

Translation from the original text

MARTELLI A., *Il "criterio oratoriano" nella pastorale giovanile come dono per tutta la Chiesa*, in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 1 (2023) 44-54



ENGLISH

THE "ORATORIAN CRITERION" IN YOUTH MINISTRY AS A GIFT FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH



STUDIES

THE "ORATORIAN CRITERION" IN YOUTH MINISTRY AS A GIFT FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH

Alberto Martelli

"This was the first young man of our Hospice. Soon another was added, and then others; however, for lack of space, in that year we had to limit ourselves to two. The year was 1847."¹

With these words Don Bosco, in "The Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales", recounts the beginning of youth hospitality at Valdocco, only a few months after he had settled there definitively with his boys (April 1846) and had rented some rooms from the owner for himself and his mother, Margaret. In a later text preserved in the Salesian historical archives, called the "Registry" or "Census" (probably from the 1870s and later), the names of two boys already appear in 1847 as being stably hosted at the Valdocco Oratory: Felice Reviglio and Giacinto Arnaud. In the years that followed, the number of those living permanently with Don Bosco, in groups called "families," grew, reaching 15 in 1853, 355 in 1860, 410 in 1866, and so on. This was the experience of the so-called "attached house" of the Oratory, which would gradually take on more and more the identity of a true Salesian boarding school.

These historical facts, often overlooked, are nonetheless essential for understanding more deeply what the word "oratory" meant in Don Bosco's mind and, therefore, why today we can speak of an "oratorian criterion" as a permanent criterion for discernment and renewal of every activity and work², as an enduring gift of the Saint of the young to the whole of the Church's pastoral ministry.

Was Valdocco an Oratory?

The question is certainly provocative, yet not entirely illegitimate.

When Pancrazio Soave, stammering, proposed to Don Bosco the rental of a few rooms in the Pinardi house, calling them a "workshop"³, perhaps he did not miss the target altogether.

In fact, what was born in those rooms was an oratory entirely different from any other that had existed until then and, at the same time, within a few years it became a true experimental laboratory of youth ministry in all its dimensions.

Don Bosco, as we know, did not invent the oratory from scratch. Many experiences were alive before him and alongside him, even in Turin. As the pastoral note of the Italian Episcopal Conference, "The Laboratory of Talents" (2013), also states, in the Italian ecclesial experience the oratory is always to be understood as a dynamic reality, "an educational crossroads capable of activating memories, evoking images, and creating bonds." In common language and popular imagination, however, it is often associated with a good experience of life linked to one's youth.

Generally, the oratory is that courtyard, those game rooms, those youth spaces that the ecclesial community dedicates - especially in free time - to children and adolescents: a kind of extension of the parish and its facilities for the younger ones. We might even say that the oratory is usually understood as the parish's youth ministry, guided by the parish and finding its outlet within it.

When the Valdocco Oratory was born and its activities became established, however, Don Bosco himself defined it as "the parish of those who have no parish." The Salesian oratory is not a youth annex of parish ministry, but a truly new ecclesial presence in the territory. The presence within it of an "attached house" and its development toward a boarding school, without losing the welcoming and "courtyard"

¹ G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, in ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO (ED.), *Fonti salesiane 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1277-1278.

² Constitutions of the Society of saint Francis of Sales, art. 40.

³ G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, 1259.

characteristics typical of the beginnings, are its best testimony. This Salesian originality becomes even clearer if we consider that, alongside the emerging boarding school, the first Salesian oratory immediately took on the form of a school, a workshop for learning a trade, and a small seminary, and did all this independently - even demanding from the Bishop, and in the face of the already existing city parishes, a new status: the recognition of its own originality.

For Don Bosco, the oratory was a pastoral instrument entirely different from what had previously been tried. Its focus was on boys, but it also made room for young people and adults; it was not only the parish priest's work (as was typical of his historical period), but that of a true educational community composed of multiple vocations and concentric circles; it was not only a place for catechism and Sunday recreation, but a complex instrument for the all-round growth of young people, vocational development, and accompaniment into adulthood. It knew no closures during the week and no limits in seeking those activities most suited to its purpose (from theater to music, from study to work, from catechism to the sacraments).

The Salesian oratory presents itself in the territory as a complete ecclesial presence. It can exist even outside the parish structure and can stand alongside it in a fruitful and original way. Precisely its flexibility allows it to be present even where the Church is less welcomed and where the education and evangelization of young people is perhaps more necessary.

Valdocco was therefore Don Bosco's first stable work which, under the name of "oratory," brought with it a whole series of interventions and projects that opened up the field to an unprecedented form of youth ministry. For this reason, Don Bosco's personal touch "initiated at the Oratory originated an effective praxis which was to be the lasting criteria for prevention applied down through the years: from a basic catechism lesson to a presence and participation in the life of the young with special attention to their needs, problems and opportunities; from a part-time festive (weekend) oratory to a full-time home extending throughout the week through personal contacts and other complementary activities; the various sectors and activities, from the teaching of catechetical content to a systematic educative and pastoral programme, the Preventive System; from services thought out for the young to a family style presence of educators in the midst of the young in their recreational and religious activities; from a referential institution for adults to community living with young people, youthful involvement, a community open to all; from the primacy of the program to the primacy of the person and of interpersonal relationships; from a parish focused on worship and devotion to the missionary impulse of a youthful community open to young people who neither know nor find any reference in that parish."⁴

Valdocco is not just a place

The word "oratory," then, with the experience of Valdocco, takes on new meanings and specific pastoral projects. But the oratory is not simply a physical place.

A well-known text recorded in the annals of the Salesian Congregation tells of a young confrere being asked by Fr. Michael Rua, Don Bosco's first successor, to open a new oratory. To the cleric's objections, lamenting the lack of any structure or resources, Fr. Rua replied: "Go, because the oratory is within you." For us Salesians, the oratory is first of all passion - that educational and pastoral passion that each Salesian carries in his heart.

Many works of our Congregation today are Oratories-Youth Centers that carry out various educational projects for a wide range of beneficiaries, able to interest and involve young people. They take on multiple forms and characteristics depending on geographical, religious, and cultural contexts. There are, for example, night oratories, itinerant presences for at-risk youth, area or neighborhood oratories networked together, oratories that offer unemployed and marginalized youth the chance to gain basic training or prepare for employment; some even seek to reclaim young people in situations of serious social risk.

Fr. Rua's response might seem like an easy retort to someone who complains too much, or an impossible

⁴ DICASTERY FOR SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY, *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of reference*, SDB, Rome 2014, 185-186.

obedience demanded by someone who, perhaps from too far away, must spur on someone else who feels crushed by work or by poverty. In reality, the origin of the oratorian spirit that Fr. Rua points to is anything but superficial.

The spirit of the oratory that Don Bosco embodied at Valdocco is a direct outgrowth of the call he received in the dream at nine years of age. Proof of this is that some of his former fellow students, priests already advanced in years, recognized at Valdocco the realization of what Don Bosco, as a seminarian many years earlier, had already described - as though he had seen with his own eyes what he was recounting.

All of Don Bosco's activity was a response to the mission he had received, the plowing of that field Mary had shown him. "Don Bosco himself considered his first apostolic attempts, begun at the age of ten immediately after the invitation addressed to him in the first dream, as a kind of Oratory. Don Bosco also interpreted the meeting with Bartholomew Garelli and the first catechesis begun on the historic day of the Immaculate Conception as the beginning and principle of the Oratory. He is aware that in the Oratory he finds his full response to God's call, the purpose of his life: 'When I dedicated myself to this part of the sacred ministry, I intended to consecrate every effort to God and to the benefit of souls.'"⁵

Therefore, if on the one hand the oratory is a specific and distinct pastoral environment (even distinct from the parish), on the other hand the oratory is, in a wholly original way, an "oratorian spirit": that is, a specific call and vocation in the Church and of the Church for the sake of young people.

From the "oratorian spirit" (an expression of the charism) there is born in the one who is called an "oratorian heart," characterized by solicitude for the poorest young people and for the working class. Such zeal, an expression of God's saving will embodied in the figure of the Good Shepherd, has as its first recipients poor young people, in the various forms of poverty in which they find themselves.

Valdocco, above all, is a criterion

The spirit of the oratory, which points to its being the expression of a vocation/mission embodied in the first oratory of Valdocco, makes Don Bosco's original experience the reference point for understanding and relaunching his entire work.

The flexibility of the Salesian charism has given rise, over 150 years, to countless works for young people in every context of the world, both within and outside the Church. One could say that the Salesian charism can adapt to everything because it is suited to the life of young people who, precisely, are found everywhere. But how can we remain faithful to ourselves amid such a multiplicity of projects?

The answer lies precisely in the first oratory: already structured in such a way as to vary its proposal according to every need of the world of youth, it becomes the expression to which we must always look in order to measure how close our pastoral projects are to the very charism of the founder.

The Oratory of Valdocco thus becomes a yardstick, a permanent criterion of fidelity and originality for everyone. "The Valdocco Oratory brings us back to the original experience of the Salesian mission. Don Bosco, together with his collaborators and the first Salesians, embodied in the oratory that particular charism or experience of the Spirit who raised up in the Church our original form of apostolic mission among the poorest young people. So, today, referring to the Valdocco Oratory is not a historical exercise, simply looking back to what occurred there with Don Bosco. It is the way for us to return to our origins, to the source that inspired our work and activities (cf. Constitutions n. 41), and to verify the fidelity of our educational-pastoral activity."⁶

The "oratorian heart" not only represents the goal and form of Salesian educational-pastoral action, but also becomes a fundamental criterion for discernment and renewal of activities and works.

All Salesian works are a dynamic and creative fidelity to the first oratory. Don Bosco did not simply found an institution; he gave life to an original educational style, a form of youth ministry, an embodied criterion that must now be brought to light and held as a permanent reference.

⁵ Translation from General Chapter n. 20 of the Salesians of Don Bosco (1972), n. 202.

⁶ DICASTERY FOR SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY, op. cit., 134.

This means, however, that the "oratorian criterion," an expression of the Salesian charism and of the oratorian heart, goes beyond the oratory, goes beyond even the Salesian Family itself, and is placed in the Church as an enduring gift - and today an absolutely timely one - for the renewal of youth ministry in all its expressions.

In Don Bosco at the Oratory, more than a brilliant manager of a structure, we discern a creative genius capable of reading situations and responding to them, moved by pastoral charity. As is clear, we are not speaking here of looking at the first Oratory understood only as a concrete work, but of considering it "as the matrix, as the synthesis, as the hallmark that sums up the saintly Founder's genius apostolic creations: the mature fruit of all his efforts."⁷

Every Salesian house, to be fully such, must be able to re-propose that same typical pastoral experience lived by Don Bosco and present itself today as the realization of that original emblem which was the Oratory, offered as a criterion for discerning every work of youth ministry (oratory, parish, school, reception house, boarding school, youth centers...).

The Oratorian Criterion

It is significant that Don Bosco, in his circular letter to the Salesians on the spread of good books, written on the feast of St. Joseph in 1885, used the following pastoral categories, even though he was referring to something materially distinct from the Oratory: "With the Catholic Readings I aimed to enter homes. With "The Companion of Youth" I aimed to lead them to church (parish). With the "History of Italy" I wanted to sit beside them at school. With a series of pleasant books I desired, as once before, to be their companion during recreation."⁸

In the post-conciliar reflection of the Special General Chapter and in the formulation of the new Constitutions, the Congregation strove to define in detail the criterion handed on by Don Bosco, providing a concise and original definition that would become historic.

After long reflection on the fact that the care of young people in the Oratory is not austere, rigid, or aloof, but joyful, pleasant, and attractive; that the purpose of the Oratory is to keep the young on feast days with wholesome and honest recreation; that the pastoral proposal must also be formative, educational, and salvific; and that religious instruction is the primary aim, the synthetic image of the oratorian criterion is easily constructed and is reported in article 40 of the Salesian Constitutions: "A home that welcomes, a parish that evangelizes, a school that prepares for life, and a playground where friends meet and live in joy."

A Home that welcomes

"In a word, to create a "home" is to create "a family". "It is to learn to feel connected to others by more than merely utilitarian and practical bonds, to be united in such a way as to feel that our life is a bit more human. To create a home is to let prophecy take flesh and make our hours and days less cold, less indifferent and anonymous. It is to create bonds by simple, everyday acts that all of us can perform. A home, as we all know, demands that everyone work together. No one can be indifferent or stand apart, since each is a stone needed to build the home".⁹

Youth ministry must, first of all, be a home!

The experience of a "home" generates an environment rich in trust and familiarity.

Just as in a family, each member's care for the others is essential.

A home is, first of all, everyone's responsibility, because youth ministry is not the task of a few specialists but the responsibility of the whole ecclesial community. As in a home there live different people, with

⁷ Translation from General Chapter n. 20 of the Salesians of Don Bosco (1972), n. 195.

⁸ Translation from the following quotation: https://www.sdb.org/it/Don_Bosco/Scritti/Circolari/Diffusione_buoni_libri.

⁹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, 2019, n. 217.

different responsibilities and different degrees of relationship¹⁰ - where some are together because of a mutual choice blessed by God and an image of the divine Trinity, while others are a precious fruit, though still immature - so it is in the Church for the young. In the Salesian oratorian style, being a home becomes care for those most in need and the youngest, through a variety of moments in which one feels deeply listened to and understood.

A home is the proposal of a series of experiences and values conveyed through the witness of educators and the accompaniment of those who love and are loved. The impact of unconditional welcome is strong for those who arrive for the first time and sense that their primary needs are respected and that an appropriate response is offered.

"It is only in this loving and meaningful relationship that young people feel they can enter into dialogue, albeit slowly, and that values can be shared. In this climate, all the key conditions necessary for the young to mature in all aspects and dimensions can develop."¹¹

But this home cannot remain still, and it cannot remain closed.

It does not defend itself from the outside as if it were always about to be besieged by presumed enemies. The home of the oratory is open to anyone who may pass by, without distinction and without prior demands. It is a "bridge between church and street," as perhaps the best-known Italian definition of the oratory puts it. It is a home that leans outward: it not only lets in those who arrive, but also seeks those who pass nearby, lovingly involving them and trying to break down the distances that separate us.

It is a home because it is made up of more than one generation - sometimes even of more than one religion - yet it welcomes because it is a laboratory of a new society, of a Church always missionary even in its own environments, of a sharing that is always possible: never to be demanded, always to be offered. A home that welcomes, because first of all we want to tell every young person: "God loves you." "It makes no difference whether you have already heard it or not. I want to remind you of it. God loves you. Never doubt this, whatever may happen to you in life. At every moment, you are infinitely loved."¹² We want to witness that "for him, you have worth; you are not insignificant. You are important to him, for you are the work of his hands."¹³

It is a home because, through its planning, it can create a symbolic world that allows each person to grow in security and then to go out with a missionary spirit. A place to which one can always return, because in reality one never truly leaves one's own home; and yet it is neither a ghetto nor a reassuring elsewhere. It is ongoing welcome, an enlargement of the heart, the challenge of forgiveness, a stimulus to go beyond oneself in the constant gift of one's life for those who need it.

A Parish that evangelizes

"Putting all else aside, I now wish to speak to young people about what is essential, the one thing we should never keep quiet about."¹⁴

This home has a focus that unites us all and determines from within its objectives, hopes, and defining characteristics: the oratory is a place of evangelization, in the fullest sense of being a concrete proposal to every young person to live his or her life as Jesus Christ lived his.

Here, then, is the reference to the parish - not as structure and activities, but in the conviction that each young person carries written in his or her heart a desire for God and for a full life, first of all within the unifying perspective of faith. This asks the home to be an unequivocal ecclesial expression, without "ifs" or "buts": with conviction, and yet with delicacy.

Youth ministry is expressed "is an environment where the essential dimensions of the Church are made explicit, according to the Salesian charism. This leads to "Koinonia," whose ultimate expression is the Educative and Pastoral Community, whose members live the values of the Kingdom and call others to

¹⁰ Let us think not of today's homes, inhabited by single-parent families or solitary individuals, but rather of Don Bosco's nineteenth-century homes, composed of several neighbouring families, several generations who help each other and share bread and work in the daily beauty and toil of complex and stimulating relationships.

¹¹ DICASTERY FOR SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY, op. cit., 137.

¹² FRANCIS, op. cit., n. 112.

¹³ Ivi, n. 115.

¹⁴ Ivi, n. 111.

take an active part. A key element is "Liturgy" or the Christian celebration of daily events. It reaches its highest point and fullest expression in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Another important element is "Diakonia," which means a willingness to serve in educational and promotional activities, far beyond ordinary assistance. Finally there is "Martyria," which means witnessing the values of the Kingdom to the world in deeds of charity, with formative initiatives that prepare young people and educators to give a reason for the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15-16)."¹⁵

The home that welcomes extends into the street, but it does not lose its identity or its purpose.

"What does it mean to live the years of our youth in the transforming light of the Gospel? We need to raise this question, because youth, more than a source of pride, is a gift of God: "To be young is a grace, a blessing". It is a gift that we can squander meaninglessly, or receive with gratitude and live to the full."¹⁶

The oratory, according to Don Bosco's criterion, does not imitate the parish; rather, it discerns the parish's activities, choosing to evaluate its structures and goals starting from a single fundamental center: evangelization.¹⁷ The oratory lives everywhere and adapts to everyone, but it does not lose its center. Thus, the educational-pastoral community that animates it must be truly ecclesial and missionary. It bears the responsibility either to hit the target or to weaken and dilute its work.

A School that prepares for life

"I have sometimes seen young and beautiful trees, their branches reaching to the sky, pushing ever higher, and they seemed a song of hope. Later, following a storm, I would find them fallen and lifeless. They lacked deep roots. They spread their branches without being firmly planted, and so they fell as soon as nature unleashed her power. That is why it pains me to see young people sometimes being encouraged to build a future without roots, as if the world were just starting now. For "it is impossible for us to grow unless we have strong roots to support us and to keep us firmly grounded. It is easy to drift off, when there is nothing to clutch onto, to hold onto"."¹⁸

In this case too, as with the parish, it is not necessarily the school environment as such, but rather some fundamental characteristics that the school evokes and that cannot be lacking in any work of youth ministry.

The experience of "school" is qualified by offering the resources necessary for each young person to develop the basic abilities and aptitudes needed for life in society. School is the building and consolidation of one's cultural roots within a system of shared symbolic meanings that alone can enable a young person to build his or her own world and look to the future.

School is a place for decoding reality, for learning the paths humanity has taken in its own development, and for building those intellectual - but not intellectualistic - strengths that make it possible to find one's place in life and one's meaning for the future.

In an educational space where the educator strives to seek and find the point of access to the good in each young person, so that from it the person may mature integrally, school allows the young person to become the protagonist of his or her own growth and maturity: in a harmonious development of personality, in a social life founded on respect and dialogue, and in the formation of a critical and committed conscience.

The reference to school also reminds youth ministry that it remains inevitably - and uselessly - a superstructure of little relevance if it does not engage the culture each young person lives and if it does not unite faith with the depth of each person's existence. Faith is not a superficial coat of paint, but an effort of understanding, an element of discernment, a starting point for digging deeply into one's convictions and habits. School is, par excellence, the place where faith-life and faith-culture dialogue.

¹⁵ DICASTERY FOR SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY, op. cit., 138.

¹⁶ FRANCIS, op. cit., n. 134.

¹⁷ "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church." It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection." (PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 14).

¹⁸ FRANCIS, op. cit., n. 179.

School reminds the parish of the catechism's effort as a theological deepening of the faith that must be offered, in the right measure and balance, to all Christians. And it points the home back to its task of being not only a place of affection, but also a transmission of fundamental truths for growing to fullness. A final mention of the fact that, in this perspective, the school must "prepare for life": here we can place a reminder of the duty to propose a radically and evangelically vocational faith and anthropology, capable of offering the young person a vision of self and of the world as call and mission, as self-realization in responsible response to the grace received.

A Playground where friends meet and live in joy

"While drawn towards the future and its promise, young people also have a powerful desire to experience the present moment, to make the most of the opportunities life offers. Our world is filled with beauty! How can we look down upon God's many gifts?"¹⁹

The fourth "ingredient" of the oratorian criterion is perhaps the one that, in the collective imagination, is most typically Salesian: the playground and joy.

Pointed out by Don Bosco to Dominic Savio as one of the commitments for becoming holy, being always joyful has since then become a defining trait of every oratory - and indeed of all youth ministry.

And what physical environment better than a playground can interpret such a commitment? The playground is completely malleable. It can become what we want; it welcomes everyone; it allows everyone to express themselves - precisely so that we can say to the boys: do what you like, as long as you do not sin.

The playground is the symbolic place of everyday life: where one has fun, sweats, stays together, enjoys life, talks, and exchanges experience. It is a place of creativity because it has room for everyone, but it asks everyone to respect one another and not to dominate. It is the place of the everyday, where the truth emerges that faith is embodied in life and does not take away from it, where heaven is built here below and does not estrange us from the present world.

The playground is a place of service for the youngest, but it is also a place of friendship: because the home is not enough - one needs friends - where faith is shared even outside the parish, and intellectual growth takes place through exchange among peers and not only with teachers, as in school.

The experience of the playground belongs to a spontaneous environment in which relationships of friendship and trust are created and strengthened. In the "playground," understood as a pedagogy of joy and celebration, the proposal of values and a confident attitude are realized in an authentic and close way. It is the suitable place for the care of each boy/young person, for the "little word in the ear," where the educator-young person relationship overcomes the formalism linked to other structures, settings, and roles.

In this sense, the experience of the playground is a call to step outside our formal structures, the walls in which we work, and to make every place where young people meet an environment rich in educational and pastoral proposals.

Even where new pastoral paths are attempted, attention is not only on the personal relationship, but also on recognizing and valuing the dynamics of informal groups. In the realm of free time, new virtual meeting places and social networks are truly spaces that must not be foreign to us, and that we must know how to use, so as to be with the young person where we meet him or her.

Even if not made explicit in the text, in the background of the oratorian criterion lies Don Bosco's solicitude for young people, especially the poorest, the abandoned, and those in danger. The Oratory of Valdocco, raised to a criterion for the Church's youth ministry as the gift of a charism to the whole Church, is the emblem of the passionate search for the young person's eternal good, through their full response to God's call, realizing in it the purpose of their life.

¹⁹ Ivi, n. 144.