

The Salesian Educational Approach as personal spirituality.

The Salesians have always said that they have an educational philosophy that spells out how and why we work together in the task of education. What is less appreciated is that there is also an underlying personal spirituality embedded within that philosophy. In Salesian education we are drawn into a relational pattern of working with colleagues and students which is part of good practice and governed by professional boundaries. But there is another relationship that is intimately involved which has no boundaries except mystery. That is our relationship with ourselves.

Working with young people challenges our self-image, exposes our weaknesses, and draws out our gifts. It pulls us into a life-long journey of personal growth and self-understanding. On that journey the well-known aspects of Salesian education, Home, School, Playground and Church become a mirror for the educator's soul. Each of these focal points sharpens the inner experience of the educator and connects them with the spiritual energy and meaning unfolding in their lives. It opens up a Salesian pathway to what the church calls discernment.

Let's go into some more detail.

Home

The basic question here is, "are you at home in your own skin?" do you know who you are? Are you at ease with your past with its success and failure? Do you like who you are? Are you able to care for yourself or do you at times tend to self-hatred? These are spiritual questions that are often provoked by a life lived in education. They lead you into mystery, limitations and into relationships. Pope Francis, in *Christus Vivit* said the most important question is not who am I? but, to whom do I belong? So with whom am I at home? Where do I find the relational space to be myself beyond the roles I inhabit?

So many questions about being at home with myself. Scripture traces this tendency to hide from our deepest selves to the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve heard God's voice in the garden and usually that voice would bring them out joyfully into God's presence. They felt at home. But, after the fall they covered themselves with leaves and hid in the forest. They could not accept their nakedness and dependence and in covering themselves up something beautiful was lost. Our human and spiritual journey can be seen as a journey home to ourselves, and the milestones are the points where we recognise and discard the ways we are not at home with ourselves.

School

School in the Salesian oratory pattern is the place of growth, of learning at every level and also a zone of curiosity. It is not just formal learning but a deep curiosity about oneself. Each of us is a mystery, a unique blending of nature and grace. Each of us has been moulded by events and learnt behaviours that are part of us but not the heart of us. It is quite likely that there are patterns in our lives of which we are completely unaware. The adage, "know thyself" is an impossible target because we change all the time. The best we can do is notice patterns by looking back reflectively and listening to trusted friends. Then we can begin to appreciate the story we are writing with our spirit.

Our school is a place of remembering and listening to our own sacred experience. Patterns and themes in our lives will have been spinning out like threads from our earliest years weaving into patterns that give meaning and purpose to our lives. That learning never ends and the spirit within is our daily teacher. Going to school at this level means sitting reflectively, remembering, and letting those threads settle into a new pattern.

Playground

Don Bosco's work began with play and it remains at the centre of his spirituality. To play means to be in the present moment. It means being together without any other agenda. It allows the world to turn without you for a while and creates a space for people to be together with games and entertainment or alone with a hobby.

An inability or a reluctance to play is a symptom of disordered spirit. It stands as a valuable sign that we need to re-balance our lives. Play allows us to be in a flow of inner energy that renews us and puts us back into right relationship with ourselves, the world around us and with our God. Proverbs 8 describes a wisdom figure who is always at play in God's presence and delights to be with other people. In other words, play is sacred, liberating, creative and healing. It is a kind of active mindfulness where the burdens of our roles drop from our shoulders, at least for a while. In that moment we realise the joy that arrives as a gift to renew our deepest spirit.

Church

Our inner church is the place where we meet mystery and search for meaning. It is essential that we visit this inner sanctuary regularly and step back from busyness to be still in a wider context of life.

*The individual, the consuming self, 'isolated from larger entities,
is a very poor site for a meaningful life. However, the bloated self
is fertile soil for the growth of depression.* [OBJ]

This quote reminds us that a healthy spiritual person is not the centre of their own lives. The Gospel constantly reminds us that we need to empty ourselves in order to be filled with the spirit. The courage to do that self-denial is forged in this inner church through prayer, meditation and reading. Only this inner stillness and searching can widen our horizons. Only this stillness can liberate us from the clamour of so many pressures so that we can hear the spirit and save our souls. Don Bosco said, "give me souls take everything else away". Salesian spirituality opens up the doors of our inner church and allows the mystery of our lives to come into sharper focus. It is this sacred space that holds the presence of God in every person.