

## “Being with” or Salesian Assistance in the Digital Age „Być przy”, czyli salezjańska asystencja wychowawcza w epoce cyfrowej

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**Abstract:** St. John Bosco demonstrated his teaching method most clearly in a letter from Rome in 1884, in which he established the loving presence of the educator as the foundation of Salesian pedagogy. In the long and varied pedagogical practice of the Salesians, the so-called assistance played an essential role in the visibility of a specific educational model. In a modern society of individualism, assistance is often understood as control. In this context, the emphasis on freedom of conscience makes it particularly difficult to find a presence that wants to share and transmit Christianity. In this article, we highlight the difficulties that such an understanding poses for the entire field of education today. Especially in the age of digitalization, when young people are increasingly chained to their electronic devices and less and less capable of having genuine relationships, this loving presence of which Don Bosco writes is all the more necessary. Using the concrete example of a Salesian educational institution, we show that such a pedagogical orientation is not only an option, but that assistance with the traits of Christianity in practice can be effectively used to work with young people even in the digital age.

**Keywords:** assistance, Salesian education, St. John Bosco, digital, religious education, Letter from Rome

**Abstrakt:** Św. Jan Bosko najpełniej przedstawił swoją metodę wychowawczą w Liście z Rzymu z 1884 r., w którym jako podstawę pedagogiki salezjańskiej przyjął pełną miłości obecność wychowawcy. W długoletniej i różnorodnej praktyce pedagogicznej salezjanów tak zwana asystencja wychowawcza stanowi wyróżnik na tle innych metod nauczania i wychowania. We współczesnym społeczeństwie nacechowanym silnym poczuciem indywidualizmu stała asystencja wychowawcza może być raczej rozumiana jako chęć kontroli. Tak duży nacisk kładziony obecnie na wolność sumienia sprawia, że szczególnie trudno jest znaleźć dzisiaj taki rodzaj obecności wychowawcy, który będzie skutkował dzieleniem się i przekazywaniem wartości chrześcijańskich. Niniejszy artykuł zwraca uwagę na trudności wynikające z takiego właśnie rozumienia obecności wychowawcy dla całej dziedziny edukacji. To właśnie jednak w dobie cyfryzacji, kiedy to młodzi ludzie stają się coraz bardziej zależni od urządzeń elektronicznych i kiedy coraz trudniej przychodzi im nawiązywanie prawdziwych relacji z innymi, ta pełna miłości obecność, o której pisze Ksiądz Bosko, staje się tym bardziej konieczna. W oparciu o konkretny przykład salezjańskiej instytucji edukacyjnej zostanie ukazane, że taka metodyka kształcenia i wychowania nie stanowi jedynie jednej z możliwych opcji, ale może być skutecznie wykorzystana w kształtowaniu cech chrześcijańskich w pracy z młodymi ludźmi, nawet w epoce cyfrowej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** asystencja, edukacja salezjańska, św. Jan Bosko, cyfrowa, edukacja religijna, List z Rzymu



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## INTRODUCTION

The words spoken 140 years ago still express the great pedagogical eros of every Christian educator: “Whether I am at home or away I am always thinking of you. I have only one wish, to see you happy both in this world and in the next” (Bosco 2020). It is a happiness that comes from the deep conviction that one is saved both here on earth and in eternal life. Without this background, it would be difficult to understand the words of St. John Bosco to his disciples. However, these words are even more pointedly addressed to his followers – to the Salesians and to all who strive to live in his spirit. For in his old age, St. John Bosco was beginning to feel that he could no longer be present to the youth as he had been in the past (Ciglar 2009, 32-33). His effort to find a new religious community was to help preserve the typical educational concept that leads young people to faith and prepares them for a responsible life. “There was a danger that the organization, the coldness, the formality, the timetable... would take precedence over spontaneity, familiarity, closeness, that the Salesian would no longer be a father, a friend, a counsellor, a brother, i.e., an educator, but only an overseer, a guard, i.e., a non-educator” (Ciglar 2009, 32). St. John Bosco was convinced that with the loss of this sense of familiarity, this loving-kindness, young people would cease to open up to being guided into a responsible adult life, even less so into a healthy relationship with God.

St. John Bosco was a realist in all the ideals he held as an educator of young people. He was convinced that if one could instil in the youth, the love of life, the spontaneous integration into society, and the joy of providing for himself and his family, it would be an achievement. “But, as a rule, he tried to achieve even more: a more refined moral-ethical sense and a firm faith, with a constant striving to live in a state of grace” (Braido 2019, 325). Faith was undoubtedly the starting point of his professional activity, and it constituted his basic educational background. Of all his works and efforts, however, we can say that the only confirmation of being a good believer, as John Bosco himself often argues, is being a good citizen. The commitment to apprentices, the first evening schools, the boarding school, all certainly served to proclaim the message and, above all, to equip young people for a responsible and successful adult life.

In an increasingly secularized society, it would have been difficult for St. John Bosco to base his pedagogy on the “Hail Mary” and the paradigm: honest citizens and good Christians. Although in his times, he managed to successfully respond to all opposition to Christianity and the Church, today the situation is strikingly different. We live in a society that, at least in the West, is becoming increasingly areligious, deprived of a sense of faith. Modern social institutions no longer base their actions and existence on one kind of religiosity or another, which is fundamentally different from the times of St. John Bosco. This is and must be a challenge for Salesian education (Lydon and Briody 2023, 69). In addition, religious attitudes of young people are at stake, as the young live in a very pluralistic

environment. A monolithic Catholic society is a thing of the past (Kraner 2021). Nevertheless, it can be said that Salesian educational institutions around the world are trying to remain faithful to this core and to preserve the religious dimension of their actions. Our discussion will therefore be naturally linked to the necessity of establishing a close relationship with students emphasized by St. Bosco in his letter from Rome and the possibility of giving this closeness a religious dimension: “This is what gives rise to the coldness of so many in approaching the sacraments, to neglect of the prayers in church and elsewhere; to their reluctance to be in a place where Divine Providence heaps every possible blessing on their bodies, their souls and their minds” (Bosco 2020). Whether it is possible to maintain his charism in a time of areligiosity, often even anti-religiosity, is an urgent question for the successful application of pedagogy based on the presence, which in the Salesian tradition is understood as assistance.

However, what is an even greater challenge for those educating in the spirit of St. John Bosco today, is how to maintain and establish the closeness he portrays in the above-mentioned Letter from Rome. The decline of his educational model is visible at first sight: “But I saw quite a number of others on their own, leaning against the pillars, a prey to depressing thoughts. Others were on the steps or in the corridors, or up on the terraces near the garden so as to be away from the common recreation. Others were strolling about in groups, talking to each other in low tones and casting furtive and suspicious glances in every direction” (Bosco 2020). Today we would see more of such behaviour. Young people are becoming increasingly lonely. Recent years have given humanity communication capabilities that were unimaginable just a short time ago. One would think that we are more connected and less lonely. However, the opposite is the case. “So, all of them, even when communicating with others, are bound to feel solitude or loneliness, which they try to remedy by frantically consulting their messages, anxiously awaiting the reply, and speedily composing their response” (Larchet 2019). Young people in particular are finding it more and more difficult to interact with each other in the digital age (Kraner 2023a). They are increasingly apathetic to general social issues and their physical well-being is poor. A growing body of research on young users of digital technologies points to this. “The users surveyed are said to have frequently slept worse and felt lonelier than the comparison group. Consequently, the feeling and inferiority grows with the length of time spent in the (virtual) lives of others” (Hepp 2022). Although this is just a survey of Instagram users, there are increasing signs that society is becoming more and more asocial. Therefore, our attempt to situate the educational model as presented in the Letter from Rome in the environment in which young people live today, even more than the religious dimension itself, will focus on the changes that the so-called digital culture brings to authentic Salesian education.

## 1. DIGITAL CULTURE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

If St. John Bosco knew how to use all the means of his time to help young people grow up, become independent, and take responsible positions in society, then this is certainly the task of every responsible educator today. The only difference is the initial situation. Society in the developing industrial cities of the nineteenth century needed “only” young workers. Their only future was hard work and an even harder life that came with it. Most young people of his time had no chance of education and thus of improving their social and economic situation. Visits to prisons with his spiritual director, St. Joseph Cafasso, eventually led the young priest to what would later become Salesian pedagogy. Under his guidance and teaching, he discovered and developed the typical characteristics of his spirituality: Christian hope, a primary trust in God rather than a fearful reverence for Him, which is the basis of any Christian pedagogy that educates for life (Braido 1981, 304-306). Without this deep attitude of the good shepherd, he would not have gone out into the streets of Turin and gathered boys. Still less would he have done so without a belief in their better future. His education can be characterized as a pedagogy of hope (Braido 2019, 324). The results were obvious even among the most neglected pupils: many of the boys who came out of prison found it easy to turn to a profession to earn an honest living. Many who were in extreme danger of becoming promiscuous avoided the dangers and turned to the path of upstanding citizens (Braido 2005, 284-294). All of his work confirmed him in the realization that young people became unhappy not because of their own wickedness, but because of a lack of education and opportunity. After the first decade of his ministry, John Bosco lived out of a deep conviction that youth are not inherently bad but are driven to sin by bad companions and the social environment (Braido 1987, 39-62). The growth of the Salesian family also gave him the belief that youth have a great future. Therefore, the letter from Rome is a reminder not to squander this future of young people, because with the right education anything can be achieved: “One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young” (Bosco 2020). This optimistic view of education is based on loving relationships, which are no longer found in the oratory in his dream vision.

Educators and teachers today have a difficult time sharing this educational optimism. First of all, in the spirit of freedom, society despises the role of authority and largely removes it from the educational process. While Don Bosco emphasizes the role of the educator and demands his constant presence, many modern people would see this as an invasion of privacy, as surveillance. Likewise, freedom of belief is something that everyone who works with people must respect: “Individuals themselves have become the supreme authorities for judging what is relevant to them, even what is right and true. Cultural postmodernity has questioned the previously held certainty and authority attributed to spiritual, religious knowledge and it casts doubts about the value of metanarratives. In this cultural atmosphere

of scepticism, the truth and reliability of personal knowledge and knowledge of the spiritual seem to deteriorate; what is now certain is that there is a natural uncertainty to this type of knowledge. Hence, it becomes very relative, and it is then up to the individual to decide what to believe. Spirituality now becomes personal, subjective and DIY (Do It Yourself) rather than both personal and communal as in traditional Christian spirituality” (Rossiter 2018, 33) The decline of faith in the grand narratives is most damaging to the structure of the educational system and traditional religious communities. The consequences, Rossiter says, are borne by the individual who, freed from self-evident certainty and authority, falls more and more into insecurity and scepticism, much as John Bosco sees young people who no longer enjoy the genuine closeness of their educators. He would agree with us in the observation that imposing the need to find his or her own way on a young person leads not only to egocentricity, but also to fear of the future and of taking responsibility for oneself. However, this follows from the fact “that we are increasingly disillusioned with real life. Reality seems increasingly boring, slow, colourless, and meaningless. Real life does not seem worth the effort” (Hepp 2022). This is the result of an increasing immersion in the virtual world. The dreamlike image of the oratory where everyone passively stays on the edges of the courtyard is getting worse in a digital culture. Society as a whole is losing faith in the future, despite the many opportunities available to it. Young people are feeling this more and more, and they no longer allow themselves to feel the foundation of all Salesian education: One who knows he is loved loves in return, because they no longer believe in the possibility of being loved for nothing. Therefore, the possibility of an “active, dynamic presence” is increasingly questionable (Lydon and Briody 2023, 62).

This closeness was based on a type of communication that required a living relationship. That is why, a safe courtyard is so important, because that is where a real relationship is built. Many young people today enter into relationships with the help of digital technology (Kraner 2023b). “Constructing friendships in the era of the Web therefore signifies dealing with more possibilities for contact, but it also requires a greater awareness of the intensity and profundity that is possible in ‘incarnated’ human relationships” (Spadaro 2014, 33), which young people no longer have. This has many consequences, as one of the authors of *Digital Reality* notes: “You’re sitting there swiping at a screen. You might spend less time with your family in proportion to the cuteness of the presentation of your family life you put out there on social media. You might be at risk for self-harm in proportion to your social media use, especially if you’re a young woman. You might be making traumatic experiences worse by using social media. You might be losing self-esteem even as you express yourself” (Lanier 2018). There is growing evidence of the dangers posed by the digitalization of society, especially for young people. They are increasingly growing up with the help of social networks that offer them many role models. To get as many ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ as possible, they adapt to the demands of their environment. “The relatively new media and communications technologies have created additional pressures

on the development of personal identity – particularly the projective function of identity concerned with the desired image and characteristics the individual wants to display for others” (Rossiter 2018, 67).

The former role of peer groups in the search for identity through the Internet is not disappearing. Young people still socialize, but now through digital technologies. There, they are much more subject to the limited views and interests of certain groups. There are also more and more fake profiles that radicalize the particularity of each group. Involvement in such groups does not end when people become adults. Many remain ‘trapped’ in virtual communities of one kind or another. “Our peer groups have a big impact on us when we’re young, but it stays that way throughout life. If your extended peer group contains a lot of fake people intent on manipulating you, you are likely to be influenced without realizing it” (Lanier 2018). In this we can recognize what John Bosco also observed in his own courtyard – groups, “but with looks and smirks that would make you not only suspect but feel quite certain that St. Aloysius would have blushed to find himself in their company” (Bosco 2020). Such association not only damages young people’s identity and religious attitudes, but also destroys the future of society. Not much is left of the paradigm of honest citizens and good Christians. “Something is pulling young people away from democracy. Despite all the hopeful self-congratulations of social media companies, it seems that when democracy has been weakened, the online world has only grown uglier and more fraudulent” (Lanier 2018).

## 2. NETWORK CHURCH AND NEW DIMENSIONS OF FAITH

According to St. John Bosco, the presence of the educator among young people must reflect the love of God. “Jesus Christ did not crush the bruised reed nor quench the smouldering flax. He is your model” (Bosco 2020). The understanding of faith is changing in the digital age and the question arises to what extent the direct presence of the educator and his transmission of faith is still acceptable in a digital culture (Kraner 2023a). The understanding and position of leaders in traditional religious communities has changed significantly, as online groups often function quite differently than religious communities in traditional religious settings. They function not as tightly bounded social structures but as loose social networks with varying degrees of religious affiliation and commitment. While the traditional religious community functioned in a hierarchical and largely closed manner, religious groups in the digital environment are governed by the principle of participation, free participation and creative contribution by the willing. Such a community resembles a network in which there is no single centre, but which connects individuals and allows them to work together. The concept of “networked community” has emerged as a way to describe this new conceptualization and structural form of religious community, both in the online environment and beyond (*Digital Religion* 2013, 64). The concept of the educator in faith, as espoused by John Bosco, is thus strongly challenged, as the solution to education

lies in the authority of the superior: “let the superior be all things to all, always ready to listen to any boy’s complaints or doubts, always alert to keep a paternal eye on their conduct, all heart to seek the spiritual and temporal good of those Divine Providence has entrusted to him” (Bosco 2020).

The Internet creates a sense of freedom for the user that extends to the religious sphere. At the same time, it allows for a much more open development and dissemination of one’s religious views, experiences, and forms of celebration. “Religious networks enable people typically outside the structures of the authority of a group to contribute opinions and help build the shape of their community. The network structure can empower religious community members and offer new opportunities for contributions to the group mission and practice. This means religious communities that function as social networks create space for members to experience new levels of freedom and participation in their group’s identity” (Campbell and Bellar 2023, 16). It turns out that an online religious community is indeed different from a traditional religious community, but it cannot be completely separated from faith in an offline world. This means that we need to question not only how the concept of community changes online, but also how traditional offline community is perceived and lived (*Digital Religion* 2013, 67), which brings us back to the notion of loving presence.

The notion of community as a network means that involvement in online faith communities often changes their members’ understanding of what it means to be part of a faith community or church. Such experiences can also change expectations about how faith communities can or should live in traditional communities outside of the digital. Understanding communities as networks explains how faith communities function as loose social networks with varying degrees of religious affiliation and commitment. This is because it is no longer religious leaders or institutions that determine who belongs in the community or how it looks or functions. Instead, it is the individual members of the community who shape, direct, and manage what the experience of the faith in the community will be (Campbell and Bellar 2023, 23).

This change in the understanding of the community in which we live our faith, or at least seek it, also changes individual believers and the relationships in the community. The Church is no longer the only place of reference, let alone the most appropriate one, for understanding Christ and his message. It is no longer a lighthouse that radiates light and sustains the joy of salvation, but a pillar that offers support. Its goal must not be to increase the number of its members, but to increase the Kingdom of God. From this perspective, we do not exclude pastors, heads, bishops, the Pope or others (Spadaro 2014, 114), but we understand them as a network, as ecologists, as people who have the task of maintaining the functions of the network within the society, which can very quickly change the relationships within a particular community. “This vision offers an idea of the Christian community that makes the characteristics of a virtual community itself turn into light, without historical constraints, and which is geographically fluid. Certainly,

this horizontality helps us greatly to understand the Church's mission, which is to evangelize" (Spadaro 2014, 39). This is also the basic purpose of the Letter from Rome.

From the perspective of the network community, the individual is not only the object of receiving the message, but increasingly becomes the subject of sharing, interpreting and evaluating the mission of the community and the content of the faith. This brings us to another element of Salesian education: the animator. "The Salesian animator should be involved with the young people in their activities, arousing their interest and leading them to constructive engagement" (Lydon and Briody 2023, 61). Religious education that takes place in a networked community setting should treat both the individual and the community as subjects rather than objects. It should consider the relationship with God and especially with Christ as fundamental, even where the digital and physical worlds intersect. In both, we should strive for authenticity, charity, and sincerity in educational presence, as John Bosco dreamed. "Let them like what pleases the youngsters, and the youngsters will come to like what pleases the superiors. In this way, their work will be made easy. The reason for the present change in the Oratory is that many of the boys no longer have confidence in their superiors" (Bosco 2020). The first three initiatives of Pope Francis' *The Global Compact on Education* are precisely in the spirit of active involvement of all (Pope Francis 2020). It is a presence that puts the person at the centre, listens to the voice of young people, and promotes the participation of young people in education. It is the vision of the first oratory in which education is part of play and play is part of the relationship between educators and young people in all openness to God. "In one corner a group of youngsters were gathered round a priest, hanging on his every word as he told them a story. In another a cleric was playing with a number of lads at "chase the donkey" and "trades." There was singing and laughing on all sides, there were priests and clerics everywhere and the boys were yelling and shouting all round them. You could see that the greatest cordiality and confidence reigned between youngsters and superiors" (Bosco 2020).

### 3. A LOVING PRESENCE IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CULTURE

The ancient oratory must become the goal of Salesian educational presence today. To love what young people love is still the guiding principle that obliges the educator to seek the possibility of a new 'courtyard.' "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 a friend" (Lydon and Briody 2023, 62). For many today, that is the internet. It is the place where we must meet and share life with young people. It is the task of the herald to know the language of today's young people and to speak through them. At the same time, he must preserve the heritage on which this proclamation is based. One of the first things



that links Salesian education and digital culture is active participation of young people. Psychotherapists have also noted this: “And for the younger ones, at some point it is no longer necessary to wait, to take life into their own hands and to learn to act independently – and to do so without becoming embittered on the long road to old age” (Hepp 2022). They will embark on this journey if they feel loved, as the Letter from Rome says.

“The problem today is not to find the message that makes sense, but to decode it, to recognize it on the basis of the multiple messages that we receive. Increasingly, digital witnessing to faith becomes “accounting for hope” (1 Pt 3:15) in a context in which reason is quickly and wildly being confronted” (Spadaro 2014, 23). That is why, young people need the presence of educators. Assistance is no less necessary today than in the past. Only the “courtyard” has changed, as have the games the young people play. The message is at hand, it just needs to speak to them in a way that gives them hope. In the apathy of the loneliness of the digital world, they need challenges that strengthen their faith in their own future and in the future of humanity. “In this context one of the principal challenges for the school leader centres on the demands something greater than simply the creation of harmonious relationships. Collegiality involves fostering a commitment to the goals of an institution larger than those of any particular individual” (Lydon and Briody 2023, 64). Only in this way can we achieve the paradigm of honest citizens and good Christians, which is also the background of the Letter from Rome.

That such educational presence-assistance is also possible today was confirmed, at least partially, by a survey conducted by Dr. David Kraner in 2022 among the students of four Catholic high schools in Slovenia (Kraner 2023c, 1005-1016). He asked 672 young people about the impact of digitalization on feelings of loneliness. One of the high schools is the Salesian High School Želimplje. It is characterized by the fact that 255 out of 280 students live in a boarding school. The other three Catholic high schools also have student boarding schools. However, it is difficult for students to choose to stay there. Students at the Salesian high school want to stay in a boarding school even though they could easily return to their homes on a daily basis. To the question “How easy is it to connect with your classmates,” the following answers are possible: very difficult, difficult, easy and very easy. Of all schools, 3.9% of students from Želimplje chose “very difficult,” the highest percentage (others ranged from 2.6% to 3.2%). The answer “very easy” was chosen by at least 12.5% (the others from 15.5% to 18.5%). We conclude that they do not have a very high opinion of themselves, that they simply enter into relationships. We also know that face-to-face communication with new people is much more difficult than in a digital environment. As students come from different backgrounds and have not known each other before, living together is certainly an endeavour in the quest for good communication. Which may help to illustrate why it is in this particular high school that they feel it is more difficult to maintain good communication. When asked, “How lonely do you feel,” where the possible answers are: always completely lonely, often completely lonely, rarely completely

lonely, never completely lonely, the opposite picture emerges. Only one student, 0.8%, always feels completely lonely (other schools from 1.6% to 5.7%). The majority answered that they rarely feel lonely, 63.3% (other schools from 56.7% to 64.1%). They also spend the least amount of time with digital media. On average, they are on digital media a quarter less per day than in the other three Catholic high schools. You would expect them to be more on their own at boarding school and therefore spend more time on digital media. The survey results show that this is not the case. This is largely due to the very atmosphere that is permeated with the Salesian assistance. This has an impact not only on students being on digital media less, but also on them wanting to stay in a boarding school at all. It is important to remember that these are similar schools with similar profiles of young people. While it is true that there are no major differences in the answers, it is a fact that young people at Želimlje High School are mostly housed in the dormitory, which could have an impact on loneliness, as they have left their homes and friends, they had in their home environment. However, in the program of the institution itself, since its foundation (it is the first private school in Slovenia), great emphasis has been placed on the active work of all educators in the spirit of the Letter from Rome. All employees must undergo training in Salesian pedagogy, with emphasis on the principle of assistance. We can state with certainty that the difference in results is significant enough. The young people are in the “courtyard” in their educational group together with the educator and despite the conviction that they find it difficult to build relationships with others, they do not close themselves in the digital world, but actively participate in life with their classmates and educators. The constant presence of educators, including younger and older Salesians, the varied offer of activities and the involvement in various projects keep young people busy enough not to need digital media for personal affirmation. The proximity of the educators is not understood as control, but they are present among the young people as animators. Students experience them as companions to be taken into account (Gimnazija Želimlje 2024).

## CONCLUSION

If the French theologian Larchet states that the Internet has become a substitute for community because of the way it communicates, “In fact communication has become a substitute for communion, which, in its spiritual reality, rests on the participation in one Body and one Spirit in a concrete community” (Larchet 2019), the Salesian vision of education, reflected in the “dream” of the Letter from Rome, can be preserved and integrated into today’s digital culture. In the digital age, Salesian education, inspired by the Letter from Rome, can help young people to have the courage to communicate face to face. Only through such communication will we be able to build true communions. This is the only way to empower young people to use digital media for their own benefit and for the benefit of society, and not, conversely, to be their slaves. Concrete examples of good Salesian educational

practice show that young people still have a sense of community, are willing to learn from their elders and dream of their mission in the world today. This is very close to what moved Saint John Bosco to dedicate his letter from Rome to the Salesians. So genuine assistance, which openly welcomes what young people like, can build a community in which young people share in one body and one spirit of the new Church. This new Church will not be afraid of the new media but will use them to be even more present in the modern world.

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