

Wolves Transforming into Sheep' is *a Matter of the Heart*

Don Bosco's dream was not merely a vision; it was a call to action, a call to embrace our mission with zeal and enthusiasm. In the previous circular reflecting on the dream of Don Bosco, we saw the traits of wolves and how these traits hinder the relationships in our communities.

Sheep-Traits are to be nurtured in our Relationships and Mission

1. **Sheep are vulnerable and defenceless:** Sheep by nature are vulnerable and defenceless. In the same way, every religious is challenged to stand firm in moments of vulnerability and defencelessness for the sake of the Charism and God's Kingdom. It should be understood within the background of Scripture: For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it (Lk 9,24). When we come across youngsters who are vulnerable and defenceless in our mission, it is our responsibility to teach them how to bolster strength and courage to withstand those situations.
2. **Sheep allow themselves to be Guided:** One of the prerequisites for the one stepping forward to embrace religious and priestly life is the basic openness to guidance from a spiritual director, a confessor and the superior in charge. The one who is open to guidance rarely finds oneself "without a sense of direction". We as Salesians have to pay attention to this aspect as most of the youngsters of our times are uncomfortable with the idea of seeking guidance or getting guidance from others. Till they experience personally the good that is hidden in guidance or spiritual direction and get convinced of the wisdom that lies in allowing oneself to be guided by others, they will not offer themselves willingly or freely for guidance. However, some research shows they are ready to take guidance from their peers and social media. I hope that we as Salesians and guides of the young are not in the same state of our youngsters.
3. **Sheep do not opt for self-direction as it is not always the best solution:** When a sheep falls upside down it cannot turn itself to an upright position without the help of the shepherd. When it comes to humankind, some faults can be corrected by oneself, however, big pitfalls need the humility of a person to seek direction from others. For the youngsters of our day, next to self-direction comes the peer-opinion, peer-advice and peer-guidance. It is a challenge to convince them of the need of surrendering oneself to a wise and spiritual person for life-direction.
4. **Sheep trust the one in Authority for everything:** Sheep are not afraid of the Shepherd but trust him even though he is in authority, for their spiritual, emotional and physical needs. Sheep listen, follow and go in the direction that the Shepherd leads. Sheep's reliance on the shepherd mirrors a human being's need for guidance and support from authority figures or spiritual leaders. Youngsters are generally allergic to different forms of authority that function in the society. We need to convince them that authority in our Salesian setup and in the Christian context is always a service rendered to others and a commitment to self-sacrificing oneself for the good and holistic growth of others.
5. **Sheep strive to avoid strife:** Similar to sheep's preference for still waters, we as religious and priests should always strive to avoid conflict and seek peace in our relationships. Everything that comes from the world seems to be full of conflicts and destruction. More often than

not, youngsters are caught up in violence, hateful feelings, and conflicts in all relationships that govern their life and peace-less environments. Helping them to embrace peace and educating them to become apostles of peace will be an eternal challenge for us Salesians.

6. **Sheep do not react to correction and protection:** As the sheep respond to the rod and staff, and benefit from correction and protection given by the Shepherd so too the religious and priests are to respond positively to the corrections given and foster growth and security. Today, youngsters, by and large, do not like corrections. They have a negative idea about it. As they are growing with unbridled freedom, even channelizing their freedom for constructive purposes is perceived as control enforced. Furthermore, they are convinced that they can protect themselves or their friendship circle is there to protect them, and they fail to see that various sectors in the society are trying to protect them, even when they give their service in the form of recommendations for change.

Having reflected at length on the traits of Wolf and Sheep, the task that is ahead of us is to see or to show how wolves can be transformed into meek lambs or docile sheep, as the dream at the age of nine unravels itself. It is good to keep in mind that our mission to transform wolves into lambs demands that we go among wolves as lambs or sheep. In fact, John Chrysostom exhorts us: "if you do not go out as a lamb but go as a wolf among wolves, the Lord will not protect you; defend yourself on your own". Let us always remember that we should show by example first and tell our youngsters to follow us. If we go as wolf among wolves, then what Jesus told of the Pharisees, when he instructed the people his time, "therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (Mt 23,3), will also be said of us to our youngsters.

'Wolves Transforming into Sheep' is a Matter of the Heart

The mission entrusted to us Salesians drives us to face umpteen challenges every day. How are we going to confront these challenges? How are we going to make the process of transformation that the dream of nine or other dreams connected with it are urging us to make it happen, in the lives of the youngsters we meet? We know that it is the Spirit of the Lord that is going to take the lead in this process of transformation and that we are only instruments in God's hands. However, can we, as Salesians relate with youngsters on a daily basis to fortify them and initiate in them the process of transformation that they stand in need of? Here are some suggestions that could be of help to bring about transformation, first in ourselves and above all in the youngsters we meet.

1. **Let them know that they are loved:** This indeed is the secret of our success and our father and founder has underscored it many times including the letter from Rome. The sacrament of presence and the way we talk, walk with, listen and accompany youngsters should make them open their hearts spontaneously to us for guidance, placing all their confidence in us.
2. **Patience and Non-judgemental Attitude:** It is important for us not to give an impression that we are fed up of them or with them or with their failures. The way we conduct ourselves in their presence has to guarantee them that we are compassionate, merciful and patient with them and that we are not judgemental in our looks, gestures, words and attitudes.
3. **Allow them to hang-on to our Habits:** When youngsters have failed, are discouraged and need someone to encourage them or need a pasture where they can repose, we as Salesians should promise to give them what they need, in order to recover them from their setbacks. In fact, our charismatic identity and the vocation to be 'another Christ' and 'another Don

Bosco' for those in need will help us to love and give ourselves unconditionally to what the youngsters stand in need of. That's why in our tradition sometimes it is said: 'let your cassocks be strong, fortify it every day through good virtues and good habits. Let it not tear when they come and hang on to it for help or in despair.

4. **Cultivate Emotional Resilience among the Young:** Encourage youngsters to develop stronger emotional defences and resilience against harm by building in them self-awareness, assertiveness, and coping skills.
5. **Promote Self-Responsibility and Self-Direction:** Encourage youngsters to take ownership of their lives, make mature decisions freely and responsibly, and seek self-improvement or 'care of self' and not 'self-care' through introspection and learning.
6. **Encourage Daily Accountability and Responsibility:** Foster among youngsters a culture of daily accountability where individuals take responsibility for their actions, acknowledge their mistakes, and actively work towards making amends without solely relying on external help. In other words, it is teaching them how to do a constructive self-examination of conscience for bettering one's life and self.
7. **Foster Collaboration over Competition:** Encourage the youngsters to cooperative and collaborative behaviours in relationships, emphasizing empathy, understanding, and mutual support rather than nurturing rivalry and competition.
8. **Empower Critical Thinking:** Encourage youngsters to think critically and dialogue with authority when necessary, promoting independence of thought and decision-making.
9. **Cultivate Self-Confidence:** Encourage youngsters to develop self-confidence and problem-solving skills rather than solely relying on blind obedience to authority.
10. **Encourage Open Communication:** Among the youngsters promote open and honest communication in relationships, allowing them to express their needs, concerns, and feelings. This openness to listen to them can prevent conflicts and misunderstandings.
11. **Nurture Conflict Resolution Skills:** Teach the youngsters conflict resolution skills to address any type of disagreement constructively by fostering understanding, cooperation, collaboration, and reconciliation rather than attempting to avoid conflicts altogether.
12. **Promote Personal Growth:** Encourage youngsters to embrace personal growth and development, seeking continuous improvement and learning from their experiences rather than passively accepting correction and protection from external sources.
13. **Encourage Spiritual Exploration:** While respecting individual beliefs, and encouraging youngsters to explore spirituality as a source of comfort and guidance, it is good to promote critical thinking, freedom and responsibility in spiritual matters.
14. **Say no to 'blind Obedience' to Rules:** Legalism and rule-oriented behaviours do not give rise to mature characters. It is important to explain to them the 'why' of a rule and the values or virtues hidden in them.
15. **Present the preventive system holistically:** Some Salesians stress only one element of the preventive system: Reason or Religion or Loving Kindness and emphasise a little or nothing on the other two aspects. The way we educate and evangelise will be the way they will take

the mission forward. Preventive system does not compromise values or virtues but with a spoon full of sugar it allows the medicine to go down into the hearts of young people.

- 16. Develop an Oratorian Heart:** An Oratorian heart is a heart that burns with fervour and zeal for the salvation of the young. It refers to a personal and intense relationship with God and youngsters, which is lived in union with the Church. The heart of a Salesian welcomes, educates, imparts faith and relates with young and makes them experience loving kindness. Therefore, the heart must resound the Valdocco model: “a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelised, a school that prepared them for life and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves” (C 40).

A small tip that our Rector Major gives to all of us to understand what an Oratorian heart is the following: “I recommend with all my heart that you have your eyes wide open to see the people and to look them straight in the eye; have your hearts and your arms open to receive them; and have the courage to give your entire life to them. Just like Don Bosco, you can be close to all, but your heart must always be for those ‘who are last’ and your life must always be for them too. I invite you to open your heart to so many people who live in precarious and painful, difficult situations; to be close to those who have no voice; to help them gain the justice that they deserve; to care with fraternity and solidarity for those wounded by life; and to stay far away from that indifference which—way beyond not being helpful—humiliates.” Again, in the Biographical Memoirs we read that the heart can do the magic of transforming youngsters from what they are to becoming what God wants them to be. No youngster is irredeemable.

“Just as there is no barren or sterile land which cannot be made fertile through patient effort, so it is with a man’s heart. No matter how barren or restive at first, it will sooner or later bring forth good fruit. It will begin by loving what is naturally good and ultimately advance to what is supernaturally good, provided that a spiritual director (an educator) will cooperate with God’s grace by prayer and effort in making it fruitful and beautiful” (BM V, 236-7).

Conclusion

The month of April is very special to us Salesians, for it is on the 1st April 1934 that our Father and Founder Don Bosco was canonised as Saint. This year we are celebrating the 90th anniversary of this great gift to our congregation. “Pope Francis tells the Salesians that they are lucky to have a founder who had a face that reflected the joy of Easter Sunday, rather than the sorrow of Good Friday. St John Bosco, he said, ‘was always joyful, welcoming, despite the thousands of labours and difficulties that besieged him every day’.” Along with this, we should also remind ourselves that we as a province of INM are also in the 90th year of our foundation (1934-2024). In ten years-time, we will be celebrating the double centenaries. As preparation for these celebrations, let us take on the two wisdom pearls from two saints who lived it and are passing on to us their way of life revealing to us the secret that can win the hearts of youngsters and their souls for God. The first wisdom pearl comes from St. John Bosco himself. He testifies of the need of the Oratorian heart for us Salesians as follows: “My sons, in my long experience, very often I had to be convinced of this great truth. It is easier to become angry than to restrain oneself, and to threaten a boy than to persuade him. Yes, indeed, it is more fitting to be persistent in punishing our own impatience and pride than to correct the boys. We must be firm but kind, and be patient with them. See that no one finds you motivated by impulsiveness or wilfulness.” (Letter from St. John Bosco). The second wisdom pearl comes from St. Philip Neri that our father and founder St. John Bosco picked it up for his ministry, especially for the sacrament of Reconciliation. When it comes to dealing with adolescents and young adults, “let us act otherwise (not harshly); by compassion, gentleness, and love, we will strive to win them for Jesus

Christ; let us sympathize [also empathize] with their weakness as much as we are able, so that our whole effort may be to inflame them with the love of God, who alone works great things.”

Our experience tells us that Don Bosco followed his dream till the end of his life and we his sons are also to have a share in that dream. However, the basic query is whether or not the dream of St. John Bosco impels us to give all the love we can give for the youngsters in need, as long as we live on this earth. Is there anything that does not allow me to give all the love I can? Can I overcome that limitation to make my commitment and consecration a total one? As we continue to reflect on the dream that makes us to dream, a prayer that can encourage all of us to give ourselves for the dream and that should always resound on our lips is the prayer made by St. Dominic Savio on his death bed: “Lord, I freely give myself to Thee. Take all of me. I offer myself to Thee because I have always belonged to Thee, O God, and to Thy holy will I surrender myself.” As the Risen Lord invited his disciples to get back to Galilee, St. John Bosco is inviting all of us to get back to Becchi to understand his dream with his heart. To reread the dream means to have a profound understanding and a new beginning.

Ref. No. INM-DBL-CIR 21/04-2024 (APRIL)