

# Faith Formation in Catholic Parishes and Creative Salesian Approach

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## Part 1: Introduction

Opening visual ... Little Johnny Bosco walking the tight rope and performing tricks, attracting the crowd, especially the children and youth ... and eventually leading them all into the Church for prayer...

The ultimate purpose of all Salesian mission, ministry, programs, and activities... is FAITH FORMATION and EVANGELIZATION. This makes the Salesian presence, life and work, MEANINGFUL. The absence (by neglect, non-priority, lukewarm, partial, unplanned, unscientific response...) makes the Salesian presence and work, meaningless and contradiction.

Little Johnny Bosco did not stop with his tricks on the tight rope and send the crowd back home; he ensured his audience entered the Church for prayer and Sacraments.

The Salesian works namely, educating, training, skilling for employability, providing job opportunities, sports, games, entertainment, functions, celebrations... are not end in themselves, and the Salesian Mission still remains incomplete.

The ultimate Salesian focal point is FAITH FORMATION for the Catholic youth, children and families, and EVANGELIZATION for the others. It is only at this point that the Salesian mission is said to be accomplished. Hence, it is worthwhile to ask whether the Salesian Mission is stagnating at any of the

intermediary points and if so, why and what needs to be done to get the mission moving towards the focal point.

The Charism and mission of St. John Bosco makes it clear that every Salesian by his vocation is basically and primarily a Youth Worker, Catechism Teacher or Faith Formator and an Evangelizer. Further, the implication is that, this is not a dispensable option for a few or for a Sector or Department, but an indispensable obligation and responsibility of the Salesians both as individuals and Congregation, and accountable for the same to our father and founder Don Bosco, to the Church and to God. Obviously, this mission needs to be contextualized into the socio-cultural, political and multi-religious reality of the country and of our presences.

We need to be aware of and sensitive to the political agenda (no more hidden) of the ruling BJP and its RSS masters... One nation (*Bharath*), One religion (*Hindutva*), One language (*Hindi*), and eventually one party and one government. Whatever the challenges the socio-cultural and religious reality may present, the responsibility for the Faith Formation of the Catholic children, youth and families cannot be compromised with; and the obligation to evangelize cannot be given up either.

Every Salesian presence and community could make explicit plan to engage the Salesians in Catechism teaching for the Catholic youth and at least in indirect evangelization activities for others within its reach. Following the life and mission of Don Bosco, the Salesians by virtue of their Charism, need to be more proactive, take new initiatives and give the lead in the Church (Dioceses) towards a creative revival of Faith Education.

## 2. Understanding Context

Regarding the faith formation of our children and youth, the highlight of the situational analysis is that the secular education from the pre-KG onwards, is by and large, highly organized, systematic, updated, technology supported, creative, attractive, competitive, indispensable and therefore, also accountable and delivering the intended goals namely, knowledge, skills, career, earnings... and Catechism or the Faith Education as it is, seems to lag behind, as a poor competitor.

The implication is that Faith Education in our Parishes and Institutions is by and large unorganized, unsystematic, outdated, irrelevant, uncreative, monotonous, less attractive, dispensable, unaccountable and practically having nothing to deliver, at least from the children / youth point of view (of course, the few sporadic, occasional, temporary, individual exceptions are acknowledged).

Pope Francis has highlighted several challenges facing the Catholic Church and its mission today, including issues such as poverty, inequality, social injustice, environmental degradation, and the need for interfaith dialogue. He emphasizes the importance of a more inclusive and merciful Church, addressing the concerns of the marginalized, and fostering a greater sense of solidarity among believers. Additionally, the Holy Father has called for a renewed commitment to evangelization in a rapidly changing world, acknowledging the need to adapt to contemporary challenges while staying true to the core principles of the faith. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), Pope Francis outlined several challenges facing the Catholic Church and its mission. Some key points includes,

1. **Economic Inequality:** The Pope addresses the issue of growing economic inequality, emphasizing the obligation to care for the poor and marginalized. He criticizes an economy of exclusion and calls for a more equitable distribution of wealth.
2. **Individualism and Consumerism:** Pope Francis warns against a culture of individualism and consumerism that can lead to a lack of concern for others. He encourages a more communal and compassionate approach to society.
3. **Globalization:** The Pope acknowledges the benefits of globalization but also highlights the challenges it brings, such as cultural homogenization and the marginalization of certain groups. He calls for a globalization of solidarity, where the human dignity of all is respected.
4. **Lack of Joy in Faith:** Pope Francis expresses concern about a joyless and somber image of the Church, urging believers to rediscover the joy of the Gospel. He emphasizes that faith should be a source of joy and hope for individuals and communities.
5. **Pastoral Conversion:** The Pope calls for a renewed focus on pastoral care and a conversion of the Church's structures to better serve the needs of people. He encourages a more missionary mindset, going out to the peripheries and meeting people where they are.
6. **Religious Indifference and Secularism:** Pope Francis acknowledges the challenges posed by a culture of indifference towards religion and increasing secularism. He calls for creative ways to engage with individuals who may be distant from the Church.
7. **Communication Challenges:** The Pope highlights the importance of effective communication in spreading the Gospel. He encourages the use of modern means of communication while emphasizing the need for authenticity and sincerity in sharing the message of Christ.

These challenges, as outlined by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, reflect his vision for a more compassionate, inclusive, and mission-focused Church in the contemporary world.

## 8. Challenges for Pastoral Ministers

The challenges and temptations faced by priests in their pastoral ministry: In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis addresses several challenges faced by priests in their pastoral ministry. Some of these challenges include:

- a. **Individualism and Self-Referentiality:** Priests may face the challenge of becoming too focused on themselves, losing sight of the community and the needs of their flock.
- b. **Excessive Busyness:** Priests may be tempted to prioritize administrative tasks and busyness over direct pastoral engagement, potentially leading to a detachment from the real needs of the people.
- c. **Spiritual Desolation:** The document mentions the risk of priests experiencing spiritual desolation, which could affect their ability to effectively guide and serve their congregations.
- d. **Worldly Values:** Priests may be tempted to adopt worldly values and attitudes, compromising the authenticity of their pastoral mission.
- e. **Lack of Joy:** The exhortation emphasizes the importance of joy in pastoral ministry and warns against a lack of enthusiasm or joy, which could hinder the effectiveness of evangelization.

Addressing these challenges, *Evangelii Gaudium* encourages priests to be rooted in a personal encounter with Christ, to prioritize the needs of their communities, and to embrace the joy of the Gospel in their ministry.

### 3. Foundations of Faith Formation

The Foundation of our Faith and Faith Formation is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Our Catechesis emanates from Jesus Christ who is the fullness of divine revelation.

The starting point for our Catechesis is the very understanding of “Faith Education” or “Faith Formation”. It is surely much more comprehensive and inclusive, multi-dimensional process than mere “knowing”. It is **understanding** (clarifying the implications, demands); **accepting** (agreeing with, making right choices); **internalizing** (making it one’s own, personal value system and priorities); **experiencing** (practical living & growing); **witnessing** (even in moments of challenges and trials); **relating** (in communion with others, especially in families, parish community); **celebrating** (rejoicing, praising, thanking); and **transferring** (to the next generation by teaching, ensuring).

It is a continuous, inter-related, inter-dependent, cumulative continuum and a life-long learning. The question that needs to be raised here is, whether the Faith Education / Catechism in our parishes and institutions adequately addresses all these dimensions, or stagnates at one or two levels, making them a sort of “comfort zones”.

There definitely needs to be more creative and proactive initiatives towards making Faith Education more comprehensive, inclusive and relevant to the children and youth. Accordingly, the content of Faith Education needs to be creative in that it should - apart from the traditional prayers sacraments, scripture, Church, saints and so on - also include and address the needs, problems and rights of children, youth, weaker sections, minorities; Preamble of the Indian Constitution, human rights and human values; and nature, environment and ecological concerns.

The Catechism teachers (women and men, as many lay people as possible) need to be selected, trained, supported, remunerated and respected, adequately. Learning methods like group activities, games, experience sharing, peer teaching, storytelling, the use of mass media, social media, folk media, theatre, art, music, dance and so on, need to be integrated into learning.

As for the target group of Faith Education: Children, Adolescent Youth and Adult Youth; Parents and Elders in Parishes, a Census Survey of families in our Parishes appears to be a must for a database on the number of Catholic families, children, youth, adult youth; children attending, not attending Sunday Catechism in Parishes; studying in Catholic, non-Catholic schools, colleges; young adults as students and employees totally cut off from any Catholic influence. Accordingly, a **Faith Education Roadmap** could be designed (with appropriate content, methodology and media) by the Salesian Parishes and Institutions (Schools, Colleges, ITIs, Youth Centers...) to reach out to the various groups (Children, Adolescent Youth and Young Adults). The Internet and social media need to be creatively used to reach-out to those young Catholic adults who as students, employees or migrant workers, are well beyond the reach of our parishes and institutions.

**Creative Pastoral Ministry:** In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of creativity in pastoral ministry. Pope Francis encourages pastors to be creative in their approach to evangelization and pastoral care. He highlights the need for flexibility and adaptability, suggesting that pastors should find new ways to engage with their communities, reaching out to people where they are and responding to the challenges of the contemporary world. The overall message is a call for innovation and a willingness to explore creative methods in spreading the joy of the Gospel.

## 4. Salesian Approach to Formation of Faith: A Proposal

The Salesian approach to educating young people in faith and formation revolves around a preventive system, as outlined by St. John Bosco. Here are some key elements:

1. **Preventive System:** The approach focuses on preventing negative behaviors by creating a positive, supportive environment. It involves reason, religion, and loving-kindness in guiding and forming young individuals.
2. **Holistic Education:** Faith formation is integrated into a holistic education that encompasses spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional aspects. The aim is to nurture well-rounded individuals.
3. **Relational Approach:** Building strong relationships is crucial. Educators and mentors strive to establish a familial atmosphere, creating a sense of belonging and trust among young people.
4. **Joyful Spirituality:** The Salesian approach emphasizes a joyful and optimistic spirituality. Faith is not presented as a set of rules but as a source of joy and meaning in life.
5. **Practical Examples:** Faith is taught through practical examples and experiences, making it relevant to daily life. This hands-on approach helps young people see the application of religious principles in their own experiences.
6. **Youth-Centered Approach:** The education process is tailored to the needs and interests of young people. It involves active participation, encouraging them to take ownership of their faith journey.
7. **Vocational Guidance:** The Salesian approach includes vocational guidance, helping young individuals discern their life paths in alignment with their talents and values.
8. **Community Involvement:** Engaging in community service and outreach is encouraged. This not only fosters a sense of responsibility but also provides practical opportunities to live out one's faith through service to others.
9. **Sacramental Life:** Regular participation in sacraments, especially the Eucharist, is promoted as a central element of faith formation.
10. **Positive Discipline:** Instead of punitive measures, the Salesian approach focuses on positive discipline, helping young people understand the consequences of their actions and guiding them toward responsible choices.

In essence, the Salesian approach is centered on love, reason, and religion, aiming to form young people into morally upright individuals who actively live out their faith in the world.

## 5. Practical Implementation

**Practical Ways to Implement the Salesian Faith Formation:** Implementing the Salesian Faith formation involves incorporating its principles into various aspects of education and community life. Here are some practical ways to do so:

1. **Create a Family Spirit:** Foster a sense of belonging and care within the community - Establish mentorship programs to provide guidance and support.
2. **Holistic Education:** Develop a curriculum that integrates spiritual, academic, and practical elements - Encourage extracurricular activities that promote a well-rounded education.
3. **Relational Ministry:** Prioritize building relationships with young people - Provide opportunities for open communication and dialogue.
4. **Joyful Spirituality:** Organize uplifting and celebratory events that highlight the joy of faith - Incorporate music, art, and storytelling into religious education to make it engaging.
5. **Practical Examples:** Use real-life situations and case studies to illustrate moral and ethical principles - Organize service projects to apply faith in action.
6. **Youth-Centered Approach:** Involve young people in decision-making processes - Tailor religious education to their interests and questions.
7. **Vocational Guidance:** Provide career counseling and guidance based on individual strengths and interests - Organize workshops and events to explore various vocations.
8. **Community Involvement:** Engage in community service projects and outreach programs - Encourage students to identify and address local needs.
9. **Sacramental Life:** Foster regular participation in Mass and sacraments - Provide opportunities for reflection on the sacraments and their significance.
10. **Positive Discipline:** Focus on teaching and guiding rather than punitive measures - Implement restorative justice practices to address conflicts.
11. **Faith Formation Programs:** Establish regular faith formation programs, including retreats and workshops - Incorporate elements of prayer, meditation, and reflection.
12. **Encourage Peer Ministry:** Train and empower older students to serve as mentors and leaders - Create spaces for peer-led discussions on faith and life.
13. **Promote Social Justice:** Integrate social justice issues into discussions and activities - Encourage advocacy for marginalized communities.
14. **Professional Development:** Provide ongoing training for educators and mentors in the Salesian approach - Foster a culture of continuous learning and growth.
15. **Technology Integration:** Utilize technology to enhance religious education and communication - Create online platforms for discussions, reflections, and resource sharing.

By implementing these practical strategies, institutions can effectively incorporate the Salesian approach into their faith formation programs, creating an environment that nurtures the holistic development of young people.

## 6. Faith Formation Roadmap

The roadmap for Catholic faith formation involves a structured and comprehensive plan to guide individuals in their spiritual journey. Here are key elements that can be included in a Catholic faith formation roadmap:

1. **Foundational Knowledge:** Begin with an understanding of basic Catholic teachings, beliefs, and traditions - Explore the significance of the Nicene Creed and the basic tenets of the Catholic faith.
2. **Scripture Study:** Emphasize the importance of reading and studying the Bible - Provide resources and guidance for individuals to explore both the Old and New Testaments.
3. **Sacramental Preparation:** Offer thorough preparation for sacraments, including Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Marriage, and Holy Orders - Connect the sacraments to daily life and the Christian journey.
4. **Liturgy and Worship:** Encourage active participation in Mass and liturgical celebrations - Explore the significance of liturgical seasons and rituals.
5. **Prayer Life:** Teach various forms of prayer, including personal, communal, and liturgical - Introduce contemplative prayer practices and devotions.
6. **Moral and Ethical Formation:** Discuss Catholic moral teachings and principles - Explore ethical decision-making and the application of Catholic social teachings.
7. **Catechetical Programs:** Implement structured catechetical programs for different age groups - Utilize age-appropriate resources and teaching methods.
8. **Spiritual Retreats:** Organize retreats for reflection, prayer, and spiritual renewal - Offer retreats tailored to specific groups, such as youth, adults, or families.
9. **Formation of Conscience:** Guide individuals in forming a well-informed conscience - Discuss the importance of discernment in making moral decisions.
10. **Catholic Social Teaching:** Integrate Catholic social teachings into faith formation - Encourage active engagement in social justice initiatives.
11. **Interfaith Dialogue:** Promote understanding and respect for other faith traditions - Provide opportunities for interfaith dialogue and collaboration.
12. **Leadership Development:** Identify and nurture potential leaders within the faith community - Provide leadership training and mentorship.
13. **Community Service:** Emphasize the importance of living out one's faith through service to others - Organize community service projects and outreach initiatives.
14. **Ongoing Formation:** Encourage continuous learning and spiritual growth throughout life - Provide resources for further study, reading, and reflection.
15. **Technology Integration:** Utilize technology for virtual learning, online resources, and community building - Develop interactive platforms for discussion, reflection, and sharing.

This roadmap aims to create a well-rounded and lifelong approach to Catholic faith formation, addressing various aspects of spiritual development and fostering a deep connection with the Catholic tradition. Adaptation to the specific needs and demographics of the faith community is crucial for its effectiveness.

## 7. Q&A Session

## 8. Conclusion

Recalling the Church Teachings, in the light of the Gospel and Salesian Constitutions, considering the profound social reality of the time we have intended to focus on creating a pastoral ministry with a renewal of the Salesian parish ministry. First and foremost, we need to encounter Jesus Christ. A living relationship with him should lead us to the people of God finding new ways and means to evangelize them. Our pastoral care should be inclusive of everyone especially the poor and the abandoned. In the words of Pope Francis, "When we speak of "the people" we are not speaking about the structures of the society or Church, but about all those persons who journey, not as individuals, but as a closely-bound community of all and for all. That demands that the parish community must be joyful and not remain a prisoner of sadness. We should be an out-going dynamist who has the capacity to collaborate with everyone in the society. Besides urging us to renew our presence we need to rediscover that the parish is the fundamental place of Evangelization and proclamation of the Gospel and a place where we foster fraternity and charity, which becomes a shining witness for the world. Hence, a parish pastoral ministry must remain a place of creativity, of relationship, of motherhood. It is there that this inventive capacity is realized and when a parish moves forward this way it achieves what we call "the parish on move".

## 9. Suggested Readings

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