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Between Charism and Contemporary Context: The Ongoing Relevance of Salesian Pedagogy after St. John Bosco

Między charyzmatem a współczesnością.
Aktualność pedagogiki salezjańskiej
po św. Janie Bosko

Michał Vojtáš, *Salesian Pedagogy after Don Bosco:
From the First Generation up to the Synod on Young
People (1888–2018)*, LAS – Libreria Ateneo Salesiano,
Rome 2023, 480 pp.



The author of the book under review is Michal Vojtáš, a Salesian, full professor at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, lecturer in Salesian history and pedagogy at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, and director of the Don Bosco Study Center. The book I consider here continues his reflection on Salesian education (see Vojtáš 2017) and examines the evolution of Salesian pedagogy after Don Bosco's death, covering nearly 130 years, from 1888 to the Synod on Young People 2018. In a certain sense, it fills a gap in Salesian pedagogical scholarship that emerged after the deaths of eminent scholars of the Preventive System, Fr. Braido and Fr. Stella (Braido 1964; 1999; Stella 1968–1988).

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Reviews

Recenzje

The book is structured around six periods/themes:

1. Statements on pedagogy by the first Salesian generation;
2. A practical pedagogy of osmosis;
3. Adverse times call for disciplined fidelity;
4. Second Vatican Council: Before, during, and after;
5. Planning and animation;
6. New evangelization and education for the third millennium.

Reading the book reveals several highly original aspects. First, the book should be appreciated for its contextual approach—that is, the author does not limit himself to a purely documentary or historical reconstruction. It is not merely an internal history of Salesian pedagogy; rather, it is a study that takes into account the historical, social, and cultural changes that have influenced Salesian education. In other words, the author seeks to show how the pedagogical principles of the Salesians have evolved and adapted to new social, cultural, and ecclesial contexts, showing how some original elements have been strengthened, others neglected or reinterpreted, and how all of this presents both challenges and opportunities for contemporary Salesian education (see also Borsi 2011: 309–332, who seeks to place the preventive system in dialogue with today’s educational challenges in the social context).

The volume is quite substantial, comprising 480 pages, and therefore provides an extensive historical overview. However, its broad scope means that in certain sections some aspects are not developed in as much detail as others. The level of detail and depth varies between chapters, with some of the periods identified by Vojtáš examined more thoroughly than others. Given the vast time span covered and the diversity of the geographical and cultural contexts of Salesian pedagogy, it becomes evident that the global coverage is not always uniform, with some contexts documented more thoroughly than others. As a result, the author occasionally risks a certain degree of generalization. Because of the size and density of the volume, the text can be somewhat demanding to read. This should not be viewed strictly as a limitation, but rather as an inevitable consequence of the fact that such a comprehensive account necessarily requires both breadth and depth.

Another strength worth noting is that the book offers not only a chronological narrative but, above all, a heuristic approach to the

issues discussed—that is, the author identifies educational challenges in different eras and then reflects on what it means today to “practice Salesian pedagogy.” In this way, he shows how Don Bosco’s legacy can be reinterpreted by subsequent generations (see also the International Conference on Salesian Pedagogy 2015 in Orlando). The book under review therefore goes beyond a simple chronicle; it opens new directions for contemporary educational and pastoral practice. The author seeks to highlight recurring issues and possible pathways for today’s Salesian pedagogy—for example, questions of planning and animation, the relationship with modernity, and perspectives on the post-Council era. An interesting contribution that also provides evidence of a re-reading of the preventive system after Second Vatican Council was made by Niewęłowski and Vojtáš (2024: 36–55). The text under review thus opens new avenues both for formation and pastoral practice—addressing issues such as secularization, pluralism, cultural change, the role of young people, and globalization—and in the academic sphere, particularly within historical-educational research. It is precisely this approach that makes the volume valuable even for those engaged in Salesian educational work.

The volume also presents some limitations. There is an evident issue of balance, as certain parts of the book place greater emphasis on specific historical periods or particular pedagogical “mentalities” than others. In my view, however, this is largely a matter of the perspective adopted by the reader. Another clear limitation is that, while the author successfully develops the transition from a historical analysis to concrete operational guidelines for pastoral practice, the opening of these pathways does not always result in a fully practical manual. The reader encounters several examples and operational suggestions, but in reality this is not a practical handbook intended for teachers or animators.

The added value of the book under review lies in the fact that the proposed itinerary highlights the contribution of each era, showing how Don Bosco’s pedagogical legacy has provided new inspiration and generated fresh ideas in the fields of education and youth ministry. The book offers not merely documentation of events but, above all, a narrative of life—a journey that may be especially meaningful for those drawn to Don Bosco’s pedagogical and spiritual heritage. The author thus provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding

of, on the one hand, the development of Salesian pedagogy and, on the other, the challenges that lie ahead in the twenty-first century. The method employed by Michal Vojtáš also deserves appreciation. He seeks to move beyond the sterility of purely documentary reconstructions and, through both synchronic and diachronic comparisons among authors, presents not only a linear development but also cross-era comparisons interpreted in a contemporary and insightful way.

The volume under review was published by Libreria Ateneo Salesiano in Rome and has been made available in several Western languages, offering members of the Salesian Family a valuable tool for formative and pastoral reflection. It can also serve as a textbook in university courses and as a resource for historical and educational research. In my view, the book represents an important contribution for anyone seeking to understand the evolution of Salesian pedagogy from the time of Don Bosco up to the Synod on Young People 2018.

The monograph presented here is a rather dense academic volume, aimed primarily at scholars, formators, and university lecturers. The language used in the book is quite specialized, characterized by theoretical and historical reflection, although there are some “lighter” sections that suggest possible approaches to educational practice. The book can also be appreciated by readers seeking a solid historical overview while wishing to understand the context, transformations, and challenges of our time. It offers a new and promising point of reference for Salesian studies. The volume by Michal Vojtáš is also available in digital PDF format.

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