYC) is an *educational setting on the frontier*. More than the others, this educational setting provides young people the possibility of going beyond the confines of the parish and creates educational relations with other agencies in the area.

Therefore, it is like a *border area between the public and the private*, where both spheres can interact in synergy that makes for effective educational interventions.

It is an *open place* where young and adults freely come and go. It is an educational setting where people can put their time and energy for others.

It is a *border area between pastoral ministry and education*. It is an educational setting where the synthesis between evangelisation-education is continuously interpreted, updated and monitored.

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The disciples of Jesus have learned to share the passion of Jesus, that is, the absence of prejudice and his strong capacity for relationships. This must be the reason for His disciples' presence and action even today in traditional places of youth ministry and, in a special way, in those we consider frontier places, the nonformal places.

The community is called to be aware of the provocations and the cries of the younger generations by listening to them and welcoming them. It is through this encounter that the faith of adults can also grow to maturity. Therefore they are willing to be helped to change their structures and to recognise young people's original way of living the faith.

The Oratory, inasmuch as it is an expression of the Christian community's attention to young people, must always pay attention to maintain its relaxed atmosphere, like a home in the midst of other homes. The Oratory is a semi-structured *setting*, a midway between the school structure (classes, schedules, registration, etc.) and the completely unstructured setting like the street.

The Oratory is a place that combines certain elements of structure for informal purposes (the wall, the sports field, a wide entrance ...). The life of an Oratory includes formal *times* (catechesis, organised games, liturgical moments ...) and informal *times* (conversations, improvised games, free time ...).

The Oratory comes in contact with formal *groups* (catechetical groups, sports groups, the Catholic Action group, the Scouts group ...) and with informal gatherings (the boys who come to the gym to play or to listen to music, the groups that gather outside the building or at the square ...).

Such diversity of settings, situations and contacts are a great asset. Thanks to these, the Oratory is able to offer proposals at different levels (from the most casual "hit and run" type to the most challenging and engaging) and to establish contact, encounter and dialogue with the young people who are less inclined to accept proposals from institutions, and who are apparently uninterested in groups, in commitment and in the faith.

This is why the Oratory educators are called to be aware of this dimension, and to continually re-think its educative model, trying to create diversified itineraries.

The Oratory community, the "eighth Church"

In a Church that is at the service of the world and not against it, it makes sense to look for new methods and new expressions to communicate the faith. As it is passionate for the Gospel's message of liberation, the OYC can choose to become a Church that is able to recognise the challenges while it is on its earthly pilgrimage. The choice of becoming the *eighth Church*, in the tradition of the Book of Revelation's seven letters to the seven Churches of Asia Minor at the dawn of Christianity. These seven small communities immersed in difficult contexts, with their strengths and weaknesses, betrayal and perseverance to the point of martyrdom, encourage the OYC to be and to become ever more the *eighth Church*, "a youthful community, whose youthfulness is its characteristic component. It is 'the young Church'. Young people are not in the Oratory, they are the Oratory."⁵ In fact, the *Oratorian community* meets Christ, hence, becomes hospitable to all, a *new home with the young for other young people*.

The Oratorian community as a new home for the young is capable of "decentralization", of "coming out of its walls" (structures, traditions, physical places ...) in order to *focus on the young*, on *their* resources and capacities, on *their wealth*. This decentralization implies an ongoing reflection and evaluation according to the criteria that characterize a Salesian environment. It also implies a transfer from the usual locality in order to be in more strategically relevant places today, like the so-called "flying oratory" or street oratory, that go out to where young people live their everyday life.

⁵ RAMPINI, *Per il rilancio dell'Oratorio*, in DMA 17 (1969-'70)11, F4, 26.

The OYC is a *home* that becomes a *way of evangelization*

In this sense the OYC today is “more of way than wall”. In fact it is called to be a *home that becomes a way ... that meets, that makes itself a neighbor, that makes the first step ...* to reach the young, even those who are farthest, the indifferent, those who do not dare to come, or who find it hard to come.

The more stimulating, difficult and unpredictable challenge is to work in the street in order to meet and win back the young people who do not have any relationship with the community. This is also the road less taken and often postponed. It requires credible witnesses that show that there is another “way” to live life and that life should be spent and lived better. This calls for well-prepared educators, new collaborations and the awareness that we cannot be self-sufficient. In fact, it is indispensable that before any initiative “on the street”, there must be a discussion and planning with other parishes, religious institutions, movements and associations present in the territory.

Fields of action

A missionary Oratory needs a **Plan** with a **stable team of young people and adults** who believe that the Gospel can and must be proclaimed to the young. It needs to **identify its fields of action**.

✿ **WE.** The formation of a stable team of consecrated and lay educators who put the plan into action and make an evaluation, with a spiritual and professional plan of formation.

In line with this, it is vital to discover *ministry* as response to an educational-evangelizing call in the Church and in society, as a *pastoral task* to build the Church according to the Second Vatican Council, that is, one that respects the mission of the Spirit, the primacy of Baptism and the vocational response, and is present in the territory. Furthermore, there is a need to go deeper into what it means “to animate life and the daily” which is way beyond “doing animation” at the OYC, the sense of “being volunteers” more than just “doing volunteer work”.

Today the OYC is an alternative setting when it *chooses* simple and engaging *feasts, celebrations and games for all* because they are ways that open us to joy, faith and trust. As human and universal experiences, they open us to the spiritual dimension, generate life, allow us to experience what is essential despite the complexity, orient to the mystery of the human person as a relational being and called to reciprocity. At the OYC games, feasts and celebrations are also moments that unite the different generations, allowing for moral growth together, like a family. These occasions are precious ways that give joy and equilibrium especially during difficult moments.

✿ **THE NETWORK.** Together with other ecclesial and civic movements and associations, with a clear identity and capacity of dialogue between the different charisms. In order to work in the entire city, it is important to build a network that facilitates strong communication among the parishes, schools, social centres, associations and movements, and all the realities present in the territory that work in favor of the young, so as to share and create a common language. We must look together at the world of the young so as to guarantee a better society.

Take care of this cross-cutting dimension: the **MANAGEMENT** of the OYC

From an economic and organizational point of view, the OYC is a non-profit organization, a new expression that refers to organizations (associations, NGOs, social enterprises, etc.) whose aim is not primarily profit, but are moved by an ideal, a *mission* or a “vocation” that comes from the motivations of their founders. When we speak of mission, intrinsic motivation, or vocation, we also speak of gratuitousness, although we enter the territory of gratuitousness every time we engage in certain behavior because they are good, because they have a value in itself.

The principal objective of every non-profit organization is to evolve and grow without losing its true identity to which depends the medium and long-term survival of the same non-profit organization. The OYC must also aim to grow and to develop, keeping high its own identity. So just like any other organization, the OYC needs to be managed wisely in order to achieve its objectives.

Management: the ability to coordinate all the variables of the organization (people, relationships, economy and finance, instruments, etc.) to achieve the Oratory's goals. To manage also means to have a clear knowledge of the specific *mission* (who am I, what do I do and why do I do it) and *vision* (where am I going, where do I want to go) and to put in place everything that you need to walk in the right direction such as goal setting, planning, *budget* preparation, search for resources and funds, and monitoring.

This may seem dry and irrelevant to a nonformal education setting, but in reality we must learn to manage competently if we want to give continuity to our Oratory-Youth Centres. In this way, the OYC can also provide work for the young who professionally prepare themselves as educators.

Don Bosco gives us an example:

“In order to prevent over-spending, he wanted to look into how a common centre may be built in the house. This centre will deliberate on everything that concerns expenses. In the beginning everything was centered on Don Bosco. Later on, when Don Bosco could no longer take care of so many different things, each member of the Superior Council provided for the urgent needs as they arose, and independent from each other. But this system harmed the economy... Don Bosco said that the things were done in an easygoing manner, but in important affairs, to move ahead like this is to go in the wrong way. Then Don Leveratto, Prefect of the Oratory, presented a project for a good organization of the offices and their interdependence, so each task was assigned to a leader who would give motion to all. Don Bosco then asked to elect a committee who will look into this project” (MB XIV, 114 – 115).

Finally, our economic and administrative choices become, by themselves, educational, when we are guided by ethical considerations like simplicity, attention to poverty and especially on the human person, trying to put together efficiency (doing things right) and effectiveness (doing the right things).

The Oratory-Youth Centre: a LAB-ORATORY

The Christian vision of life, rooted in faith and formed by it, is the heart of the OYC's life because only faith-trust begets hope, enthusiasm and love even in the most desperate situations. This workshop (laboratory) of faith might find its foundation and strength in some Gospel icons. In line with this, we propose to the Oratory Councils or Groups of Coordination, to read, from the pastoral viewpoint, some Gospel texts that have at their centre the meeting of Jesus and His disciples with young people. For example: children at the centre (Mt 18:1-5); the boy with five loaves of bread and two fish (Jn 6:3-15); *Talità Kum!* (Mk 5:22-24,35-43); the raising of the widow's son (Lk 7:11-17); John and Mary at the foot of the cross (Jn 3:13-17); the young Eutychus restored to life (Acts 20:7-12).

From the systemic point of view, **workshop is a way of educating** that involves shared research and animation in a climate that allows for self-expression and communication, participative inquiry and experimentation.

The workshops of the OYC interact among themselves. Certainly, not all workshops can be present in every OYC. But the choice of having even only one workshop facilitates the opening to and inclusion of all the other workshops that touch the other dimensions of daily life. This paves the way to the holistic growth of the person.

The basis of this style is the Christian vision of life, a vision that must be present in all workshops. For some people in the OYC, faith is already present (they come to our educational settings because

Introduction to the third step of the process *Oratory-Youth Centre* they are believers), while for others faith is a point of destination (when they find in the OYC an environment that expresses God's love, "speaks" of God, and accompanies them to know and to meet the Lord Jesus).

With creativity and passion, the OYC concretely becomes a *lab-oratory*, an environment...

- * where we learn to build together
- * where we seek and find together adequate instruments to realize *labor cooperatives, production cooperatives, microcredit schemes, small scale industries, observatory of youth and of families, etc.*
- * we offer many itineraries ... *service, animation, educational sports ... work, professional preparation ... music, artistic expression and theatre ... culture, the digital world and the culture of communications ... socio-political commitment, respect and care of the environment ... volunteering ... a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and solidarity ...*
- * where we create an authentic youth community united in the Lord Jesus, *a new home with the young for other young people.*

The Oratory-Youth Centre Study Group
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