

PRESENTATION OF THE STRENNA 2018

Rome, 16 July 2017
Feast of Our Blessed Lady of Mount Carmel

STRENNA

«*Sir, give me this water*” (Jn 4,15)

LET US CULTIVATE THE ART OF LISTENING AND OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Synthesis – a summary of what the presentation of the Strenna will be when sent out at the end of this year. I begin by saying that *this is not the commentary on the Strenna 2018; here I limit myself to offering some hints.*

The synthetic phrase of the strenna corresponds to the heartfelt request that the Samaritan woman makes to Jesus at Jacob’s well. In her meeting with Him, the woman feels that she has been listened to, respected and appreciated; and so in her heart she feels impelled to ask for something even more precious: “Sir, give me some of that water” (the water of life to the full that you are offering me).

Following the central theme of this gospel passage, we would point out, in the context of the coming Synod of Bishops («Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment»), the importance for all our Salesian Family and for its mission in the world, of cultivating the precious art of listening and of accompaniment, with the conditions that need to be ensured, the demands and the service that is involved in both listening and accompanying, in the process of personal, Christian and vocational development.

I. A MEETING THAT CANNOT LEAVE US UNMOVED

The starting point for our reflection must be the calm and meditative reading of the gospel passage that we know as “the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman” (Jn 4, 3-42); a meeting that then becomes the icon to refer to in order to see how the Lord relates to her, the sort of relationship He establishes, its results, and the consequences that the meeting with Him has in this woman’s life.

*“There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”
(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)*

The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jn 4, 7-9).

Jesus is in a situation in which he is powerless and vulnerable in the face of a practical need. To the Samaritan woman he is a foreigner, he is thirsty, he does not have a bucket to draw

water, and the water in that deep well is out of his reach.

On the other hand, as far as one can tell from the story, the woman, to put it mildly, has a doubtful reputation, living in an “irregular” situation.

In addition, between Jesus and the Samaritan woman there is the barrier of well-established ethnic and religious conventions, a case of reprehensible behaviour, according to the customs of the time, for him to ask water from this woman.

In this situation, from our point of view, we can observe something very interesting: a secular place, a well in the open countryside, that becomes *a place for an encounter with God*.

Jesus the real protagonist and leading person in the encounter, in the listening and the opening dialogue, ‘has a plan’ for conducting this meeting, beginning by **listening** to the other person and to the situation, which He knows intuitively.

For us nowadays, this process of **LISTENING** is a real art. “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.”¹

This process of **listening** begins with a *meeting* that becomes an opportunity for a human relationship freely entered into, “with a respectful compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.”²

When a meeting happens in this way, among other things **listening**:

- Fosters *openness* towards the other person.
- Implies giving one’s whole *attention* to what the other person may be saying and making a conscious effort to understand what the person wants to communicate.
- Accompanies *with real interest* the person and what is being sought and expected.
- Sets to one side one’s own world, one’s own situation, in order, as far as possible, *to draw close* to that of the other person.
- Listening, to put it briefly, is the art that requires *giving careful attention* to a person, their struggles, their weaknesses, their joys, their sufferings and their expectations; in fact we do not limit ourselves to listening to something, rather we are attentive to someone.
- This listening when it refers to personal spiritual accompaniment goes beyond the psychological dimension and acquires a *spiritual and religious dimension*, because it takes us along pathways on which one is waiting for Someone.
- Our gaze as educators turned in a special way to young people and also to the life of their families, gives us reassurance that there is much that is *positive* in every heart³; and there is a need to bring out this positive element through the patient work of paying attention to ourselves, to openness to others, to listening and reflection.

This listening ought to lead us to understand properly the needs of young people nowadays, and sometimes the needs of their parents, or of those people with whom we come into contact through our ministry. In fact, young people approach us not so much in search of accompaniment as rather because of the pressure of their *needs*, when they find themselves facing *doubts, problems, emergencies and difficulties, conflicts, tensions, decisions to be*

¹ EG 171

² EG 169

³ “In every boy ... there is soft spot ., The first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy’s heart.” Cf BM 237, quoted in GC 23, N.º 151

made, problematic situations to be coped with.

And, in general, they make an approach if there is someone who takes the first step by showing an interest in them, approaches them, and has time for them. Sometimes these casual meetings can become the doorway opening onto a more serious journey that is leading to development...

This is what happened in the meeting between Jesus and the woman who had gone to the well simply to draw water.

II. A MEETING THAT MOVES A PERSON ON FURTHER

“Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?” (...)

Jesus said to her, “Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; (...)

«Sir – said the woman –, give me this water that I may not thirst.” (Jn 4, 10-15)

* Jesus, as a master of wisdom and an able conversationist, makes use of all that words can offer - expressions and gestures - to make contact with people.

- ✓ He asks questions, discusses, explains, tells stories, pays attention to the way the person he is speaking to sees things, make suggestions, affirms, provokes a reaction.
- ✓ He helps the woman to face up to the real situation she is in and to her evasive replies; even with regard to her delicate position – as she says in the following verses -, “I have no husband”.
- ✓ Jesus is not discouraged, he does not give up when faced with the initial resistance.
- ✓ The conversation helps her to clear up some ambiguities, to reveal herself in an honest way; the enigmatic and provocative replies draw the woman closer and she grows in trust and in her surprise really wants to have what can make her life better.

*Jesus, who is seeking what is best for the other person, the one he is speaking with, rather than pronounce a moral judgement of disapproval or reproach establishes a personal relationship.

- ✓ Instead of accusing he discusses and makes a suggestion.
- ✓ His language, his words are addressed to the heart of the one he is speaking to.
- ✓ In conversations (in practice on this occasion with the Samaritan woman), he speaks calmly, without haste in presenting himself as the one who can change her life, in order to gradually awaken in her the desire to be able to have access to a spring of water that promises a special, different, better life.

*Jesus as an expert in Humanity, shows himself to be attentive and full of interest in the inner world of those he is speaking with; he reads their hearts, studies them and knows how to interpret them.

These attitudes of the Lord make us understand the importance of the **Gift of discernment**.

In the Church’s tradition the exercise of discernment has been applied in many different situations: for example, discerning the signs of the times, or discerning in view of acting in a moral manner, or spiritual discernment in order to follow a path of Christian life to the full, or

again, spiritual discernment when it is a question of one's own vocation or of a choice of life. In all these cases, dialogue with the Lord and listening to the Voice of the Holy Spirit are essential; however, there are some **basic (fundamental) pre-requisites**, that make further discernment possible.

- The starting point will be that which leads the individual, the young person, the married couple, or one of them, to feel the need to give meaning to their life, to make it significant. It is in this situation that one becomes aware that something is not really going well.
- When one does not feel well, is not living harmoniously and does not find real and full meaning in what forms part of themselves, or of the “us” in a marriage, in a family, the situation can arise from an “existential void”, which often leads to personal disorientation and frustration.
- In the societies in which we are living that make us live our lives on the outside, as though we were in a glass case, without any visible limitations or defects, without the right to be old or to grow old, because “that is in bad taste” ..., more than ever there is the need for an education that encourages depth and an inner life.

These are all situations that can stimulate, encourage or assist with discernment, and one needs to undertake every process of discernment as Pope Francis proposes in the letter in preparation for the Synod⁴, by **recognizing, interpreting and choosing**⁵.

- **RECOGNIZING**⁶, in the light of what the Spirit inspires.

- ✓ To have clarity in the high and low moments of life; in the periods that can occur of a real interior struggle.
- ✓ To help come to fruition all the emotional qualities that a person may have, and give a name to what one is experiencing or what we find present in ourselves.
- ✓ To capture the “flavour” that I find in the consonance or dissonance between what I experience and what is in the depth of my heart.
- ✓ All of this enlightened by the word of God on which one should meditate. Putting at the centre the ability to listen; a person's affective nature, without being afraid even of silence.
- ✓ Taking everything on board as part of the journey of growing to personal maturity.

- **INTERPRETING**⁷

- ✓ That is, understanding what the Spirit of God is calling someone to do through what is stirred up in each one.
- ✓ -Interpreting and interpreting oneself is a very sensitive task that requires patience, vigilance and even a certain knowledge. It is necessary to be aware that social and psychological conditioning exists.
- ✓ It will be necessary to face up to reality, and at the same time not to be satisfied

⁴ FRANCIS, *Young people, the Faith and Vocational Discernment. XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Preparatory Document and questionnaire*. Elle Di Ci, Leumann (Torino) 2017, 22-65.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 44, quoting EG 51.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid*, p. 45-46.

⁷ Cf. *Ibid*, p. 46-47.

with the minimum, nor deal only with what is easy; being aware of one's own gifts and possibilities.

- ✓ Naturally this task of interpretation cannot be developed in a believer, in a Christian:
 - Without a real dialogue with the Lord (a dialogue such as the Samaritan woman had with Jesus).
 - Unless all the capacities of the person are engaged (acting in such a way that what happens is not insignificant, as occurs in the heart of the woman in conversation with Jesus).
 - Without the help of an experienced person in listening to the Spirit (who, in the case of the gospel passage was Jesus Himself guiding her).

- CHOOSING⁸

The time then comes when the individual, the young person, the wife or husband ..., has to decide, exercising authentic human freedom and personal responsibility.

The Samaritan woman had to decide for herself whether to ignore Jesus and continue her life as though nothing had happened in that meeting, or whether to make the decision to allow herself to be surprised by Him and involved to the point of going to call her local companions because that man had reached the depths of her inner life.

- ✓ The choice that is made when discernment is carried out in the light of the Spirit, very often brings a person freedom, and at the same time demands coherence in life.
- ✓ For this reason, it can be said that to encourage people and in a very special way young people to make life choices that really are free and responsible is the final aim of every serious process in the faith journey and in personal growth (and in any vocational ministry that one can imagine).

Discernment – the Pope tells us - “is the main tool which permits safeguarding the inviolable place of conscience, without pretending to replace it.”⁹ precisely because “*we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them,*”¹⁰ following the example of Jesus who in his conversation with the Samaritan woman, accompanies her on the journey towards the truth and her own inner life.

III. A MEETING THAT TRANSFORMS A LIFE

“Just then his disciples came. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” They went out of the city and were coming to him.»
(...)

“Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with

⁸ Cf. *Ibid*, p. 47-48

⁹ *Ibid*, p.40, n.2

¹⁰ AL 37

them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.» (Jn 4, 27-30, 39-42).

- The Samaritan woman enters the scene in the gospel as “a woman from Samaria” and she leaves it having come to know, in such a very personal way, the spring of living water that she feels the need to run and tell her own people what had happened to her, and through her *witnessing*, there are many who then approach Jesus.
- To those whom he meets, as in this case the Samaritan woman, Jesus does not offer them more things to think about or to get to know but rather a way to grow and change their lives. Even “Jacob’s well”, a symbol of the wisdom that comes from the Law, loses its value and is replaced by living water (by the spring).
- The image of God that comes through in the meeting with Jesus is not the image of a god unmoved, distant, philosophically cold. On the contrary Jesus reveals Him as the God who gives Life, who can be called Father, who does not cut himself off, seek to control or to possess, because He is Spirit (worship in Spirit and truth).
- The conclusion of the meeting goes beyond what one might have expected for a normal ending, that the woman would return to her ordinary life with the jar full of water. Instead, the jar that the woman leaves behind empty so as to go and call her neighbours, speaks to us of a gain and not a loss.

Like Jesus ... accompanying.

There are numerous biblical accounts which in the first place tell the story of the accompaniment God promises his people throughout time.

On the boundary between the two Testaments, John the Baptist appears as the first spiritual companion in the Gospels, first of Jesus Himself. John could bear witness and prepare the way because God had spoken to his heart.

On so many occasions in the New Testament Jesus makes himself a neighbour, a travelling companion in order to communicate himself and to meet the people of his time in a personal way.

The meeting of the Lord with the Samaritan woman helps us to see the way the Spirit of God can act in the heart of every man and every woman. That human heart which because of fragility and its own sins feels quite often confused and divided, attracted by temptations and suggestions that are varied and often contradictory.¹¹

Faced with this human dilemma, **Personal Accompaniment** would appear to become an extremely valid means of the Christian spiritual tradition, in the desire to help believers avail of the instruments and the resources, that enable them to recognise the presence of the Lord, his challenges and his calls.

How can we describe **Accompaniment**? As an example, “like a kind of ongoing conversation

¹¹ Pope Francis. Document of the Synod. o.c. p. 50

between companions in order to Welcome Life, accompanying life”¹²; a dialogue that has as its purpose the fostering of the relationship between the individual person and the Lord, helping to overcome any potential obstacles.

As with Jesus in every **meeting**, in every experience of accompaniment there is need for:

- ✓ A loving glance, like that of Jesus when calling the twelve to their vocation (Jn 1,35-51).
- ✓ An authoritative word, like that of Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum (Lk 4,32).
- ✓ The ability to come close to someone like Jesus with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4,3-34.39-42).
- ✓ The decision to walk side by side, to become a travelling companion like Jesus with the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24,13-35).

Therefore, to accompany involves:

- Knowing the journey the other person is making, the point at which they have arrived and where they are going, in order to be able to walk with them.
- Ensuring that there is a **meeting** that is an opportunity for a relationship that is human and humanizing and not utilitarian.
- With a **listening** attitude (once again reference is made to the art of knowing how to listen!), that makes it possible to know and understand where the other person is coming from, the journey they are on, the situation they are in, of sorrow, of lack of hope, of fatigue, of searching.
- It is also always a matter of a meeting of **mediation**, because the real Companion is the Holy Spirit.
- The one who accompanies and the travelling companion has to become **the witness to and the proclaimer of** the action of the Spirit in the person accompanied, but in a quiet way, staying at the side, content to occupy the allotted place and not another one. In truth the spiritual companion is moulded in the *fundamental experience of being first of all met by Him*.
- To discover the way in which God manifests Himself in our lives to the extent of surprising us **as we are met by Him**.
- **The initiative will always be God’s**; we need to show responsibility and freedom.

All of this undertaken by means of a **pedagogy of processes**, that is so common in the spiritual tradition. “The Christian life is lived in a progressive way, according to distinct degrees of depth and fulness, and is always open to an ever greater development”¹³.

- Following processes that *should not be forced* neither from within nor from without.

- To the point of *becoming conscious* of the process and making it one’s own, given that it is the Spirit who unleashes it in each one.

IV. WITH WHAT PASTORAL ACTION IN MIND... ?

This will be the final part of the Strenna, which I shall present fully at the end of the year, since it deals with the pastoral application of what has been said so far. I shall refer to the strategic points (key) of the pastoral method of the Church at the present time, and to what

¹² LOLA ARRIETA, *Aquel que acompaña sale al encuentro y regala preguntas de vida para andar el camino* (Apuntes provisionales). Simposio CCEE. Barcelona, 2017, 11.

¹³ STEFANO DE FIORES, *Itinerario espiritual. Voz en Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad*, Paulinas, Madrid, 2004, p.755.

is specific to our *Salesian spirituality*. I intend to develop the following points of which I indicate only some possible headingstitles /titoli:

- *Walking* with the young, with families, with the fathers and the mothers, who need to follow this path. With those in mind with whom the different groups of the Salesian Family in the world are engaged in their mission.
- Providing opportunities for all young people excluding no one, *because the Spirit is at work in each one*.
- With a religious or lay or educative pastoral community that feels itself responsible for the education of the new generations.
- In which the adults are *significant and credible persons of reference ...*
- With the appropriate means.

V. IN COMPANY WITH THE SAMARITAN WOMAN ... as Jesus called His own followers, towards what goal would He be leading us today...?

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