

Youth in Addiction and our Responsible Care for them

Young people have a special place in the Church and in the society. Most of the teachings of the Church always address something specific to their life. Our Congregation has the young as its only focus. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (2018) Pope Francis addresses the youth, their vocation and life in a special manner. Last month our Congregation had a Youth Synod at Valdocco and in the month of December, at the South Asian Region level, another Youth Synod is going to take place and our Province is going to host it. The 'sense of self' and the 'sense of belonging to someone' are very strong among the young and we could say that they are continually in search of people and organizations that are authentic and accessible, that could support and uplift them from their present status, where they find themselves stagnated. They are reluctant to ape the past solutions and get stuck in their life. Moreover, they grow indifferent to whatever is "old-fashioned" and prefer to be always in momentum. Their desires are full of developmental plans, growth-seeking decisions and dreams full of hopes. In all these, young people are seeking identity. The Church at large and we as Salesians, who have a preferential option for the poor youth have to support them, their families and their formation. Our Constitutions remind us that "the Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer. We are called to the same mission and are aware of its supreme importance: young people are at the age when they must make basic life-choices which affect the future of society and the Church. With Don Bosco we reaffirm our preference for the young who are 'poor, abandoned and in danger', those who have greater need of love and evangelisation, and we work especially in areas of greatest poverty" (C 26).

Every moment of our breath must be for young people and we, with their families have the responsibility to help them find meaning in their lives. Whatever be the portfolio you hold now or in whichever house you are living now should guarantee only one thing my dear confreres: "Mission to the Young". The dream at the age of nine calls our attention to what Mother Mary told little Johnny: "Look, she said [to Johnny Bosco and she is telling us now,] Here is your field, here is where you are to work". However, *Salesian Youth Ministry: Frame of Reference* exhorts that the proper way of comprehending the term 'work' is not to perceive ourselves merely as workers who do a job for some reward or have a fragmented commitment, but as a ploughman who with the virtue of hope does not ruminate on the past nor look for instant fruits for the work, but labours day and night on the soil. There are three important characteristics of a ploughman (that each of us has to nurture): Firstly, a ploughman concentrates on the field that he is working in, so the focus is on what is there available to him 'here and now'. Secondly, the ploughman is not over-worried about the state of the soil in the past, before he starts ploughing. He does not waste his precious time on that. Thirdly, the ploughman "does not have the vision of the sower nor the joy of the reaper" but works on the soil persistently and courageously, nonetheless, with hope. The present scenario at the world level or national or urban and rural level raises a great concern over the young who are addicted to numerous things in innumerable ways, and we who have dedicated our lives for the young cannot afford to remain blind, deaf, mute and indifferent to these realities.

In *Christus Vivit*, art. 72-80 highlights the profound suffering faced by young people due to violence, exploitation, and addiction. Many youth live in war zones or are involved in crimes

like drug trafficking, while others suffer from marginalization due to their faith, ethnicity, or economic status. There is the need for society to empathize deeply with these challenges, urging those who lead more comfortable lives to truly understand and weep for the suffering of others. It criticizes the superficial aid often given by powerful entities and underlines how modern culture exploits youth by idealizing their appearance, while failing to respect and care for them genuinely. The exhortation also discusses the impact of a globalized culture that can disconnect young people from family traditions, morals and values, making it harder for them to find meaningful support and guidance. Are we ready to accompany these sorts of youngsters, when they need us the most? Through the letter to GC 28 youngsters are crying out: “It is very important for us that the Salesians return to their roots to be present outside their administrative roles and to be with young people in all contexts. We remind you that you are not limited to your role or position in your community.” Additionally, they articulate the reality of their lives as follows: “We are afraid, confused, frustrated and need to be loved... ours is a hard struggle... We believe that our society [of youngsters] is individualistic and that we, too, are often individualistic... We want to... [return] to the first love that is Christ, to be his friends. We want to journey towards spiritual and personal growth and we want to do it with you Salesians” (GC 28).

The rapidly evolving world would vouchsafe that youngsters are increasingly vulnerable to a range of contemporary addictions. Here, we deal with some of them. **Digital Addiction** is prevalent, characterized by excessive screen time leading to physical issues like eye strain and disrupted sleep, as well as psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. To address this, structured digital detox programs, mindfulness techniques, and educational workshops can help restore balance and promote healthier digital habits. **Substance Abuse** remains a serious concern, involving the misuse of drugs and alcohol, which manifests in behavioural changes like secrecy, mood swings, and neglect of responsibilities. Effective remedies include professional counselling, participation in support groups, and educational programs that raise awareness about the dangers of substance use. Family involvement is also crucial in supporting recovery. The rise of online platforms has fuelled **Gambling Addiction**, where persistent gambling leads to financial problems and preoccupation with gambling activities. Symptoms include borrowing money, lying about gambling habits, and neglecting personal responsibilities. Eradication efforts can involve access to Gamblers Anonymous, cognitive-behavioural therapy, financial counselling and education on managing gambling urges.

Pornography Addiction affects mental health and relationships, marked by obsessive viewing of explicit content, distress, and difficulties in forming intimate connections. Remedies include individual and group therapy, accountability partnerships, educational programs on the impact of pornography, and the use of internet filters to limit access to explicit material. **Shopping Addiction**, or compulsive buying disorder, leads to financial strain, emotional distress, and hiding of purchases. Addressing this addiction requires financial counselling, cognitive-behavioural therapy, support groups, and the development of spending plans to control impulsive buying behaviours. **Food Addiction** manifests as compulsive overeating, emotional eating, and physical health issues like obesity. Nutritional counselling, therapy to address emotional aspects, participation in support groups like Overeaters Anonymous, and educational programs on healthy eating can effectively combat this addiction.

Internet Gaming Addiction is particularly problematic among youth, where excessive gaming results in academic decline, social withdrawal, and irritability when unable to play. Structured time limits, parental controls, alternative recreational activities, and counselling can help manage and reduce gaming dependency. **Sexual Addiction** involves compulsive sexual behaviours that disrupt personal relationships and daily functioning. Persistent sexual thoughts, engaging in risky activities, and secretive behaviour are common symptoms. Specialized therapy, support groups, educational programs on healthy sexuality, and behavioural interventions can aid in recovery. **Workaholism** is another growing issue, characterized by excessive commitment to work at the expense of personal well-being and relationships. Symptoms include stress, anxiety, and difficulty taking breaks. Promoting work-life balance through time management workshops, counselling, and encouraging regular breaks are essential strategies to combat workaholism.

Exercise Addiction involves compulsive exercising beyond healthy limits, leading to physical injuries and neglect of other life areas. Symptoms include anxiety when unable to exercise and prioritizing exercise over other activities. Balanced exercise programs, therapy, education on moderation, and support groups are key to addressing this addiction. **Social Media Addiction** is increasingly common, marked by excessive time spent on social media, leading to self-esteem issues, anxiety, and disrupted daily life. Digital literacy programs, social media detox initiatives, engagement in offline activities, and counselling for self-esteem and mental health are effective remedies. Finally, **Compulsive Lying** involves habitual dishonesty, leading to difficulties in forming genuine relationships and maintaining consistent behaviour. Symptoms include regular deceit, anxiety about being discovered, and strained relationships. Cognitive-behavioural therapy, educational programs on the benefits of honesty, support groups, and accountability partnerships are crucial in fostering honesty and personal growth.

HOW WOULD JESUS & DON BOSCO ENCOUNTER THESE ADDICTIONS?

If Jesus and Don Bosco were to minister today to youth struggling with various addictions, they would employ strategies deeply rooted in compassion and spiritual transformation. For **Digital Addiction**, they would engage the youth in meaningful offline activities to foster genuine connections and encourage purposeful use of technology, including digital detox periods. Addressing **Substance Abuse**, Jesus and Don Bosco would offer healing encounters and build supportive communities that provide vocational training and spiritual guidance. In combating **Gambling Addiction**, they would teach the value of life over quick gains and create accountable, faith-filled communities. For **Pornography Addiction**, they would restore dignity through education on healthy relationships and establish accountability partnerships with a focus on prayer. To address **Shopping Addiction**, Jesus would teach contentment in God's provision, while Don Bosco would encourage service-oriented activities to shift focus from acquiring to giving. For **Food Addiction**, they would promote healing through love and community meals that emphasize moderation and sharing. Confronting **Internet Gaming Addiction**, they would redirect energy into real-life engagement through sports and purposeful play that aligns with spiritual growth. In response to **Sexual Addiction**, they would offer deep healing and ongoing education on authentic relationships, emphasizing chastity. Against **Workaholism**, Jesus would model balance and rest, while Don Bosco would ensure a joyful community life with time for recreation. For

Exercise Addiction, they would teach moderation and spiritual discipline, integrating physical activity with spiritual and social well-being. Addressing **Social Media Addiction**, they would encourage true connection through real-life interactions and guide youth to use social media for digital evangelization. Finally, for **Compulsive Lying**, Jesus and Don Bosco would emphasize the importance of truth and trust, encouraging confession and reconciliation to rebuild honesty and integrity. Through these strategies, they would aim to transform young people, leading them to freedom and divine love.

HOW CAN WE, AS SALESIANS, MINISTER TO ADDICTED YOUNGSTERS?

Without Jesus Christ at the centre of our thinking, feeling, living, dreaming, working... there is no future, and we cannot offer anything that is significant to youngsters, particularly those who are struggling with addictions. Our mission should not stop with preventing youngsters from wrong doing but proceed to heal them on the inside. According to Juan Edmundo Vecchi, the eighth successor of Don Bosco, “the pedagogy of Don Bosco is a pedagogy of the soul, of grace, of the supernatural. Once this energy has been activated, the more profitable work of education begins.” Therefore, to transition from being merely preventers of bad actions to becoming true healers, we must embrace a more transformative approach articulated below.

1. **Conduct Comprehensive Assessments:** Evaluate the needs, challenges, and underlying issues of each youngster to lay the groundwork for effective interventions.
2. **Implement Trauma-Informed Care:** Recognize and address past traumas that impact behaviour, creating a supportive environment that fosters healing.
3. **Practice Empathetic Listening:** Build trust by actively listening to young people, making them feel heard and understood, and encouraging openness.
4. **Collaborate on Goal Setting:** Work with each youngster to set realistic and personal recovery goals, making interventions more relevant and empowering.
5. **Pursue Professional Training:** Equip Salesians with training in addiction recovery, mental health, and counselling to ensure they are prepared to provide effective support.
6. **Establish Partnerships with Professionals:** Collaborate with counsellors, therapists, and medical practitioners to create a comprehensive support network that addresses all aspects of healing.
7. **Develop Healing Programs:** Create adaptable programs that include therapy, life skills training, and holistic practices tailored to individual needs.
8. **Offer Mentorship and Role Modelling:** Engage experienced individuals within the Salesian community to mentor and inspire young people towards healthier behaviours.
9. **Build a Supportive Community:** Organize group activities and support networks that foster a sense of belonging and mutual support among the youngsters.
10. **Continuously Reflect and Adapt:** Regularly review and adapt strategies based on feedback and evolving needs to ensure ongoing effectiveness and relevance.
11. **Teach Resilience Skills:** Provide training in coping strategies and problem-solving skills to empower young people to face challenges with confidence.

12. Ensure Follow-Up and Continued Support: Offer ongoing encouragement and adjust interventions as needed to support a long-term commitment to the healing process.

By integrating these strategies, we can transition from a preventive role to a more profound, healing mission, actively contributing to the recovery and well-being of young people.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the mission to support and uplift young people struggling with addiction demands our full and dedicated engagement. The Salesian approach, rooted in the compassionate teachings of Jesus and Don Bosco, calls us to be not just caretakers but transformative agents of change. Our commitment must be characterized by profound empathy, a deep understanding of each individual's struggles, and a holistic approach that addresses their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

By embracing trauma-informed care, integrating supportive family involvement, and fostering genuine, meaningful connections, we can make a tangible difference in the lives of these young individuals. The challenges of addiction are immense, but our response must be even greater—marked by firm dedication, innovative strategies, and an unyielding belief in the potential for healing and growth.

Let us embrace this mission with the same passion and hope that fuelled Don Bosco's tireless efforts, working to create spaces where young people feel valued, supported, and empowered to rise above their challenges. Our mission goes beyond merely preventing wrongdoing; it is about fostering true transformation and nurturing a sense of hope. As we dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to this vital ministry, we will not only contribute to healing but also inspire a future where every young person can discover their true identity, live with purpose, and experience the joy that comes from living a meaningful life.

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