The Voice of the Chaplains in MCAST Concerning the Young, The Chaplains and the Chaplaincy and Groups

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Abstract: Little data exists on the work conducted by chaplaincies in the Maltese educational system, and less so about chaplaincy work occurring on campuses around post-secondary institutions. The declining numbers of churchgoers implies that less people are active in the pastoral work based around the same settings. It also highlights the need for chaplaincies to be more relevant to the needs of its members. This study highlights the need for using a multidimensional approach when working with students and to incorporate the social sciences as a path leading to pastoral praxis, to better respond to the fluid and dynamic theological realities found within a chaplaincy setting. A grounded theory approach was utilized since this is the preferred method for theory building. Since the aim was to listen to what the participants, based on their pastoral experiences both in MCAST and in other pastoral settings, had to say, a theoretical statement was then constructed that incorporated the salient points of the pastoral and educative work of the Salesians of Don Bosco at MCAST.

Keywords: Chaplains, youth, Salesian youth ministry, MCAST.

Introduction

The Church offers an adequate space for supporting young people at risk of social exclusion through the services of the youth ministry within the Church. This is substantiated by findings from literature in a local study titled, ‘Voices of the Young Vulnerable in Malta: A Qualitative Study’. Throughout the study, emphasis is made on the role of the voluntary sector to aid in supporting young people who are at risk of social exclusion. To this effect, youth ministers that are academically trained and in possession of a youth work warrant are an essential part of the lay ‘team’ to complement the work done by religious, priests and nuns (Gellel and Rossi 2017; MYMA 2017).

The lack of previous studies about Maltese pastoral services within educational settings makes it even more necessary today to formulate a study that prioritizes and scaffolds the principal areas that require immediate attention when identifying the function and purpose of a youth pastoral service. The chaplaincy will benefit from this study since “The educational concern which is part of our youth ministry seeks to begin with the story of the young person’s life and recognize the action of God there through our ministry” (Salesian Pastoral Youth Ministry, Frame of Reference 2014: 68). The chaplaincy, therefore, is seeking growth and complementarity in the diverse work occurring around the institutes, using a Salesian approach to understand what the pastoral care and youth ministry of MCAST consists of of.

This research searches for a ‘culture of encounter’ as emphasized by Pope Francis, given that the study sets out to dialogue with the religious who make up the current chaplaincy
team. The chaplains are the people responsible for creating an opportunity for students and staff to improve the quality of their study/work experience here at MCAST. The study sets out to conduct a functional assessment of what the reason for chaplaincy is and to acquire a better understanding of how the chaplaincy could better fulfil its mandate; the researcher was interested in what would answer to the question of ‘what is the role and function of the chaplaincy services in MCAST?’

In so doing, it is being anticipated that the MCAST chaplaincy could better respond to what was reiterated by Prof Joachim Calleja, CEO and Principal of MCAST on the occasion of the launch of the Act and the strategic plan for a consultation, where he emphasized the need for the community college to be a lived experience where students come and embark on a lifelong learning experience that will help them form into active citizens and where they design their careers (MCAST Communications 2021).

To do this, the chaplaincy is embarking on a process of searching for ways and articulating the impact of its presence while seeking ways to be strategically more present. Therefore, the research is guided by the complexity theory and strategy as practice literature. In so doing, the interviews will guide the participants to think differently about their work, resulting in better organization and their better equipped for the mission that lies ahead of them in MCAST. Working with young people is a sometimes-haphazard endeavour since they operate within the confines of a ‘chaotic’ environment, where there is no structure. Therefore, working as a complex adaptive system seems consonant with the traits and ethos of the religious order being studied to be working as a complex adaptive system.

The paper is organized in the following manner. First, the literature is reviewed followed by a discussion on how strategy as practice is different to traditional strategic thinking; the paper then attempts to understand complexity in complex adaptive systems; then it tries to see how the role of an adaptive system plays out in practice. The second part of the paper is the methodology section explaining the reason for the methodology chosen, while the latter part sets out to explain the role and function of the chaplaincy services. In so doing, the paper will make use of the interview responses given by the participants to elicit the main themes to develop the theoretical framework.

**Literature Review**

*Approaches to Strategic Thinking*

Strategy is an old practice that has also been given different meanings along the path of its inception, thus running the risk of becoming meaningless, throughout its history, in its many different understandings (Liedtka 1998). In this way, strategic thinking can be understood to be the processes that allow an organization to understand what measures are required to make advances, be it in monetary profits or other gains within a company. Traditional strategic thinking is intended to foretell what would happen under normal circumstances to an organization and so, by planning, strategic practice intends to prevent shortcomings and increase the chances of profit for an organization (Hamel and Prahalad 1994; Mintzberg 1994).

For this assignment’s purposes, it would be fitting to ask if the service being studied here can be considered an organization that implements the adaptive system approach. In analyzing this, one indicator to keep as an active part of the discussion would be to understand whether the system keeps the stakeholders at the centre of its practice, or
as many researchers point out, whether the human being is still the main concern of organizations (Bettis 1991; Ghoshal and Moran 1996; Jarzabkowski 2004; Lowendahl and Revang 1998; Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Whittington 2003).

To understand strategy thinking and strategy planning, it was necessary to understand how the different roles are played out. Thinking strategically about strategy would increase the practical knowledge and shared experience thus increasing the practice wisdom related to the growth of the organization, in this case of the service provided (Jarzabkowski and Sillince 2007; Mantere 2005; Vaara et al. 2004). In other words, what is of main concern is the intention or praxis of the chaplains. Praxis is the way that strategists focus on how they act, or what the intention behind their actions is; this action is a consequence of the practitioner’s beliefs and values and the action that precedes the practice. (Freire 1972)

So far what has been presented is an analysis about the classical model of managing a service in contrast with a more modern method, where the management of organizations is treated in a more organic manner, recognizing that changes are the constant that keep a service in sync with the needs of the stakeholders in the environment. The discussion has shown that in today’s running of a service, those managing the service must be able to read the signs of the times and adapt accordingly, otherwise they run the risk of losing out on opportunities for growth. What follows is a discussion about applying this strategy as a practice to complex situations.

**Complexity Perspective: New Ways of Thinking About Strategy?**

Strategy has evolved from what was historically considered to be formal and organization-oriented—the classical perspective (Whittington 2001)—to a more opportunistic approach, thus placing more emphasis on emergent trends, whether systemic or relating to personnel, or likewise to creativity. These changing times called for more exploratory approaches to managing complex organizations. (Cornelius, Van De Putte and Romani 2005; Verity 2003). In this context, Mitleton-Kelly (2003:2) asserts that complexity theories are being “interpreted as an explanatory framework that helps us understand the behaviour of complex social (human) systems”. In addition to the debate started by Mitleton-Kelly (2003) on defining the term of complexity theory, Nicolis and Prigigone (1989) suggest that speaking about behaviours would make the discussion on organizations more measurable than if one were to focus on the system as the unit of analysis. Complexity theory, as cited in Gunartine (2003), holds fast onto Prigigone’s theory of dissipative structures. The same author advocates for the non-linearity, versatility, unpredictability, chaos theory and far-from-equilibrium conditions that characterize systems which are open instead of structures that are closed off to working on their own terms, irrespective of the changing needs of the stakeholders.

**Complex Adaptive Systems: Modelling Complexity**

Complex adaptive systems can be seen as a manifestation of what happens in the theory of complexity (Mitleton-Kelly 2003). Since complexity theory denotes an adaptive look at creating healthy systems (Mitleton-Kelly 1998), the emphasis is on moving out of a stalemate to creating a new space where patterns for working emerge, which effectively create new ways of finding solutions to problems and finally a new organization is ‘born’. Therefore, to do this, Mitleton-Kelly (2003) highlights those traits required for a complex adaptive system to exist, stating that the system being observed requires being characterized by various elements. These are shortlisted in Figure 1.
complexity theory as the basis for understanding CAS
connectivity and interdependence of the woven links found within the organization's environment;
co-evolution borrowed from evolution biology that is understood in light of the complex relationships forming and evolving over time within an organization;
the far-from-equilibrium and dissipative structures, that bring about the necessary change in open systems rather than by seeking equilibrium but rather by moving systems into 'spaces' where disequilibrium brings about new relationships;
feedback processes which are goal seeking by nature, thus rendering a system open in reaching a desired state;
seeing order in disorder and thus making systems more human, giving space for them to evolve in a more natural way;
seeing the parts of a system in the bigger picture and thus watching the emergent patterns that arise out of these systems as a whole;
studying the socio-cultural as well as the technical aspects of the system;
a continuous socio-cultural as well as the technical aspects of the organization-within-the-environment so that 'backsliding' is avoided all costs.

Figure 1: Traits for a Complex Adaptive System to be in place. Adapted from Mitleton-Kelly (2003)

This study will therefore depart by viewing the chaplaincy services within MCAST from a complexity theory basis. The chaplaincy services have as their focus the wellbeing of all whom they meet through the chaplaincy, namely students and staff. In this sense, and to begin with the story of the people they meet, the chaplaincy could be more adaptive than mechanical. One example of this is the socio-economic culture of its main clients—the students. There is a tendency for a portion of the students to be of a more working-class mentality. In these cases, it is more likely for students to be less literate and require more support within their environment, hence the lower-level programmes. The chaplaincy in this case focuses on the story of the young person, with one of the functions of the chaplaincy services being to provide pastoral care. Discussions among the team focus on what structures and resources need to be in place to provide attention to this area of the service provided, since dealing with people will never render the predictions that mechanistic thinking would desire. Although this latter thinking is possible with the mechanical aspects of a provision, the students require an altogether different approach, this being the complex adaptive systems approach using strategy as leadership practices where the focus remains the individual (Metcalf and Benn 2012).

Methodology

The research took a qualitative approach to collect data. A grounded theory approach was used to guide the research process. The purpose of the study was to deepen the understanding of the relevance of the chaplaincy services in MCAST and see how best to improve the service that already exists; therefore, a grounded theory was deemed the best approach. Scott (2022) suggests that this method is best suited when a researcher wants to develop a theory or offer an explanation to a concerned population with the intent of offering a solution to the presented problem.
Participants were selected because they are the chaplains of the MCAST campuses. The research set out with a question in mind, which was ‘what is the role and function of MCAST chaplaincy?’ Individual interviews were held, some face to face and others using MS teams, where the interview was recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were then placed into the MAXQDA 2022 software and analysed. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the 6 chaplains present at MCAST in Malta. The Gozo chaplaincy was not considered for this research. Although this may seem to present discontinuation between the different chaplaincies, the reality is that each campus has its own needs. Considering that the Malta chaplains are all from the same religious order, then there is some form of connection between these chaplains, whereas in Gozo, the chaplain is a diocesan priest, and the connection with the chaplain at the Gozo campus still ought to be established.

A preliminary review of the literature was conducted to understand the core beliefs of the bigger organization of the Salesians of Don Bosco. In the literature the ethos highlights that the organization’s primary charism is to be a movement of religious people whose work proceeds from ‘where the youth is to be found’:

*We go in search of young people in the real situation of their lives, with their resources and difficulties. We try to discover the challenges presented by the cultural, social and religious contexts in which they live. We dialogue with them, and, through a pedagogy of*
accompaniment, we invite them to undertake a journey that leads to a living community encounter with Jesus Christ. (SYM, 2014 p. 39)

The organization (the chaplaincy) may therefore be better understood as a complex adaptive system (Mitleton-Kelly 2003), since the literature found in the Salesian Framework for Youth Ministry accentuated the fact and responded to the traits for a complex adaptive system to exist.

The interviews were intended to create a theory on the role and function of the MCAST chaplaincy, therefore, an organizational approach for strategic planning was adopted. In this way, the data was first coded using open coding under the titles of the functional requirements, referring mainly to what the chaplains do and how they carry out their work at MCAST. The recognition of what the provision is and how it should be perceived is what clarifies the role of such a provision. The next code was the structural requirements, where the data collected was grouped to outline the actual implementation structure. How do the chaplains go about fulfilling their purpose? To do this, an understanding was gained of the personal, social, pastoral, and environmental challenges that the chaplains are faced with. Finally, and to carry out the work, the resources requirement was necessary to outline what tangible and intangible resources are needed to exist in a healthy manner.

More focused coding was conducted for the data to be organized further. Keeping in mind that the organization is being viewed as a CAS (Complex Adaptive Systems) and that the purpose of the study was to elicit what is the role and function of the MCAST chaplaincy, the second stage of coding took place to outline the purpose and function being fulfilled by the chaplaincy team so far. This coding was more focused and more in-depth, and the codes were built on the existing theory of both CAS and the Salesian Framework for Youth Ministry. Strauss and Corbin assert that information (Strauss and Corbin 1998) acquired from the literature throughout the process of evolved grounded theory is another voice contributing to the researcher’s theoretical reconstruction.

Literature was used to understand and elicit the categories from which further work would have been done. These codes were further focused, and a core category emerged. Since the role was articulated clearly and concisely, and a category emerged, the researcher concluded that that the data had been saturated and so built a theoretical framework deeming the data to have been sufficient.

In Eve (2003), the list of characteristics found in a complex adaptive system are listed, and this research followed that same order to contrast this literature with similar characteristics found in the Salesian Framework for Youth Ministry (2014) However, when it came to the part of creating a working theory, the findings were then reorganized in a way to reflect the sentence structure of the working theory. Figure 3, below presents a more graphic research process.

**Findings and Discussion**

Chaplaincy is a part of a larger system and seeks to exist and function within the confines of the larger educational institution known as the Malta College for Arts Science and

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1 The text is copied from the Salesian Framework for Youth Ministry (2014); however, its original work is listed in Italian. Here is the original quote as found online. “La comunità salesiana, alla luce della situazione dei giovani d’ oggi e della natura del nostro servizio pastorale, dev’ essere portata a un rinnovamento profondo dei suoi atteggiamenti e delle sue situazioni pastorali, cercando di far rivivere Don Bosco, inviato da Dio come Padre e Maestro dei giovani. I Salesiani, nel rinnovamento di questi atteggiamenti e situazioni pastorali, in una viva espressione del Sistema Preventivo, dovranno adoperare le forme concrete che si adeguano alle esigenze proprie delle diverse tappe - preadolescenza, adolescenza, gioventù - dello sviluppo evolutivo dei giovani. (SDB, 1972)
The college has carved into its emblem the words ‘Laborie at Scientia’. It is through an effort to understand such a vision that finding purpose within a complex system ought to take place, otherwise one fears the possibility of oversimplifying a complex task. The antidote to this type of thinking is a ‘strategy as practice’ approach to understand how this service relates among its own members and within the larger ecosystem that it forms a part of. To this effect, the analysis will be constructed to outline the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of this provision. However, through the course of the interviews, what also transpired through the semi-structured questions was the question of ‘who’ are the chaplains, thus adding that human dimension that behind the service provider there is a human being searching for ways to engage with its clients.

**Figure 3:** Outline of the research process adapted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>The main principles of complex adaptive systems acting within an ecosystem of organizations as outlined by Eve (2003)</th>
<th>SYM-Frame of Reference (2014)</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
<th>Core Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional Requirement</td>
<td>Connectivity and interdependence of the woven links found within the organization’s environment</td>
<td>(p. 41)</td>
<td>Building a family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Requirements</td>
<td>Co-evolution understood in light of the complex relationships forming and evolving over time within an organization</td>
<td>(p.36)</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Requirements</td>
<td>Feedback processes which are goal seeking by nature</td>
<td>(p. 253)</td>
<td>Openness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creating ‘spaces’ where disequilibrium brings about new relationships</td>
<td>(p.39)</td>
<td>In search of the Young</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeing order in disorder and thus making systems more human, giving space for them to evolve in a more natural way;</td>
<td>(p.38)</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeing the parts of a system in the bigger picture and thus watching the emergent patterns that arise out of these systems as a whole.</td>
<td>(p. 59)</td>
<td>Resourceful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studying the socio-cultural as well as the technical aspects of the system</td>
<td>(p.36)</td>
<td>Spirit of sharing (fraternity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding of the organization-within-the-environment</td>
<td>(p. 71)</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The core category that emerged as a significant role and function of the Chaplaincy team within MCAST is relationships. This category also complements the objectives of the MCAST 2021 Act—which the researcher set out as a premise to fulfilling the obligations towards this end. Everything in the work of the chaplaincy is built around relationships with anyone or any part of the system that the chaplaincy encounters. It is the functions of this relationship that the next part of the paper seeks to discuss and explain. This term will guide the rest of the findings and discussion toward the holistic development of young people, with an emphasis on the pastoral and educative role of the MCAST chaplaincy. To this effect the theoretical framework being proposed is summed up in the following sentence:

**Searching for the young in a spirit of solidarity, to provide relevant support, while accompanying them on their learning journey, through a family-style model, thus encouraging growth in discovering their full human potential, as individuals, within a community of learners.**

Following this is a discussion that will make use of the core categories that have emerged, and which form a part of the above working theory to justify the role and function of the Salesian chaplaincy in more detail.
Searching

Central to the theme of meeting with the young is, firstly, the search for the young. Don Bosco, who is the author of this method within the spirituality forming the Salesians, held the relationship with the young as the ultimate theme lived out in his priestly mission. This is the basis of the work of the Salesians in MCAST—to be visible, to witness, to listen, and to provide spiritual assistance. In their experience, the chaplains find that providing a sense of stability in the lives of the young will enrich their sense of being, thus making them question more and possibly enabling some to experience spiritual accompaniment.

*Um, meeting Christ and, I think it’s important also to eventually, eventually bring this... the presence of God felt and visible on the Earth.* (Chaplain 2)

What could be understood today is that the religious life is not so central to the life of most young people, however, the chaplains, through the method of Don Bosco, are sure that this is not even the place to start, since before arriving at the meaning that young people give to life, there are more basic needs to see to, as one participant mentioned that there are:

*People of no faith. But there are... There are no people of no need.* (Chaplain 6)

In this spirit, the Salesian chaplaincy sets out to reach out to even the most distant of young people, those who are found in the peripheries, in order to bring them back to the centre of the life of the church, using all means available to them today.

*Everything will form the future life. We prepare them personally.* (Chaplain 6)

This missional approach—with an end in mind—requires the creativity of the person accompanying the young with an understanding of where the young is, and a willingness to want to connect, since it is the young person that is at the centre of the work of the Salesians, with the concern around the young as:

*We are aware as a team that, erm, we’re after the general wellbeing of the persons. And spiritual wellbeing, it is, and has to be part of a general wellbeing. So, it’s no use, erm, focusing only on, on the spiritual if there are underlying issues that need attention.* (Chaplain 5)

Solidarity

Reaching them - Fraternity

It is this spirit to move out and beyond the confines of the self that the Salesian religious must have when encountering the young. Their concern is always the young, not themselves—in line with the spirit of Don Bosco, who cared about the young as the central theme of his mission. In today’s terms, this could also mean that the person in their entirety is what is of importance to the work of the Salesians. Their concern is with the young to learn the language of love, the language of being human. Like older brothers to younger siblings, the Salesian chaplaincy tends to the young in a brotherly manner, with concern about the general wellbeing of the young.

*But it would... I mean, they have a potential for learning in another language, what about the human language? What about the deep human language, and the spiritual dimension?* (Chaplain 6)
Alleviating poverty

One of the stigmas in society that one can endure today is that of not feeling loved. It would be hard to detect where this stems from, however, symptomatically, it looks something like feeling abandoned, neglected, and disconnected; these forms are what give rise to a state of identity crisis and role confusion, according to Eriksson’s stages of development. They stem from an uncertainty in who I am, and therefore play upon relationships when it comes to intimacy (fidelity) and being professional (commitment). Through their presence and awareness of such a reality that the young face, the chaplaincy team endeavour to integrate the students into a holistic system of living life to the full, through friendships (a sense of community), through education (a sense of personal and professional development), and through knowing their self-worth as made in the image and likeness of God (a sense of knowing God), as is reiterated in Don Bosco’s preventive system. The purpose is:

To reintegrate them into the educational system and get them, uhm, on board… [so that] they can become the best of themselves according to the values, also, of the Gospel…And [to] be part of this community. (Chaplain 5)

However, to begin with, the youth must have a sense of love of self; a love that they know that they are loved, and that they can love back also. To do this, the chaplaincy is aware of the need to first reach the young, should the chaplaincy be relevant to them.

We have to reach them in the first place. So, that’s the, the first, uhm, steppingstone, no? (Chaplain 5)

Once engaged with the young, the chaplaincy seeks to create a space for the young to be able to talk even about themselves, whilst recognizing that this is not always easy since the students that come to MCAST:

The students come, sit, stay, they stay here for hours. But then, they have another life, how do they deal with it? What is the space that they can talk about this…? The family problems with their equals, no, friends. Boyfriends, girlfriends […] this contact with young people, that they need to talk. They need to talk about themselves. Erm, here, self-esteem – so you’re not judging them, you’re supporting them – you are reflecting to them the good that they tell you. (Chaplain 5)

This model is typical of the approach used by Don Bosco, one which kept the youth at the centre of his work. It was a place for Don Bosco where he met with the young, to learn more about them personally, to better understand how he would be best of service to them. One participant mentioned that Don Bosco started with their names, and family structure, and with what they were doing in the city, and what they liked. These are things that sometimes the youth themselves do not find time to talk about—maybe no adult is interested in them personally, and so there is the poverty that these young people experience. Poverty today can be seen in how the young are aware of themselves, how they respond to life situations using their emotions, and how they cope with what life throws at them.

One participant also suggested correction, making reference to a style that Don Bosco utilized known as ‘la parolina all’orecchio’, a system for grounding the young when they required correction the same participant continued, how he used this style of Don Bosco who always advocated against shaming and punishing, and so believed that a a spoonful of honey is more effective than a barrel of vinegar, meaning that,

With a kind word, the young are prone to listen more to correction than if one were to shout and to embarrass them in a judgmental manner. (Chaplain 4)
Relevance

Relevant to a Culture

Chaplaincy is there for people of all beliefs and for people of no belief. It is how the Christian message is conveyed that is versatile, since as one participant put it, “the chaplaincy understands that Christian spirituality has a lot to offer culture”. (Chaplain 5)

In the very essence of the name, Catholic means universal and so to remain faithful to this understanding of the faith, the message requires one to be versatile to remain universal, this while delivering the same unified teaching of the Catholic Church. Being a chaplaincy goes beyond programmes however, its true effectiveness is seen in the impact left on the individual’s life. To do this, it must therefore exist at the point from where the young person is since in so doing it could eventually arrive at the higher values of belief and faith in God. However, to do this, the so-called lower needs also need to be met. Meeting the various personal needs that are also of a spiritual nature may end up acting as catalysts to ask about God. This is where the Salesian chaplaincy is also commissioned, therefore, to then speak about Jesus in ways that are understood by people of diverse cultures, sub-cultures, and ethnicities.

Relevant to the System

All that happens, happens with a context, within a particular reality. In this respect, three parts of the system stood out during the interviews. The Church, MCAST as an organization, and the Salesian Youth Ministry. All are stakeholders and all play a part in contributing to this pastoral and educative work of the Salesians. While on a more positive note appreciation for the work of the Salesians is duly given by the Church in Malta, on the other hand, there was more anticipation for the Salesian Youth ministry to recognize the work that exists within MCAST, as one participant deciphered how the setup in this case requires a particular structure, since:

*It’s not assigned to the same community even though three of them are in the same community, but as a ministry, it is a province ministry. It’s a ministry that a province provides. So, for me, I would say if that were the case then it is the youth ministry’s responsibility to, if not actually be physically present, to be the kind of board that manages and oversees things. (Chaplain 3)*

In this way, the same participant adds that “if it is [Chaplaincy work] seen as part of the Salesian Youth Ministry, uhm, then it will have a more positive impact.” (Chaplain 3)

On the other hand, making a presence felt inside MCAST institutes heavily depends on who is in charge. Some institutes do have posters with spiritual quotes around the corridors, however, this is a subjective reality, depending on who leads an institute. There is cordial agreement on what works in relation to youth ministry and MCAST. So far, a good response from both administrative staff and students alike is the participation of students conducting their community social responsibilities around Salesian environments. There is consensus to build on this.

Lastly, when it comes working collaboratively with the institute, the need is felt for more co-workers, not merely as volunteers, but, as ones engaged on a more permanent basis, with a suggestion for there to be a person employed for a number of hours to assist the chaplains in their work. A participant commented as follows:
But having said that, the idea of having a coordinator it would be easier, uhm, and, if the coordinator is officially assigned by the college, you know, then they are more answerable to the college than they would be to the chaplain himself, I think, I don’t know. Does that make sense? (Chaplain 3)

Relevant to the Individual

As mentioned previously, the crux of the matter rests in the one-to-one connection with every young person that the Salesian chaplaincy meets. This way of administering pastoral and educative care to the young is the very charisma of Salesian spirituality. To do this, the chaplaincy is committed to making themselves available to interact, in the style of being near to the young to talk about anything, with the potential to influence them to ask the more important questions about life. If a young person would want to get to know more about religion, then, being a religious organization, the chaplaincy would be willing to guide them to the place that leads them to Christ. The rich resource of various talents that the chaplaincy is equipped with makes the pastoral work undertaken a presence:

In the style of being near to the young, so that being here we can ... build bridges and accompany them where they, where they’d like to go, but we also obviously agree and influence that as well. Uhm, but being near to them is I think a privilege, a challenge and a beautiful thing at the same time... and then together we accompany [them] on a journey and maybe we can help in directing their journey, uhm, to somewhere beneficial as well. (Chaplain 2)

Knowing the audience

Hence, to facilitate the way for the young people to grow in knowledge of self, knowledge of other, and knowledge of God, one possible modality is that of getting to know the young.

They will say I don’t believe in this stuff and all like that [sic], but then they will come a moment later then, at a good moment, uhm, when they might say my mother or my father, whatever, passed away a few years ago, sort of, and they just leave it like that. But say, why, why did you say that? Like why, why would they have said that? It really is neither here nor there, except that they would like you to remember their mother or their father, you, you know as well, without... Because it’s not cool to ask for prayers. (Chaplain 1)

This is done by walking with them, getting to know them, presenting arguments that are up for discussion, and by challenging points of view. This is an approach that is an antidote to the sometimes-present reality where young people, despite the way that the educational system has moulded them over the years, accept information rather than ask about it and questioning it. In this sense, as one of the participants explained, they are:

Coming from an environment which doesn’t question, which means they’re carried by the tide, by the culture. (Chaplain 3)

Connecting is the key word when knowing the audience. Today, young people are more accustomed to connecting with each other by using virtual means. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this reality became even more evident during the lockdown when lessons were held online. However, the chaplaincy recognizes that connecting is a personal matter that changes depending on the individual. As highlighted by some of the participants, some engage in offering service, others connect with the chaplaincy indirectly via their mentors found within the institutes. However—and since the chaplaincy is still in its inception stage of development—there lingers a fear of being overtly active with the
chaplaincy, or any other form of religious service. However, the participants recognize that deep down there still exists an awareness of identifying with being Catholic. Therefore, this brings the participants to the realization that due to this overarching sentiment, the chaplaincy must be more sensitive to what image it projects. This is congruent with the view of young people that give a lot of importance to their personal image and how they appear in front of others, as one participant highlighted.

"Uhm, so personal beliefs are a lot more important yeah. They also don’t want to be judged, they see the, the church as rejecting them, as keeping them away, pushing them away, most people pushing them away. (Chaplain 1)"

For the chaplaincy, it is more important about connecting than just being present, and therefore blending in in order to communicate better with the staff and students is a requirement. It is a known fact that, today, young people are disenchanted by anything religious (when it comes to rituals and beliefs—they are more accustomed to a spirituality focused on sensitivity to self and to others), and this is no fact to shy away from. Therefore, as one chaplain 2 reiterated, “it may be best to keep certain religious jargon to ourselves”, so as to avoid being an obstacle, instead of being a peaceful presence that young people want to be around. With the young being more spiritual than religious, the participants are aware that human needs need to take centre stage. It is not that young people do not necessarily believe in a God, and so, as one participant previously explained, prayer is sometimes a remedy for getting through more turbulent times.

Chaplain 1 suggested that today, the young are “looking for what is real, genuine, and authentic and so, from a chat, a young person may be better trying to understand if this person is ‘with them’ and in agreement with them”. Therefore, the role of the chaplain would be to connect their world towards the world of the young for them to be able to connect better with their realities. One participant suggested that “having a different point of view is a healthy requirement of socializing, since it is good for young people to be able to engage with persons of other opinions”; However, the same participant continued that, it is not that the chaplain speaking to the young disagrees with the other on an anthropological level, as disagreeing over approach does not change the fact that the Salesian is present for the young.

One participant argued that “The image of whether there is a spiritual dimension for young people is disputed by some young people, because if there is a spiritual dimension, then we cannot ignore it.” (Chaplain 1) Ultimately, the Salesian mission has embedded in it the passing on of faith to the young, not in a dogmatic way, but rather more in a way of integrating the human experience together with the existence of God, to know that they are loved and lovable. With respect to this a participant argued that,

"Faith and life are one thing. Faith and life. Erm, so to enter in a relationship means that, erm, they can know you. They can know who you are. And the best thing is that they think they are important for you. For me, that’s important, no? (Chaplain 6)"

A Familial Approach to Youth Ministry; the Charisma of the Salesians

The Don Bosco family is what makes the work of the Salesians stand out from other good works. Don Bosco was insistent on not entering into works of a philanthropic nature in the strict sense of civic engagements, and on the contrary wanted to remain out of the political scene completely, even when this meant that those in power saw this as a mistake, as can be seen in this conversation that Don Bosco is reported to have had with Lord Marquis, where he is quoted as resisting support that would turn his Salesian family into mere social work:
This family of mine, these boys who come here from all over the city, are not a corporation. I would make a laughingstock of myself were I to pretend to make my own institution which depends entirely on civic charity (Lyons 1989: 234).

Therefore, in this way what becomes clearer is that the works of Don Bosco are meant to stem out of a vocation, a calling of his religious towards the needs of the young and so to treat them as family. It is in this way, through his network of Salesians, that the young could get to feel that they are loved, because the care is about the whole young person in all their complexity, rather than about filling a gap in the system through the means of civic charity.

According to the participants, to engage in a Salesian manner with young people requires the active engagement of Salesians and their co-workers to interact in a friendly, family-style relationship, with a focus on the individual in the anthropologic sense, recognizing the individual’s capability to love God and to be an honest citizen. In this regard, there was insistence from the participants that the Salesian model applies to all, as does a true Christian spirituality. Where it occurs is more a matter of being in the right place at the right time to meet with the young; in a school environment this could mean anywhere from corridors to canteens to workshops, without excluding the possibility of meeting in a religious environment such as in the chapel.

The quality of relationships that exist materializes in a trustful relationship aimed at keeping young people observing a life of good moral character. The place to begin is from a relationship, therefore a connection must be there because it is understood that young people, as one participant stated, “look for the genuine, the authentic, the real persons beneath the face of the church, chaplaincy, whatever it is—from there we establish a connection”.

From here on it is presumed that work could be carried out as a team, which would consequently be defined by those participating and collaborating in this Salesian work. As one participant stated:

Still visible, but we wouldn’t be alone, singles, instead we would be a team and that team could involve not only priests and, uhm, but also groups of lecturers or staff, other staff, uhm, and young people themselves create a sort of, uhm, community there to identify as a chaplaincy community, then yes, it can go to the individual institutes. (Chaplain 5)

Some works may take the form of social action, while others more of a prayer group style, while others would connect with the young without any formal structure, simply knowing that the Salesian there is an educator, a friendly presence trying to help them. However, the emphasis on team emerged in order to combat this pervasive sense of loneliness and individualism that many of the young are struck by. In this sense, a presence will be the antidote to this problem, thus enabling a sense of encounter to permeate throughout the various institutes of MCAST, where the chaplaincy will identify as a community, where a place of belonging exists.

Openness

Studying the youth scape to find ways of encountering the young is something of a persisting problem; how to get to the young and be more effective lingers in the minds of the chaplains. There is a willingness to be open to the context and to the audience, however, there are still many ideas with loose ends in order how to operate, with so many of the suggestions being optimistic and beneficial to this end. However, it is also good to make the point that the operational system is still lacking, and apart from merely being a
matter of resources, the approach is also under discussion. With many innovative ideas, the chaplaincy team would require sitting down to plan a unified approach on moving forward, but nonetheless retaining the culture of each institute so as to remain unique and be as effective as possible.

**MCAST as a particular reality for Salesian Youth Ministry**

Also, because you have to consider that it’s one thing working in a setting that belongs to us, as Salesians, like, for example, a youth centre. And play football, and uhm, mingle with their friends, but because they want to and for that purpose.

This participant contrasted how the approach for the MCAST Salesian chaplaincy must be adapted from what the chaplains are more commonly used to when working in their own Salesian environments. The culture is different than that specific to a Salesian context, in that in a Salesian environment the young are there with a better understanding about the ethos of the religious order, such as in their schools and in their residential settings, therefore making the Salesians and their co-workers, an ‘attraction’ to be found within the environment. In MCAST, this is flipped around, where apart from a mere understanding of chaplaincy, sometimes even the Salesians are not well-known. This brought some of the participants to contemplate the reasons why students are at MCAST, which changes drastically from the family-style approach normally found within Salesian premises.

The Salesian team recognizes the importance of collaborating with the institution, maybe also underlining this fact even more given that there is less of an awareness of the spirit by which the Salesian chaplaincy exists at MCAST. Therefore, a lot is left at the mercy of the lecturer and administrative staff on how effective the chaplaincy team can be. Support has been solicited from members of staff and from whom there has been a generous response, although the chaplaincy team still envisages that more work needs to be done to educate the staff about what the chaplaincy in MCAST exists for.

In addition, a participant insisted on the necessity of the laity since “the laity are, are there because of their work, and they’re always there. They’re doing something perhaps additional and on a, on a voluntary basis, perhaps, but they’re always there, even physically there”. (Chaplain 5) Given that the chaplaincy holds no powers to execute at a decision-making level, the chaplaincy is dependent on the involvement of the laity to influence the College and the students. Only in this way can the Salesian chaplaincy team imagine how the pastoral care offered could be effective in the lives of those they meet, and thus have the possibility of influencing the students with the Salesian understanding of full human development.

**Groups**

Groups are a more traditional approach in pastoral work. Groups give the basis of a sense of belonging and allow for the members to grow together while undertaking a journey of discovery. It has been reported that this idea is proving challenging to get across to the staff and students at MCAST. They insist that it must form naturally so that it does not become cumbersome to attend. As one participant noted, for students “it’s important that they choose. I mean, it’s not like school [where] you form a context of education, I [the student] choose to come here because I like it”.

The chaplaincy envisages that through group work, the students will find the support they need to successfully complete their course work since groups give identity, offer support, and challenge the individual members. As chaplain 4 said, groups are “an open way, no, to share ideas, to share time, project, and form a team too... It would be something good. I
think the chaplaincy is open.” Through groups, young people will grow in charity because they will feel stronger and be more sensitive to the needs of others. The groups will be a place where the Chaplain informs the group about the needs faced by others, and the group members will be able to respond with works of mercy².

Transformation

The one educative role of the Salesian is evangelization: to bring young people to the realization of the salvation that awaits them and that begins here in human form. Though this may sound like a vision that is far off, it is a very tangible approach, as expressed by one of the participants, summed up in the words of Don Bosco as Salus Animarum, meaning the good of souls that is their salvation. (Chaplain 2) In this way, the Salesians are there to serve as a lighthouse, as one participant suggested. This requires the Salesian to be there as a person of contact for the material and spiritual needs of the young.

As mentioned earlier, sometimes gathering the young could prove challenging, therefore, bringing them to the point of questioning faith is something that appears to still be on the horizon. So far it appears, from the interviews conducted, that the willingness is there, however, it is suggested that the ‘ground is not yet ready’ for young people to embrace the good news. The throwaway mentality of consumerism contrasts with the Salesian understanding of being with the young as a part of their educative approach. It is anticipated that the culture within MCAST so far has as an ethos (induced by the students themselves) to be a place where students come to collect a certificate to be job-ready, with socializing being a lesser priority.

They don’t... I don’t think they even come to meet their friends. Most probably, students at MCAST come to, uhm, get, uhm, a level of education that they would need for their job. Then, there are the extras. Some of them would be welcome, so they’re... Some, like, meeting friends and, uhm, having a social life. And that, that would be an extra, a very welcome extra, of course, but it’s not their main aim. (Chaplain 5)

Hence, if even socializing is a matter that needs to be ‘taught’, then how much more will matters pertaining to the afterlife need to wait before attempting to be channeled through the Chaplains among the young. This imposes more limits on the Salesian pastoral and educative approach, since on the one hand the young are not receptive to dogmas and teachings but prefer an environment where they can air their concerns, which means that religious symbols are not the place to begin with. The young at MCAST may face certain issues—existential, social, and emotional—and the Chaplain is disposed to respond. On the other hand, the message of salvation of souls may need, for the time being, to remain suspended to not impose a ‘language’ that the young may not be prepared to digest. However, it begins with creating a culture where the young are encouraged to question and to do so readily; one participant adds that a way in is to ask young people after an experience in the company of the Salesians,

Did you feel good? What do you need in your life? Then it opens the door to other questions. And in the questions of life, one’s faith, beliefs, and meaning of life might surface. (Chaplain 6)

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² These works of mercy in the Catholic Tradition are divided into two: corporal works of mercy and spiritual works of mercy.
Conclusion

Where to begin? If existential, personal, social, and emotional needs are more immediate, and where the young person is willing to trust and search for an adult presence in their life, then salvation has already started to take place in the life of the young. The search for self will bring the young to the truth. This path of truth leads to God. In the meantime, the fruit may appear to be young people developing a good moral character, hence, becoming more spiritual and more self-aware.

Today, making ‘good Christians and honest citizens’ as Don Bosco intended could be said to be characterized by a going out of oneself, on a concrete path towards ‘love of neighbour,’ that has not only the power in it to fulfil one of the two greatest commandments (Mt 22:39) but to also combat the “sins of individualism, loneliness, and self-sufficiency” (SYMF, 2014, p.38). Groups are a good place for incubating this culture of charity and seeing to the needs of others. To alleviate the sense of being unworthy to receive love, something which is all too often experienced by the young, going out of oneself to help others will bear good fruit in the lives of the young, because the journey inward is that which frees the young person to live out their calling of being loved by God. A participant reiterated, “That is, for example, when it comes to freedom, you cannot detach freedom—how we envisage it today—from the teaching that we are created in God’s image”. The only natural response to knowing that one is loved is to love back.

The young will be better prepared to respond to what society throws at them, thus not wavering when opposition strikes their path. This excellent opportunity of education is not only academic and vocational training but an education of the heart. Through the final analysis of this report, what could be better understood is that, together, the educational institution and the team of professionals that run the Chaplaincy services, could enhance the ‘educating of the hearts’ of the students to shape them into integral, holistic citizens of a good moral character.

References


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