

The most significant elements of the letter

1. Knowing how to use the language of love

- *"But how can we bring these youngsters to life again, so that we can get back to the liveliness, the happiness, the warmth of the old days?"*
- *"With charity!"*
- *"With love? But don't my boys get enough love?"*
- *"I can see all that and I am well aware of it, but it is not enough; the best thing is missing."*
- *"What is missing then?"*
- *"That the youngsters should not only be loved, but that they themselves should know that they are loved."*

So it is not enough to love, it is also necessary to know how to use the language of love, without which there is no valid educational communication. This is certainly the most transparent meaning of the letter, an enunciation of the great principle that we could call the *"visibility of love"*. Today we are in the culture of visibility: what does not appear does not exist; but it is a visibility that hides, if not right away cancels, the being of the person; it is a deadly visibility; there is also a vital and life-giving visibility, which is that of charity; not for nothing, since the texts of the New Testament, love has been associated with light, the irradiation of the Light itself that is God. It is therefore necessary to verify, to learn, to invent the languages of love, so that it may be manifested to the outside world and become a gift, an invitation, a proposal. Certainly, there must be the root in the heart, a pledge of truth and effectiveness. But it is not enough: languages are also a cultural fact, subject to the evolution of time. One does not learn once and for all! The language of love is always the object of "assiduous study" in the sense that Don Bosco gave to this word: *concern, commitment, passion*. And our culture is also characterized by a lack of attention to the languages of love, even worse, by a distortion of the natural languages of love, the sexual, affective, friendly ones; so that a deep distrust spreads among young people: love is impossible, love is a fairy tale, love is a rarity that belongs to a privileged few.

The Salesian must be a passionate lover of the languages of love; a lesson that he learns not only by listening to himself but also by listening to the others: their needs, their sensibilities, their possibilities of expression and their ability to receive. Today, this is - it seems to me - the *fundamental challenge of the educator*: to make it clear that he really loves, that he loves forever, that he loves everything about that human being who appears before him and who reveals and changes with the passing of time; to show that he also loves in the face of rejection, forgetfulness, distortion or profiteering; and thus convince to love, that is, to give birth to the inner conviction that one is worthy of love, and, even more, that one is capable of love (and it is the perception of one's own inalienable value, it is the foundation of one's own dignity, it is the root of every authentic hope); and to make one realize (but this is also grace) that there exists a Source, which for me and for you is always open and available, never exhaustible in its inexhaustible richness.

2. Understanding young people

- *"No, I repeat: it is not enough."*
- *"Well, what else is needed?"*
- *"By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love."*

There is therefore *an element of rationality that must intervene*, that is, a need for knowledge that must take and guide the Salesian educator: and it is *knowing the young, understanding the situations, the questions, the needs to know how to deal with them*. A wide range of scientific and technical knowledge is required in order to interpret the series of values concretely available to and assimilable by young

people for a valid growth in the present and in the future. Too many educators insist on the negative, on the problematic, on the irrational, on the morally unacceptable; they so stand on the "no" to be firmly reiterated (often alternating with laxity) rather than on the "yes" to be proposed with intelligence (reason), intuition (love) and courage combined with prudence. Hence enmity, the distance of security, the failure to listen with a growing gap in the natural generational gap; the relationship becomes functional and institutional (when it still exists) or is openly or subtly rejected, with all that heritage of values that the Salesian has in himself and that he would like (as well as should) transmit, if you want and interpret as an educator.

Understanding youth culture is the basis of our commitment to ongoing formation that makes it possible to eliminate the inevitable distances between us and young people. It is that pedagogical competence which, matched with sympathy and assiduous attendance, allows us to live in harmony with young people, identifying the ways to penetrate their hearts and conquer life and joy. It seems to me that this is a rather lacking aspect in certain Salesian environments; it is enough to grasp the superficiality with which we comment on the conduct of young people: the desire for *intus legere*, to read within and beyond the data does not shine through; or it is enough to verify the difficulty that we find when we try to outline goals and to plan paths that fit as closely as possible to the concrete difficulties and possibilities not "of" young people, but of "those" young people. Because it remains true that if we do not know *"what pleases the young"*, that is, what passes through their inner world as interest, attraction, desire, dream, it will be difficult for them to feel the value of the educational goals that we propose and that concern commitment, effort, dedication (all ingredients of true love!) precisely those that Don Bosco suggests when he speaks of study, discipline, mortification... *"and learn to do these things with love"*.

3. To have happiness at heart

- *"Whether I am at home or away I am always thinking of you. I have only one wish, to see you happy both in this world and in the next. It was this idea, this wish of mine, that made me write this letter. These words come from someone who loves you very dearly in Christ Jesus, someone who has the duty of speaking to you with the freedom of a father. I seemed to be in the old Oratory at recreation time. It was a scene full of life, full of movement, full of fun"*.

To truly love one must *never lose sight of the ultimate goal*, the most intimate vocation of each one, which is *the call to happiness symbolically represented by the ideal community dreamed of by Don Bosco*. And for Don Bosco happiness is a privileged way for evangelization (*"to see you happy in time and eternity"*). A recent study entitled *"God and happiness"* helps us to understand this: "In the instant full of a happy moment a superior reality shines suddenly and unexpectedly in the reality of life. A dimension endowed with an unconditional sense breaks into the conduct of man marked by many contingencies. In the moment of this happiness, man knows how to be safe in a good reality that looks at him with benevolence and experiences his life as a good and successful life. Only in this moment does he awaken properly to reality, a reality that has always surpassed what he imagined as happiness and that therefore puts his aspiration to happiness in a new light. It is an experience of transcendence that can be described as a manifestation of good. In this manifestation lies the answer to the question of the source on the basis of which man knows that infinite dimension of reality. Why does he feel touched by a transcendent sphere?"

In the vast panorama of religious experience, the lived experience of instant happiness is a possible moment in which transcendence is manifested to man. In the case of the experience of happiness, he joyfully feels being spoken to and questioned from somewhere, and perceives, feels, foreshadows something that goes beyond the dimension of the reality of his life. This irruption of transcendence does not necessarily present itself as a religious experience, but lends itself to a religious interpretation and, in particular, to a specifically Christian religious interpretation. The feeling of being safe in reality for an instant is made to go back, in such a religious interpretation, to a personal foundation. The experience of transcendence is thus interpreted as an experience of God. When good manifests itself as it does in full moments, this manifestation is a form of encounter with God. God manifests Himself in the happiness of the moment to human consciousness, and this does not remain without consequences.

The experience of the full instant is a moment endowed with an existential depth; it opens up to man a knowledge that concerns his life and that deeply moves him. In this existential depth lies the connecting link, in which instant happiness becomes important for man's aspiration to happiness. In the fulfilment of a moment, man experiences that such fulfilment is of a different nature from what he had imagined. Of course, it can happen that the desires and plans that have become reality are inferior to previous expectations... He foretells that the success of his life is something more than the realization of his desires; he feels that his life is good without his help; he experiences in an existentially profound way that his happiness is greater than him, greater than his plans, his desires, his action, and this is precisely what transforms his desire". If for Don Bosco happiness is a road that opens up to God, the Salesian must deal with this reality. He ceases to love who is not in search of his own and others' happiness. And this, today, is a serious problem, given the heavy misunderstanding that culture throws on happiness; given the eclipse of serenity, of the joy of living, of the simplicity that gives the taste for small things; given the spread of depressive syndromes, disorders of relationships, escapes from reality, neurotic compensations; given the obscuring of hope and anxiety about history that generates pessimism, defensive attitudes, refusal to live and enjoy. If he is not in love with happiness, how can the Salesian awaken this latent energy in every young person, educate them and direct them to the very source of happiness that is the God of joy?

4. To be present

- *"Familiarity with young people, especially in recreation. Without familiarity love is not shown and without this demonstration there can be no confidence. Those who want to be loved must show that they love. Christ made himself small with the little ones and brought our infirmities. Here is the master of familiarity".*

Therefore, *attention to needs no less than to the purposes*, becomes *total presence*, emblematically represented by educators as the soul of recreation; we would say the soul of pedagogical coexistence. It is the obvious application of the principle of visibility, not rhetoric, of love. *It is not enough to "be for", it is necessary to "be with" the young*. The distance between us and the young is certainly cultural when it is geographical, that is, when we distance ourselves from them because we are no longer among them. There is the risk coming from the difficulty of understanding and following them in the discontinuity of their tastes and attitudes, from the need to guarantee managerial and organizational roles, age and ailments, from the huge amount of work, from many factors that gradually take away our desire and extinguish the commitment to be with them, in their midst. The basic concept of *Salesian assistance*, understood not so much as an exercise in surveillance but as a cordial and at the same time vigilant and caring sharing, is in crisis. It creates a bond of familiarity between the educator and the one being educated, allowing for the help and support that are always necessary for a healthy path of growth towards maturity (a function of support proper to any true education).

But to be with young people means to be there not only and not so much physically, but cordially, risking oneself in the dialogical relationship. And dialogue does not mean simply talking to another person to expose one's convictions; it does not even mean discussing to affirm and defend one's positions. Dialogue is the discursive practice of thinking together to find an agreement on a certain issue. Dialogue is a relationship of sincere confrontation with the young people entrusted to us and the ethical principle that inspires it, is the ability to cooperate. The truth that teaches us is that before we entertain a dialogue with young people, we are called to cultivate a deep inner dialogue with ourselves. What we must fear most is not disagreement with the young, but disagreement with ourselves. Being with the other comes from that *"secum stare"*, from that being with ourselves that makes it possible to assume the grammar of communication, that which Manzoni summarized in five verbs: *observing, listening, comparing, thinking, speaking*. Observing oneself so as to be able to observe, listening to oneself so as to be able to listen, thinking so as to be able to think, speaking so as to be able to speak. These are the keys to being present not only in physical reality but also and above all in human reality. *It is not enough to be physically in the midst of young people if we do not qualify for the ability to contact with this reality of theirs*; this is perhaps the first and main asceticism of the educator. Only from a cultivated interiority come the ability and willingness to dialogue with young people, to distract them from that superficiality that withers them and invite them to that depth that constitutes them, precisely thanks to exchange, confrontation, dialogue.

5. Overcoming formalisms

- *"Everything was a joy for me then, and the boys used to rush to get near me and talk to me; they were anxious to hear my advice and put it into practice. One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. This confidence creates an electric current between youngsters and their superiors. Hearts are opened, needs and weaknesses made known. Why do people want to replace love with cold rules? Why the replacement little by little of loving and watchful prevention by a system which consists in framing laws? Let the superior be all things to all, always ready to listen to any boy's complaints or doubts, always alert to keep a paternal eye on their conduct, all heart to seek the spiritual and temporal good of those Divine Providence has entrusted to him".*

If once regulation and discipline, misunderstood and mismanaged, could create coldness and distance between educators and young people, today it is exactly the opposite. There is a familiarity that has nothing to do with what Don Bosco meant because it is neglect, letting go, youthfulness, decline in taste, lack of respect. But it is a form of indifference that comes from the same root: to facilitate things by saving on educational effort. In this way, a new and no less disastrous distance is created because the educational relationship is altered, depriving the young person of the function of a guide and of the necessary role of authority that he needs for his growth. If significant reference figures are missing, the process of identification and therefore of maturation is compromised. Nor are group relationships enough: to make a group only to scream, to exchange one's homework, to eat a pizza, deprives the children of experiences, comparisons, stories, disappointments, hopes. The potentialities that the boys keep inside are enormous, but they are buried under the confusion of feelings, instincts, rages, dreams. This enormous confusion is partly amplified by the weakness of the father figures.

Usually the new generations, in order to make room for themselves, would have to face their fathers through dialogue, discussion, or even struggle. This rebellion against fathers is therapeutic, liberating, and redeems children from childhood and meaningless self-harm. But we are witnessing a widespread crisis of true fatherhood, that is, of authority and authority that intervenes when necessary. In the eyes of many children, fathers are no longer a wall but a soft cushion. For these children, it is we Salesians who have to take on the role of fatherhood in its reassuring function, but also as an interdiction in order to attain vital goods and values that we believe to be humanizing for us and for them. If teenagers are torrents in flood, it is not by lowering the banks that we will help them to descend towards the ocean, but by raising and strengthening them. Let us think of the value of the rules, of the limit up to the forbidden; a tiring task because it involves, at times, conflict, rejection, retaliation; but it will be possible and healthy if that decisive passage is made that goes from "loving me" to "loving my good" to "being good for me too". And this is possible only if the personal relationship and the educational environment are highly positive, what Don Bosco called "family spirit".

6. Sharing the action

- *"One could see that among young people and superiors the greatest cordiality and confidence reigned. Familiarity brings love, and love brings confidence. This is what opens the hearts of young people... they lend themselves docile to everything that the one from whom they are certain to be loved wants to command... Love was what we needed as a rule and we had no secrets for you... In ancient times hearts were all open to superiors, whom young people loved and obeyed promptly".*

Love becomes, in the two directions, encounter, trust, active and cordial collaboration. If we do not arrive at this collaboration (indicated by Don Bosco as obedience), at this involvement of young people in educational responsibility, at this guided protagonism, fruit of openness and confidence, this can mean that the dynamism of love is jammed and the young distance themselves from it because of a lack of trust. One of the parameters for describing the current condition of youth is that of confusion or that of

uncertainty; elements that form that precariousness that gives rise to discomfort. But the only way out of uncertainty and confusion is the decision of the individuals to be themselves, through the convinced assumption of their own freedom and therefore of their own responsibility: to count, to be recognized, to be able to express oneself; and therefore to be accountable to oneself, before others, of what one is, what one does, what one plans, what one dreams of.

The educational accompaniment knows how to grasp this expectation, always fragile and contradictory, to encourage the youth movements of conscientization and commitment, the initiatives of awareness and mobilization, the desire to be present and active in their environment. When, instead, the desire to be and to do goes into crisis, and gives way to a world of appearances, forgetfulness, obliviousness of oneself, when the new generations do not feel helped and stimulated to act responsibly, the fear of not being up to expectations tends to prevail, and so do the anxiety not to stand up to competition, the tendency to blend into the crowd, not to expose oneself, not to try. A general condition of apathy and demotivation is created that opens the way even to the most devastating drifts (if "I am not worth it" - because no one has given me the opportunity to measure myself against myself and reality - then I throw myself away). The Salesian favours the youths' protagonism precisely because he brings into play the essential values of identification and self-planning, while he favours a sociality that becomes paradigmatic by creating mentalities and generating lifestyles, for that *good citizen* who goes hand in hand with the *good Christian*.