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Article

The Perennial Impact of Salesian Accompaniment in a Context of Detraditionalisation

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Abstract: This article will begin by referencing briefly the notion of detraditionalisation—referencing scholars such as Lieven Boeve, who has written extensively on the issue. By way of contrast, accompaniment constitutes a perennial theme in a Christian context, best encapsulated in the Emmaus story (Luke 22:13–35), when Jesus accompanies the two disciples on what could be described as a journey of discovery. This *journey paradigm*, which underpins many religious education programmes, constitutes a central feature of the Salesian education vision known as the Preventive System. St John Bosco (1815–1888), the founder of the Salesians, was concerned with the transformation of the lives of *every* young person with whom he came into contact, resonating with ‘the uniqueness of the individual’, one of the key principles of Catholic education. According to one of his first Salesians, Bosco encouraged them to ‘go to the pump’, to meet young people where they had gathered and to engage in a genuine encounter. This article will explore the extent to which this model of effective presence and encounter reflects, firstly, Jesus as the Shepherd and, secondly, the vision of St John Bosco which involves the teacher/pastoral worker and the accompanied meeting each other and having frequent encounters in informal ways in a variety of environments, marked by openness, trust and availability. Research will be retrieved to exemplify the perennial impact of Salesian accompaniment in Salesian secondary schools in England in which students are, in general, familiar with the Christian faith and its central tenets.

Keywords: detraditionalisation; accompaniment; Salesian; Bosco; formation



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1. Detraditionalisation

In today's post-Vatican II Church, what it means to belong to anything has changed. In her seminal work, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, (1994), Grace Davie (1994) suggests that Europe is marked by a culture of “believing without belonging”, characterised by a profound mismatch between religious values that people profess (believing) and actual churchgoing and religious practice (belonging). Davie was writing around the time of major European values surveys. Kerkhofs (1993) has spoken of a shift away from tradition as the yardstick by which to interpret the meaning of life and to define moral rules with identity being found through flexible adaptation, a term which appears to encapsulate the notion of detraditionalisation.

More recently, Boeve (2007) described the situation in Belgium as, in a relatively short period of time, having secularised and evolved from a culture and society with a nearly total Catholic horizon of meaning to a situation where this horizon determines, to a much smaller and lesser degree, the identity construction of individuals and groups. In what could be described as a working definition of the term ‘detraditionalisation’, Boeve (2005, p. 145) asserts that:

‘Detraditionalisation as a term hints at the socio-cultural interruption of traditions (religious as well as class, gender traditions) which are no longer able to pass themselves from one generation to the next. The latter definitely applies to the Christian tradition in which the transmission process has been seriously hampered ‘On the contrary, because of the absence of such unquestioned

and quasi-automatic transmission of tradition, identity is no longer a given but has to be constructed’.

In the same chapter, he goes on to claim that tradition no longer steers the process of constructing identity, reflecting Kerkhofs’ reference to “flexible adaptation.” Boeve’s description has been replicated in several other European countries to a greater or lesser extent including the UK and Ireland. Hession (2015), reflecting on Boeve’s work from an Irish perspective, speaks of the complex nature of identity formation in a context ‘influenced by the forces of modernisation and globalisation’. She speaks of people “integrating multiple perspectives and contradictory rationalities into a more reflexive, contextual and plural identity.”

This notion of ‘flexible adaptation’ reflects a transition, described by the Catholic sociologist Douglas (1982), from a “group” (tightly-knit Catholic identity) to a grid mentality religion becomes more ego based: God is less a revelation to be obeyed than a source of comfort for the self. Faith becomes a matter of individual needs, with religion becoming privatised, merely a part of a person’s need for self-fulfilment. The fact that people opt out of formal structures of belonging is of particular relevance to the spiritual challenge for Catholic school leaders going forward. As Weigel (2013) points out in his new book, *Evangelical Catholicism*, post-modern culture is toxic to the Christian message. The Catholic Church can no longer expect the faith to be passed on by cultural osmosis. He writes (2013) that “the cultural Catholicism of the past was ‘comfortable’ because it fit neatly within the ambient public culture, causing little chafing between one’s life ‘in the Church’ and one’s life ‘in the world’” (p. 19).

Building on her groundbreaking work in *Religion in Modern Europe—A Memory Mutates* (Davie 2000), Davie starts from her ‘convenient shorthand, [that] Europe believes but it does not belong’ (Davie 2000, p. 33) and finds it significant that ‘churches remain, however, significant players’ within society (Davie 2000, p. 38), performing a moral, spiritual and social role on behalf of the population, i.e., *vicariously*. Davie (2000, p. 59) herself defines vicarious religion as ‘the willingness of the population to delegate the religious sphere to the professional ministries of the state churches’ and, moreover, Europeans are grateful that ‘churches perform, vicariously, a number of tasks on behalf of the population as a whole’. At specific times, churches—or church leaders or church members—are “asked to articulate the sacred” on behalf of individuals, families or society as a whole. Whilst ordinary European citizens may not practise religion on a daily basis, they recognise its worth, and are ‘more than half aware that they might need to draw on [it] at crucial times in their individual or collective lives’.

In 2005, David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, partly in response to Grace Davie, published *Religion in Britain: neither believing without belonging*. In essence, Voas and Crockett concluded, based on relatively extensive sampling, that Davie painted too positive a picture in regard to religion in Britain. They suggest, inter alia, that:

Everyone agrees that religion has lost ground; the key dispute concerns why. How much, in what way and with what prospects. We suggest that the only form of BWB that is as pervasive as Davie suggests is a value willingness to suppose that ‘there is something out there’ accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be (Voas and Crockett 2005, p. 24).

Voas and Crockett’s avowal that Davie paints too positive picture of religion in Britain reflects Boeve’s critique of the concept of ‘believing without belonging’, preferring the concept of ‘longing without belonging’.

Davie later developed the notion of vicarious religion in her 2015 work *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*. She explores the persistent paradox that the decrease in religious activity measured over a wide range of variables alongside the growing significance of religion in public debate, resonating with Boeve’s insistence that religious culture has been interrupted as opposed to ruptured.

2. Accompaniment—An Introduction

I would suggest that, in the context of the transmission of the Salesian tradition, the empowering nature of accompaniment has taken on a critical significance in this environment of detraditionalisation or cultural interruption, especially in endeavouring to avoid the challenge of it being “seriously hampered” by, *inter alia*, a decreasing number of active religious in Europe generally and in England and Wales in particular. This notion of accompaniment, central to the Salesian education vision, is rooted in the way in which Jesus accompanied his disciples at every stage of their journey. This is encapsulated best in the episode in Scripture recalling the encounter between Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). There are several striking features in this passage, not least the reciprocity and mutuality captured in the dialogue between Jesus and the two disciples. Michael T. Winstanley highlights in particular the way in which Jesus allows the disciples to take the initiative in inviting him to stay with them:

The disciples thus take the initiative in responding to Jesus and his words. It is not without significance that Jesus waits to be asked, for he never imposes himself, never forces his friendship; with remarkable sensitivity he reverences our freedom. But once the offer of hospitality is extended, he accepts it promptly (Winstanley 2017, p. 351).

‘Never imposing himself’ reflects the classical ‘offer not impose’ perspective which permeates the documents of the Second Vatican Council:

... Catholic education is offered not imposed. One phrase can recapture its impetus: ‘Proposing faith in modern society’. A very similar form of this expression occurs in the opening homily of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII. It involves thinking simultaneously and jointly of the mission of Catholic teaching in Church and in society (Derycke 2007, p. 335; Grace and O’Keefe 2007).

Derycke, addressing faith formation in a contemporary context and the movement in France from ‘a sociological to an evangelical’ anchor in the context of formation in the faith, is reflecting upon the seminal statement of the Congregation for Catholic Education which insisted that a Catholic school ‘cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education’ (CCE 1988, para. 6). This notion of ‘offer rather than impose’, in essence a dialogical concept, is also central to the underpinning methodology of many religious education programmes following the Second Vatican Council.

3. The Emmaus Paradigm and Religious Education

Thomas Groome, in his classic and foundational text *Christian Religious Education* (1980), points out that the Emmaus story has become paradigmatic for people committed to what he describes as a shared praxis approach to religious education. The term shared praxis emphasises that growth in Christian faith in essence takes the form of a journey. The term also highlights Groome’s conviction that dialogue between teacher and student must form a central component of all religious education.

By adopting this approach, Groome (1980) sought to ensure that all religious education programmes maintained a balance between the faith tradition of the Catholic Church on the one hand and the experience of students on the other. Groome, while reflecting Winstanley’s (2017) point referenced earlier that Jesus demonstrated his commitment to personal presence in accepting the disciples’ hospitality, suggests that Jesus takes the initiative in pronouncing his blessing over the bread and distributing it to them (Luke 24:30). Groome (1998) writes that ‘in this simple but profound act of service—feeding others—they came to recognise ‘the stranger’ for themselves’ (p. 307).

Groome (1998) goes on to insist that the verb translated ‘recognise’ is the Greek ‘*epignoskein*’, meaning conversion, a recognition that leads to discipleship. The five-stage process outlined below underpins many Catholic religious education programmes and is equally significant in the context of the educational approach of St John Bosco (1815–1888),

who emphasised the importance of meeting students at their stage of the faith journey. See Table 1.

Table 1. The Emmaus Paradigm.

The Emmaus Story (Luke 24:13–35)	Five Stages
Verses 13–17	1. Jesus joins the disciples on their journey.
Verses 18–24	2. Jesus encourages the disciples to talk about what they have experienced and how they feel.
Verses 25–27	3. Jesus reminds the disciples of the scriptures and the faithful Saviour God portrayed in their tradition.
Verses 28–32	4. The disciples find joy and encouragement in Jesus' company. He shares their meal and, in the blessing, and breaking of bread they recognise him.
Verses 33–35	5. They run back to share the news with the other disciples.

Each of the five stages is integral to the notion of presence and accompaniment underpinning Salesian accompaniment, encompassing taking the initiative in engaging young people in dialogue through allowing them to share their story and creating the space for purposeful dialogue on the journey to becoming 'honest citizens and good Christians', the central aim of the Salesian educative project (Bosco 1854, cited in Lemoyne 1989, p. 46).¹

4. 'Go to the Pump'

Reflecting the initiative of Jesus in inviting the two disciples to share their story, St John Bosco's advice to one of his key early collaborators, Vespignani, was to 'Go to the Pump' (Vespignani 1930). At the water pump in Valdocco, Turin, near the site of Bosco's first Oratory, boys often came together. Bosco expected his educators to be where the boys were. Such encounters in a non-formal context have the effect of building up trust which forms the basis of every educational practice or encounter. As Loots (2018) suggests, 'this practice teaches that it is best to follow first to be allowed to guide later' (p. 5).

Bosco's idea was that the boys would be inspired, through these initial invitational encounters of 'going to the pump', to join his Oratory, a name which reflects the influence of St Philip Neri (1515–95), the founder of the Oratorians. Don Bosco took over the basic features of the Oratory including catechism lessons and opportunities for recreation. He would often make the point that oratories without some element of religious instruction were simply games rooms. Luciano Pazzaglia (1993) is insistent on the latter point, cautioning against a reductionist view of the first Oratory as a playground or a meeting place for children:

'what Don Bosco had in mind was a school . . . where . . . religion was practised and youngsters were inspired to live a Christian life' (p. 282).

Bosco (1989) was undoubtedly affected deeply by his experience of visiting the Turin prison, the Generala, a prison where he saw large numbers of boys aged 12–18. In the *Memoirs of the Oratory* (1989), he recalls that the experience of seeing them idle, without food for body and soul, left him with a deep sense of concern:

What shocked me most was to see that many of them were released full of good resolutions to go straight, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison, within a few days of their release (Bosco 1989, p. 182).

This was undoubtedly a foundational experience for Don Bosco, together with a deeply rooted conviction that developing meaningful relationships with young people was the key to educational progress. Avallone (1979) notes that in the period of history in which Bosco lived, 'there was a great psychological barrier between teacher and pupil. The distance was a tool for stern discipline . . . '. He goes on to point out that Bosco bridged

the divide by emphasising the necessity of ‘rapport and kindness, so vital for security and warmth and closeness in the maturing process’ (p. 8).

5. St John Bosco’s Educative Project

In the context of [Bosco’s \(1884\)](#) educative project, his initial aim was to break down this barrier between educator and teacher, encapsulated in his *Letter from Rome* (1884 cited in [Braido 2005](#)) to Salesians, constituting an evaluation of the extent to which the original inspiration of the project was being maintained:

The teacher who is seen only behind his lectern is a teacher and no more. But when he spends recreation time with the boys, he will become like a brother. When someone sees a priest preaching from the pulpit, one will say that the man does no more neither less than his duty. But if he speaks words during recreation time, that will be the words of someone who loves (p. 384).

Spending recreation time with the boys was, therefore, seminal in terms of Bosco’s educational vision. Presence in the form of constructive engagement by educators was the key to gaining the trust of the young people. For St John Bosco, the first principle of pastoral care was presence. Like the picture painted of the ‘*Good Shepherd*’, the Salesian educator knows his pupils, goes before them and, like the father in the story of the ‘*Prodigal Son*’ (Luke 15), is prepared to make the first move. Far from being simply passive watchfulness, the presence-assistance advocated by St John Bosco reflected the optimistic humanism both of himself and that of Frances de Sales. As Bosco’s biographer Fr Giovanni [Lemoyne \(1989\)](#) puts it:

Just as there is no barren, fertile land which cannot be made fertile through patient effort, so it is with a person’s heart. No matter how barren or restive it may be at first, it will sooner or later bring forth good fruit . . . The first duty of the animator is to find that responsive chord in the young person’s heart ([Lemoyne 1989](#), Vol. III, pp. 236–37).

The use of the word *animator* (from the Latin ‘*anima*’ meaning ‘soul’) here is significant since it reminds us of the Greek word for soul ‘*psuche*’, the soul or breath of life, the dynamic principle or life force within every human being. Salesian presence, therefore, should be dynamic, breathing life into situations, making things happen. The Salesian animator should be involved with the young people in their activities, arousing their interest and leading them to constructive engagement. In the writings of Don Bosco, there is often reference to the importance of informal presence among young people. In a book entitled ‘*Life in the Recreation Ground*’ with reference to Don Bosco, Albert [Caviglia \(1943\)](#) states:

He considered it a sacred duty to be familiarly present among young people . . . it is in the Salesian’s informal contacts with young people that true education of character is more than anywhere made possible (p. 16).

It is clear, then, that contact with young people in the classroom and other formal situations alone does not suffice. The educator must establish an abiding presence with young people. He must seek to be in touch with young people in all possible situations of the school day and beyond, especially in activities that allow the educator to associate with young people not simply in the role of a teacher but as a brother or friend. In the *Letter from Rome*, cited in a volume published by the Salesians of Don Bosco, Don Bosco writes:

By being loved in the things they like, through their teachers taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to those things too which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial. In this way they will learn to do these things also with love ([Salesians of Don Bosco 1972](#), p. 271).

Such active, dynamic presence of its nature takes its inspiration from the Gospel in terms of the self-sacrifice involved, reminding us again of the Good Shepherd who ‘lays down his life for his sheep’ (John 10:11) The tireless zeal demanded by such an abiding

presence among young people also echoes Jesus three-fold criteria for discipleship: ‘if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’ (Mark 8:34). Bosco’s reference to Jesus ‘making himself little with the little ones’ indicates a further, perhaps deeper, way in which presence is an imitation of Christ.

Reminding us of Francis de Sales’ reference to God disregarding himself (cited in [McPake 1981](#)), Bosco’s ‘becoming little with the little ones’ (p. 137) involved the animator, by definition, in divesting himself of the vestiges of authoritarianism which marked the traditional standpoint of the teacher of the day. At a human level, ‘meeting the students on their own turf’ ([Lenti 1989](#), p. 7) involves taking a risk by letting go of the ‘safety valve’ inherent in the traditional student–teacher relationship. By being familiarly present to young people, as opposed to maintaining an institutional superior–inferior style of imposition, the assistant reflects the *ekenosen*, the self-emptying, of Christ himself. Bosco, then, interprets the entry into young people’s recreation as an act of loving condescension, going beyond mere utilitarianism or paternalism. It involved adults leaving the lofty heights of their ‘power over’ or even ‘power on behalf of’ positions in order to engage in a genuine sharing of the bread of life. This engaging familiarity reflects the ‘I-Thou’ relationship spoken of by [Buber \(1974\)](#):

... every human person looks bashfully yet longingly in the eyes of another for the yes that allows him to be. It is from one human person to another that the heavenly bread of self-being is passed (p. 75).

Such a relationship, according to a recent major study from a psychoanalytical angle by [Thevenot \(1988\)](#), is developed primarily in the encounter between educator and pupils ‘when they are relaxing together in recreation’ (p. 710). These encounters constitute the kernel of the *Preventive System*, summed up by [Pope John Paul II \(1988\)](#) in the following terms:

The Salesian educators who participate in the lives of young people are interested in their problems, become aware of how the young see things, take part in their sporting and cultural activities and in their conversations as a mature and responsible friend. Furthermore, prospects, itineraries and good aims help to intervene to clarify problems, to indicate criteria, to correct with prudence and loving firmness ... (p. 12).

Creating a family spirit is central to the Salesian educative project. According to [Lenti \(1989\)](#), one of the principal advantages of the involvement of animators in recreation lay in its fostering of family spirit. Recreation contributed to the building up of an atmosphere of happiness and joy, which for Bosco was a fundamental prerequisite for education. Informal, uninhibited self-expression in recreation offered the educator an opportunity to learn about the youngster and his character. The presence of educators, *almost* as equals, enhanced the morale of young people, fostering the family spirit and mutual confidence, summed up by [Dacquino \(1988\)](#):

Don Bosco’s didactic method was not predominantly cerebral in approach, something that could be completed sitting at a desk; it was an educational method based essentially on an affective relationship that spanned the entire day ... (p. 135).

6. Sodalities: Going beyond Recreation

‘Going to the pump’, involving relationships that are clearly non-authoritarian, helped sow the seeds of empowerment which, like recreation itself, became an integral part of the Salesian style or atmosphere, giving it an unmistakable character of solidarity and participation.

Sodalities, derived from the Latin ‘*soliditatem*,’ were seminal to the Catholic ecclesial tradition and emerged strongly following the founding of major religious orders such as the Dominicans in the 13th century. In Bosco’s time, the formation of sodalities, referred to by him as ‘*compagnia*’, was a key expression of empowerment, regarded by him as fundamental to the Salesian family.¹ The terms ‘sodality’ and ‘confraternity’ are some-

times used interchangeably, connoting a concept of solidarity around a common mission. Hilgers (2012) describes such sodalities as:

From the era of the Middle Ages very many of these pious associations placed themselves under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin, and chose her for patron under the title of some sacred mystery with which she was associated. The main object and duty of these societies were, above all, the practice of piety and works of charity . . . in the course of the sixteenth century and the appearance of the new religious congregations and associations, once more there sprang up numerous confraternities and sodalities which laboured with great success and, in many cases, are still effective (p. 142).

Lemoine (1989) describes the founding of several sodalities around 1859 which combined spiritual exercises with charitable activities. The boys themselves were responsible for the running of the sodalities, under the guidance of one of the Salesians who acted as a spiritual director (Lemoine 1989, Vol. VI, p. 103). Such an organisational structure promoted the building up of energetic and integrated Christian characters who gained confidence through the delegation of responsibility. Sodalities were an essential, indispensable factor in Don Bosco's educational organisation, and they grew along with the maturing of his experience. They were an instrument for the practical realisation of those educative collaborations between pupils and educators, without which it would be idle to speak of a family spirit.

Initially, the charitable activities were focused on the members of the school community. Grech (2019, p. 96) refers to the Sodality of Mary Immaculate to which the schoolboy Saint Dominic Savio belonged and makes the point that 'being of service to others was a very useful means which Bosco used to empower the young people to mature in responsibility and spirituality'. Lemoine points out, however, that the work of the sodalities was extended to include service to other beyond the confines of the school community. Collaboration with the Society of St Vincent de Paul was significant in this context. This accompaniment in the service of others has been described by Miguel Morcuende (2018) as an experience of compassion which promotes service and love for what is essential.

7. Spiritual Accompaniment: An Integral Concept of the Human with Space for Spiritual Meaning and Religion

Sodalities represent a significant bridge between the building of trust gained in non-formal contexts and accompaniment at a more deeply spiritual level. This is made possible by the maturing of relationships between Salesians and young people through the media of recreation and participation in sodalities. Finnegan (2018) encapsulates this bridge when suggesting that:

Salesian spirituality develops in spaces where intense interior energy and social solidarity converge. Through the art of friendly conversation, Salesian spiritual accompaniment encourages and supports dynamic convergence. Through gentle dialogue it seeks, identifies and promotes wise and reasonable ways to harmonise interior and social practices with the abilities and understanding of those accompanied. Salesian spirituality seeks God in ordinary ways in the ordinary activities of life, ways centred in and driven by the heart, a heart that is open and generous, humble, gentle and committed (p. 144).

It is important, in any discussion of aspects of Salesian pedagogy and methodology, to place emphasis on the spiritual and religious dimensions of meaning. A holistic view of being human avoids accepting the human person as the only active creator of meaning. The Salesian pedagogical perspective transcends such a narrow anthropocentric image of the human and emphasises human openness to the transcendent. This openness allows a movement from focusing on the self towards focusing on the other. It can take the form of a 'radical otherness' (Burggraeve 2016, p. 1) and might be described as the capacity to transcend the physical, the empirical and even the inner worldly. Such underpinning

allows human beings a way of coming to terms with experiences of suffering, disaster, guilt, failure and death in the sense that these do not have the final word on the human condition.

Denying this openness for transcendence and the encompassing meaning of human existence, which it could be argued is one consequence of a dominant post-modern secular narrative, does not do full justice to the essential dimension of being human. For [Burggraeve \(2016\)](#), the Salesian pedagogical project in the spirit of Don Bosco rejects such a closed image of the human. In contrast, it ‘honours an integral or holistic view of the human whereby the existentially spiritual openness to transcendent meaning is not shielded away from but actually takes centre stage’ ([Burggraeve 2016](#), p. 2).

8. The Perennial Reality of Salesian Accompaniment—Evidence from Research

To discern the extent to which accompaniment constitutes a perennial reality in Salesian schools, I engaged quantitative analysis across the five secondary schools that constitute the network of Salesian schools in England. A questionnaire was distributed electronically to over 400 teachers, over 80% of whom were affiliated with Christian denominations, and the response rate of over 60% was particularly positive. This article will discuss the findings from the quantitative questionnaire. Qualitative data collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers will be discussed in a further article.

A structured questionnaire utilising a Likert scale, providing a range of responses to given statements (e.g., strongly agree . . . strongly disagree), constituted the research instrument employed for this article.

Notwithstanding the inherent challenges in any quest for objectivity, there are a number of advantages to such a quantitative methodology. Questionnaires, for example, are easy to arrange and the respondents supply standardised answers, ensuring that data are unlikely to be contaminated through variations in the wording of or responses to statements. Data are also less likely to be affected by interpersonal factors.

One of the aspects of the research focused especially on student–teacher relationships or rapport, seminal in the context of accompaniment. In St John Bosco’s mind, the ability of teachers to form an engaging rapport with students was a central component in building up a family spirit within a school. The characteristics of this rapport, which are linked integrally to the notion of ‘vocation’, both in the context of modelling ministry on Christ in general and modelling the educative style of St John Bosco in particular. For the moment, suffice it to say that one of the key characteristics of the Salesian style of relating is bound up not by the language of psychology but rooted in the ability of the educator to engage constructively with students.

As has been stated previously, in a Salesian context, there is a consistent focus on the value of engagement beyond the academic curriculum, reflecting a holistic perspective that focuses on the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the student alongside the academic curriculum. In the atmosphere engendered by constructive engagement, the spiritual development of students was architectonic, encapsulated in the aphorism “honest citizens and good Christians”. Within this system, as in the case of that of other religious orders, the teacher must aim to be a role model, breathing life into individuals and groups which make up the educating community. Constructive engagement, spiritual development and role modelling constitute the basis of the series of statements encapsulated in the questionnaire:

- a. I frequently engage in extra-curricular activities,
- b. I feel comfortable in talking to students at this school,
- c. In this school everyone is treated equally,
- d. I never speak about God and religion in my classes,
- e. I feel I am a good role model for students,
- f. I am interested in knowing students as persons, and
- g. In this school it would not be difficult for students to name a teacher they admire.

In the context of being a role model, central to the concept of Salesian accompaniment, 93.7% of teachers responded with a first or second rank to the direct statement “I feel I

am a good role model for students". This constitutes strong corroboration in terms of the literature. The median rank for this question was 1.5, again suggesting that role modelling features highly in teacher's perception of their role, at least in the context of Salesian schools, reflecting Bosco's conviction that the Salesian teacher must be a role model. Concomitant validation is provided by the fact that 74.7% of respondents strongly agreed that "it would not be difficult for students to name a teacher they admire", further supported by the median rank.

The nature of role modelling in Salesian tradition is subsumed within the nature of Salesian presence as opposed to any elaborate treatise on its nature. This article has maintained consistently that engagement in extra-curricular activities is a central feature of such presence, both in terms of the sacrificial nature of the commitment involved, modelling that of Christ, and the extent to which such engagement constituted *the* critical factor in building relationships between teachers and students and, a fortiori, the Salesian family spirit. In this respect, 81.1% of teachers agreed strongly that "they felt comfortable in talking to students at this school" with a further 12.6% in agreement, again with a median rank within the "strongly agree" category. In the context of "talking", the fact that 72.6% confirmed that they at least disagreed with the statement "I never speak about God or religion in my classes" resonates with the architectonic nature of religion in the mind of St John Bosco.

Translating "talking to students" into "engaging in extra-curricular activities" appears, at first sight, to be challenging, in that 33.7% strongly agree and 27.4% agree that "they frequently engage in extra-curricular activities", with a median rank in the latter category. The word 'frequently' cannot be quantified which means that the responses do not indicate necessarily that teachers are not involved in any way with extra-curricular activities. Perhaps more significantly, the responses may suggest that teachers are aware of work-life balance and, therefore, this resonates with the findings in separate research (see [Lydon 2011](#)) which suggested that three-quarters of those interviewed held a deeply felt conviction that such a balance is necessary in order to be effective in a school context.

The value of extra-curricular engagement in building student confidence and a 'family atmosphere' in schools constitutes the distinctive contribution of St John Bosco to a philosophy of Catholic education. While appearing on the surface to be disarmingly simplistic, Pope Francis, at the World Congress on Catholic Education in 2015, highlighted it as a particularly significant characteristic for Catholic Schools of the 21st century. Citing the example of Bosco's integration of formal and extra-curricular into one educational synthesis in support of his assertion that education was in danger of being impoverished by an over-emphasis on academic outcomes, the Holy Father suggested that:

We need new horizons and new models. We need to open up horizons for an education that is not just in the head. There are three languages: head, heart and hand. Education must pass through these three pathways. We must help them to think, feel what is in their hearts, and help them in doing. So these three languages must be in harmony with each other ([CCE 2015](#)).

The overall positive nature of the findings in this series of responses to statements relating to student-teacher relationships is illustrated in the bar chart below: the evidence from quantitative data and responses to questionnaire statements represent convincing support for the perennial impact of Salesian accompaniment. See [Figure 1](#).

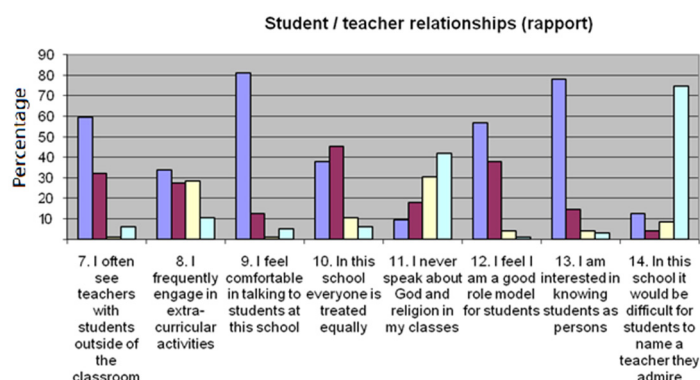


Figure 1. Student/Teacher Relationship (Rapport).

9. Conclusions: Returning to Emmaus

The [Synod of Bishops \(2018\)](#) sets out for us the efficacy of the Emmaus model:

As the account of the Emmaus disciples shows us, accompanying requires availability to walk a stretch of road together, establishing a significant relationship. The origin of the term ‘accompany’ points to bread broken and shared (*cum pane*), with all the symbolic human and sacramental richness of this reference (para. 92).

In returning to the Emmaus story, it is worth reminding ourselves, following Winstanley’s assertion quoted earlier, that Jesus is prepared to make himself present to the disciples on the road and to take the initiative in helping them understand the significance of the events they have experienced. He also identifies himself in the breaking of bread.

Bosco’s recognition that the accompanier of the young, in any situation, is prepared to walk alongside, making the first move to offer a listening ear or the hand of friendship, follows the Emmaus paradigm in that the teacher/pastoral worker makes themselves available where there is a situation of need. It is this point of giving which can prove transformative both for the accompanied and the one accompanying.

Again, the [Synod of Bishops \(2018\)](#) is clear that the invitation to accompany goes out to all of those who are stakeholders in the education of young people:

As well as family members, those called to exercise a role of accompaniment include all the significant persons in the various spheres of young people’s lives, such as teachers, animators, trainers, and other figures of reference, including professional ones (para. 93).

They are also clear (2018) that accompaniment does not stop simply with the spiritual but must have a wider holistic impact:

Accompaniment cannot limit itself to the path of spiritual growth and to the practices of the Christian life. Equally fruitful is accompaniment along the path of gradual assumption of responsibilities within society, for example in the professional sphere or in socio-political engagement (para. 94).

This sentiment fits well with the maxim of Salesian education to form *good Christians and honest citizens* and with St John Bosco’s insistence on the importance of good adult role models. [Grech \(2019, p. 78\)](#) encapsulates Bosco’s insistence in the following terms:

St John Bosco, with his gift as an accompanier of young people, has left the Church and his Salesians a rich tradition . . . Bosco believe that it is not doing something for young people that counts but being someone to them. It is not what we do for them, it is *who we are to them*.

Luciano Pazzaglia, however, appears to articulate a balance between Grech’s ‘doing’ and ‘being’, affirming an approach analogous to the “go to the pump” approach thereby gaining the trust of the young people referenced earlier.

He realised that, if this work was to succeed, he had to convince the boys that they had found a “friend”, someone they could trust and to whom they could open their hearts. Once that was achieved, once the boys felt themselves in an atmosphere of affection and sincere human concern, the problem of improving them became less difficult.

Pazzaglia’s assertion resonates with that of Loots referenced earlier with regard to establishing trust before embarking upon spiritual direction.

This research suggests, therefore, that extra-curricular activities continue to impact perennially on the developing of student–teacher relationships and, de facto, the school community, thereby building trust and opening the way for a deeper level of accompaniment enabling growth in spirituality and a sense of discerning the way in which students can embark upon their role of disciples in the contemporary world. The author’s experience of teaching in the same Salesian school for 31 years witnessed to the reality that the response of students to teachers “meeting the students on their own turf” was equally positive in the 31st year as it had been in the first year. Such commitment by teachers continues to build trust and has, thereby, provided a renewed vitality for engagement by both teachers and students in spiritual development. In this context, family spirit remains germane. Teachers should, therefore, endeavour to involve other members of the educating community including parents in extra-curricular projects, thereby eschewing individualism and a “heroic model” and adopting a sense of collaborative ministry. In the words of [Grech \(2019, p. 143\)](#):

‘An integral part of the Salesian accompaniment process is the provision of a happy family environment. The age of heroic youth accompaniment is well and truly over. The Salesian style of accompaniment must be truly collaborative’. Reference to a ‘collaborative family environment’ rather than ‘heroic youth accompaniment’ could be deemed to be a corrective to the possibility of safeguarding issues. From the outset, St John Bosco was insistent on the dangers of over-zealousness in terms of affection. In his *Treatise on the Prevention System* he stated unequivocally that: ‘The teachers, the technical instructors, the assistants should all be of known moral rectitude. They should try to avoid like the plague every kind of (morbid) affection or exclusive friendship with the pupils, and they should realize that the wrongdoing of just one person can compromise an educational institute. They operate in a way that the students are never alone ([Avallone 1979, p. 76](#)).

Conscious of the reality that Bosco’s words have not always been realised in practice, the leaders of Salesian schools in England are especially conscious of the need to follow closely the safeguarding guidelines of the UK government and ‘go the extra mile’ in an endeavour to ensure that students are safe at all times, reflecting the statutory guidance:

‘All staff should receive appropriate safeguarding and child protection training (including online safety) at induction. The training should be regularly updated. In addition, all staff should receive safeguarding and children protection (including online safety) updates (for examples, via email, e-bulletins and staff meetings), as required, and at least annually, to provide them with relevant skills and knowledge to safeguard children effectively ([DfE 2021](#)).

In conclusion, I would suggest that the perennial nature and impact of Salesian accompaniment reflect [Hervieu-Léger’s \(1998\)](#) concept of religion “as a chain of memory” as opposed to the notion of cultural interruption or detraditionalisation. She describes a process by which individual believers become members of a community that links past, present, and future members. Thus, like cultural tradition, concepts such as Salesian accompaniment may be understood as a shared understanding with a collective memory that enables it to draw upon the rich tradition embedded within the Salesian network of schools since the time of St John Bosco. Analogous to the author’s exploration of the transmission of religious charisms ([Lydon 2009](#)), the key challenge revolves around the

extent to which teachers and leaders in Salesian schools in the present and the future encounter role models committed to maintaining this distinctive style of accompaniment.

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Note

- ¹ This seminal aim of the Salesian educational system permeates primary and secondary Salesian sources. The phrase first appeared in St John Bosco's 'Plan for the Regulation of the Oratory' in 1854 and was cited in Lemoyne (1989, Volume II, p. 46).

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