



**A CHALLENGE IN ANIMATION:
THE ANIMATING CORE GROUP
OF THE EDUCATING COMMUNITY**

The *Guidelines for the educational mission* arises from life and is rooted in the process of renewal of consecrated life called for by the Church. They organise and systematise the experience of the FMA and the Educating communities (EC)¹, and make a synthesis of the various processes put in place by the Institute from the nineties and launch them towards the future with new awareness.

Spirituality is the central element of the *Guidelines for the educational mission*, and it is the basis of the “vision of life as gift and task” (*GEM* p. 4). It is for the life of young people that many adults are open to form themselves together and decide to give themselves “to create an environment of serious research, communication of intentions and educational passion” (*GEM* n. 8) in order to help the younger generations to become protagonists of their lives and of the search for the common good. To give *life to the full* requires a youth ministry that “invites us insistently to become witnesses to the fullness of humanity that Jesus manifested in His life” (*GEM* p. 5).

The *Guidelines for the educational mission* propose a journey in the Church’s horizon of new evangelization that is rooted in the direct proclamation of Jesus Christ, the foundation of hope (cf *GEM* n. 5 and 9), and encourage us to be creative in our pastoral ministry and in our efforts to “learn together, as FMA and laity”, the evangelical quality of the educative process. Our mission in multi-religious and multicultural contexts finds its basis in a holistic vision of the human person rooted in the mystery

¹ From hereon the abbreviations ACG will be used for *animating core group* and EC for *Educating Community*.

of the Incarnation. At times we are called to live the *evangelical littleness* that permits us to enter *into the horizon of “the mystic of prophecy”* (cf *Circular letter n. 925. “There is a special wind blowing in Mornese”*, For the vitality of the charism, February 2, 2012). It is along this line that we propose the reflection on the Animating core group (ACG) using the Gospel images of the mustard seed and the yeast.

The Gospel experience of being a mustard seed that becomes a tree capable of sheltering many birds brings to mind the *experience of the Incarnation*, of a God who makes Himself one *of* us and one *with* us. It recalls the *reality of littleness and of losing oneself*, hidden in humble, daily and passionate service in favour of the human person, choosing the last place in working together within the ACG; hidden in love in order to bring out the good of the young, the fullness of life; hidden in humble listening to the other person’s point of view in order to propose the Christian message in a dialogical way; hidden in sacrifice which only God knows; hidden in the Word of God which is significant for all with whom we make our journey, those who are near and far, the believers and the indifferent.

The Gospel experience of being yeast, *taken and mixed* with a big measure of flour until it is all leavened through, speaks to us of being persons *taken* and, not by chance, *mixed together* in a specific ACG of an EC in a definite Salesian environment. It also brings to our mind that, in God’s work, the hidden becomes fruitful, because the dough becomes bread and abundant food for many

1. The Animating Core Group: a newness and a prophecy

The General Council has given us the *Guidelines for the educational mission*. In presenting the ACG as an essential part of the EC in an ever more globalised and intercultural context in which the document has been drawn up, the General Council proposes something *new and prophetic*, in

In conclusion

Like the mustard seed and the yeast, the *Animating core group* is the principle of life of the Educating community that lives for and with the young. The ACG witnesses to the commitment to look for ways to give to the EC a new breath of life and of hope and to communicate the faith, despite its being a small group, the evangelical littleness in the logic of the Paschal mystery.

The images of the mustard seed and the yeast speak to us of a work that God does through our presence in the ACG for the fullness of life of the EC which is source of joy, life and hope for many. These same Gospel images remind us of the faithful servant who works throughout the day with the force and power of a faith that is capable of moving mountains.

We have the certainty as an Institute that the yeast of many ACG in a big measure of flour and the mustard seeds present in the EC of all the continents are causing the growth of the Church as *home and school of communion*, and of society as *common home* where all live the experience of encounter and harmony.

Mary of Nazareth, powerful help and attentive mother, “who accompanied her son in accepting and fulfilling the will of the Father for the salvation of the world” (*GEM* n. 71) teaches us to accept the very relevant but unpopular logic of the Paschal mystery and evangelical littleness.

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comparison with how the EC is described in the FMA Constitutions² and in the earlier document *A youth-centred pastoral project*.³

In a context that is becoming more complex and fragmented, the journey of co-responsibility for the realisation of the educative project and the experience of reciprocity of the different vocations in the Church make necessary the presence of an ACG that animates the EC. What we mean here is the necessary presence of a *group of persons committed to safeguard the Christian and charismatic identity in the educational environments of the FMA*.

The members of this group *together* re-think, live and witness to the Salesian educative charism, an evangelising education, the direct proclamation of Jesus and the synthesis faith-culture-life. This presupposes that the lay collaborators make a clear option of living the Christian identity.

The ACG is not intended as a structure of government.⁴ It is a vocation that belongs to persons who share and take up the mission of witnessing as followers of Jesus in the Salesian style.

² *Constitutions and Regulations*, Rome, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians 1982, art. 68: “An indispensable requirement for fruitful apostolic action is the formation of and responsible participation in, the “*educating community*”. This is composed of the religious community, animators in the spirit of the Preventive System; the girls themselves, the recipients and protagonists in the process of formation; the parents and collaborators. It is the task of the educating community to ensure that this formative work is carried out consistently, in the various educational approaches to a common goal. The educating community is authentic only if it lives the ideals it proclaims, is sensitive to the needs of the Church and the social environment, and mindful of the good qualities present in each individual.”

³ THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR P.G. – FMA (Edited by), *A youth-centred pastoral project*, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Rome 1985.

⁴ The ACG does not replace or is not the same as the management bodies that are present in some contexts of formal (for example, the School board) or non-formal education (for example, the Oratory council).

We want an EC that is open to all, believers, non-believers, or followers of other religions. This is why we work for a wider involvement of a greater number of members of the EC. We would like to dialogue and work with all for the greater good of the young without discrimination of sex, culture and religion. At the same time, we feel the need to give greater depth to communicating the faith in the God of Jesus Christ, which, in today's complex situation, cannot be left only in the hands of the FMA community or of a single person like the local delegate for youth ministry. In fact, communicating the faith is an action of all, FMA and lay people, who have made a conscious choice of living the faith.⁵

2. Being together in the educational mission

The greatest breakthrough of Vatican Council II was the proposal of an ecclesiology of communion in which the Church defines itself as *being at the service of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind*. This is rooted in the faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (GS 3). The global vision drawn up by the Council is that of a universal Christianity which is at the same time inculturated and differentiated. The Institute has courageously welcomed the Council's pedagogy and has expressed it in listening to the other, in acknowledging its need for conversion, in acting together for the future. The Council has left us a way of moving forward: a certain way of listening to the Word, of discerning the signs of the times, of becoming persons of interiority. In this sense the Council is still grace and compass for the building of the Church today from its deepest mystery and its most profound reality: communion among believers in Christ, a communion born and nourished by faith in Him.

⁵ Cf BORSI MARA – AMBITO PG, *L'animazione della pastorale giovanile nell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1962-2008). Elementi di sintesi e linee di futuro*, LAS, 2010 Roma, 192.

f. The experience of TRANSFORMING the educational environment and the territory in the light of the GOSPEL, PUTTING THE LITTLE ONES AND THE POOR AT THE CENTRE

As in Valdocco and Mornese, the members of the ACG of the CE commit themselves so that the educational mission may be oriented in favour of young people who are poor, abandoned and in danger; thus, transforming with the force of the Gospel the different educational environments and the surrounding areas.

Putting at the centre of every educative project the little ones and the poor, letting ourselves be touched by their situation, and awakening questions in the EC and among the young in order to discover the face of God in the poor, the ACG is called, in occasions of meeting for planning, decision-making and evaluation (without taking over the functions of established governing bodies), to remind, when necessary, the need to review our priorities in terms of management decisions, in the structures, programmes, operational criteria, timetable, rules and regulations, etc., so that we do not get caught up in the criteria of efficiency, competition, exclusion and practicality (cf GEM n. 146).

g. The experience of AUTHORITATIVENESS

The authoritative presence, word and witnessing of the ACG can mould the choices for the mission and, inspired by the Gospel, speak about dignity and respect, freedom and truth, justice and peace, solidarity and service in living responsible citizenship. An ACG that engages in dialogue and discernment will be capable of animating the EC with authoritativeness, so that it may be attentive to society and the changes taking place. An ACG that humbly and courageously animates the EC to invite the younger generations to go deeper, and accompanies its members to go inward and discover its own conscience, expresses authoritativeness; thus, it will be accepted and heeded with respect.

members of the ACG, making them capable of deep encounter, fruitful dialogue, authentic personal relationships and coherent faith.

It may happen, especially at the beginning of a new presence, that only the FMA's form the ACG. But they are called to open up sooner and, as the experience of Mornese teaches us, involve other members in the animation of a growing reality which re-designs the mission in the light of the growth in fraternal life and pastoral work.

d. The experience of BEING PASSIONATE that others may encounter Jesus

The ACG of the EC is a presence of persons who evangelise by narrating their experience of meeting Jesus. Fired by the desire to meet Jesus in the daily life, the members of the ACG invite the EC to experience the joy of growing in the faith and of accompanying the young to meet Christ and His Good News, by making them delight in the beauty of a clear option of being Christians. The coherence of life of religious and lay people demonstrates that the Gospel opens up a fascinating horizon for which it is worthwhile to commit and stake one's whole life.

e. The experience of FORMING OURSELVES TOGETHER

As a small Christian community, the ACG is called to live a different quality of interpersonal relationships and communication and be an alternative human environment. In a society characterised by fragile, competitive, individualistic and fleeting relationships, the ACG expresses the possibility of gratuitous, loving, strong and enduring relationships strengthened by mutual acceptance and reciprocal forgiveness. The greater closeness among members of the ACG – FMA, lay people and the young – for meetings and sharing, and their “giving time to be together” reinforces the *culture of communication* and the *pedagogy of presence* in the ACG. Thus, they will radiate to the EC communion, solidarity of intent and of interventions, effective sharing of the goals of formation, and commitment to unity in our educational action (cf *GEM* n. 106-109 and in particular, n. 108).

In this post-conciliar horizon of the Church, the ACG of the EC is called to be a presence of the Church as communion,⁶ a community that calls Christians to live communion as a family and in view of education, and to express it in fraternal relations of equality, mutual and co-responsible service in the Church and in the world. The Salesian and communitarian educational mission “is realised through an inculturated youth ministry inspired by the Preventive System [...] Its primary goal is to lead people to encounter Jesus of Nazareth” (*GEM* n. 78). This task of accompanying young people to meet the person of Jesus is directly entrusted to the ACG (cf *GEM* n. 99, 137).

The evangelisation aspect gives pride of place to the proclamation of the Gospel as good news for the life of every young person. This entails offering different programmes according to the age and situation of the young in order to accompany them in their integral growth and in the gradual assimilation of the Christian life programme (cf *GEM* n. 79, 99, 137). Different programmes are necessary especially in geographical and social contexts where the FMA work with a minority of Christians who need care and attention, and where the majority of persons – youth, educators and

⁶ Characteristic traits of this vision of Church as communion are: the *common priesthood of the faithful* (*LG* 10-11, 34), that highlights what is shared by all the members of the Church before any further distinction between ministerial and common priesthood; the so-called *sensum fideium* (*LG* 12a), that expresses the radical equality among all, prior to any distinction, from the prophetic point of view and of adherence to the Word; the *plurality of charisms* (*LG* 12b), that constitutes the common base, from the kingly point of view or of participation in Christ's lordship, prior to any further specification (priests, religious, laity). Other typical traits of Church as communion are: its awareness that it is not the exclusive place of salvation, but is its sacrament in the world, with the responsibility of being a luminous sign and an effective instrument (*LG* 1); its understanding that it is not the kingdom of God on earth, rather, its imperfect seed that is marked by sin (*LG* 5, 8, 48); its recognition that it is the true Church of Christ (*LG* 14), while acknowledging the value of other Christian denominations (*LG* 15; *UR*); its relations with temporal realities, in full respect of their autonomy (*LG* 36). In addition: cf *Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, Apostolicam Actuositatem, Christifideles Laici, Vita Consecrata, La vita fraterna in comunità, Novo millennio ineunte*, et alii.

families – are of other faith and religion, or are indifferent or non-believers who need to be accompanied in their search for meaning, openness to the transcendent and understanding the religious culture, specifically Christian, so as to make informed and free decisions.

3. The Animating Core Group in the document *Guidelines for the educational mission*

The ACG is present throughout the whole document of the *Guidelines for the educational mission*.

The ACG is a group of persons within the EC. It is made up of the religious community, Christian parents, educators and young people who seek, in their lives, to witness to values inspired by the Gospel (cf *GEM* n. 61, 137). It has the face of many persons: a fascinating proposal rich in diversity, companions in life's journey, *family* capable of building communion around the Salesian mission. It is a "community of adults" who choose to get involved as educators with and for young people, becoming a small Christian community that *animates* and *is the soul* of a youthful educational environment that "attracts like a magnet" (like Maria Domenica Mazzarello in Mornese) and conquers the hearts of all.

FMA and lay people create a Christian community of reference, the ACG, which guarantees the Salesian identity of the educational setting even when it welcomes young people who are not believers or who belong to other religions. They discuss about the mission, making its Christian identity clearly emerge. They share the processes of animation of the faith and express the sense of belonging through participation, formation, celebration of life and of the faith (cf *GEM* n. 61).

The FMA community is committed to promote the Salesian identity, to communicate the Salesian youth spirituality and the style of the Preventive System; thus, expanding, through a dynamic and respectful way, the

are the points of reference for the pastoral identity of the ACG. Moreover, the FMA community has the crucial role of inviting and involving others towards co-responsibility and for forming ourselves with the laity and the young people.

All FMA's are part of the ACG. Each one, old or young, gives her contribution through her witnessing, in the spirit of the *Da mihi animas* and moved by missionary zeal and the desire to communicate the Gospel. The FMA community is a *family* that grows like a *school* and *environment of faith*, since it is an image of the Trinity, sign of ecclesial communion, prophetic manifestation of the following of Christ, school of Christian love, place where one makes an experience of God.

b. *Animating core group and organisational model*

The organisational model of the ACG is determined by the socio-educative and religious context where the EC is situated, that is, the place of everyday life: there, we express our Christian and religious life and the quality of our educational commitment through the harmony of our relationships and agreement on criteria around a project that allows a unified action for the life and hope of the young, of the small ones, of the poorest. It is in the EC that we come in direct contact with the people, especially the young; there, we perceive their everyday problems, their anxieties and dreams. The EC reflects upon the witnessing of its life. It plans, verifies and evaluates educational and evangelising initiatives in response to the challenges of the territory

The multicultural and multifaith contexts where we often work are very interesting and complex realities which ask us to re-think our educative presence. They also challenge us to find new ways of proclaiming Jesus, of Christian witnessing and of proposing a lifestyle according to the Gospel.

c. *The experience of SEARCHING together*

Every ACG must go through the *fatigue of searching together* the criteria of its composition, the strategies to undertake and its organisational model. What is important is that they be strategies that promote the growth of the

c. To be a Christian community of reference

In today's complexity, it is not easy to live the faith. All of us, adults and young people, need to belong to a faith community. In this sense, the ACG must become a Christian community of reference for all, religious, laity and youth; that is, a community that accompanies "on the various paths of formation for adults and young people. They celebrate and witness to the faith starting with the practical commitment to building the Kingdom of God and transforming society in a way that makes our civil life together ever more characterised by justice and respect for life" (GEM n. 159).

5. To become the Animating Core Group of the Educating community: suggested experiences

The ACG is responsible for the building and animation of educational environments where co-ordination is lived in a harmonious way and which guarantees the synergy of all the resources in processes aimed at the integral education of the person (cf GEM n. 99, 137, 138). Here are some *important experiences* which we think will be helpful in orienting the ACG so that it may really become *the soul* of the missionary dynamism of the *Da mihi animas coetera tolle* and of processes that generate life in the EC.

a. Animating core group and the FMA community

It is the FMA community, with *all* the FMA's, that lives the family spirit and witnesses to the spirituality of communion, making it alive and effective in every educational environment. Aware that we are sent (cf *Constitutions FMA* art. 64) for the young "as an apostolic Salesian community" (art. 63), we live in communion with the Sisters our identity as Salesian educators and in the certainty that through different but complementary roles everybody co-operates in the saving mission for youth (cf art. 64).

The spiritual patrimony of the FMA community, its educative style, its relationships characterized by fraternity and co-responsibility in the mission

number of persons who accept and share evangelisation as goal of education (cf GEM n. 62, 70, 71, 113, 160).

Since it is composed of Christians, *the Animating core group is characterized by its faith and takes care of the evangelisation aspect of the educational mission through the members' simple and Gospel-inspired life and the direct proclamation through diversified programmes of education to faith* (cf GEM n. 61, 70, 99, 137). Faith is communicated, passed on and shared in the Christian community. Thus, the ACG is an active part of the local Church, works willingly with movements and Church groups and participates in the life of the parish and the diocese (cf GEM n. 70, 99, 156, 159). Furthermore, it becomes yeast and leaven in the territory and in society.

"The animating core group establishes a style of life centred on:

- *The word of God*, transforming power and source of true and sincere human relationships;
- *The Eucharist*, bond of unity and communion, source of growth for the community, and on the sacrament of *Reconciliation*, which contributes constantly to weaving and re-weaving relationships broken by human fragility;
- *The eyes of faith* that are capable of recognising what the Holy Spirit is doing in the history of people, society and nations;
- *The dynamism of communion* that is realised in solidarity with the poorest, with those excluded from social opportunities" (GEM n. 70), and with the Church (cf GEM n. 156).

Therefore, the ACG is not an additional structure; rather, it is a need and a vocational response to animate and coordinate the efforts and actions of the EC in order to give quality to the Christian proposal and to radiate the beauty of the Gospel lived in Salesian style (cf GEM n. 74).

Like Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, the members of the ACG allow themselves to be guided by the figure of Mary of Nazareth, model and

guide in the human growth and in the experience of faith. Mary is the indispensable point of reference for Christian educators because her life shows that education is always mutual. Mary, mother of Jesus, collaborated in the human growth of her Son in the areas of socialisation, inculturation and adaptation. On the other hand, Jesus promoted his mother's growth in faith (cf *GEM* n. 71).

To meaningfully communicate the faith, to propose processes, to programme experiences so as to render evident the relationship faith-culture-life: all of these make visible the communion and reciprocity of the different vocations in the Church (cf *GEM* n. 99-100). For this reason the ACG can freely dialogue with all who are within the EC, though they may be of different faiths, cultures and social classes, recognising the value of every vocation, of the laity in a particular way. Thus, the ACG becomes an expression of the "prophecy of togetherness" for the Church, extending subsidiarity and co-responsibility more and more, and demanding effort and passion.

In short, *the animating core group promotes:*

- * *the Christian vision of life* as gift and responsibility, a clear pastoral proposal that is centred on the proclamation of Jesus Christ, who died and is risen, source of life and of hope for all;
- * *an integral education* centred on love for life.

Moreover:

- * *it constantly plans and evaluates the quality of the educational environment;*
- * *it favours the co-ordination and synergy of resources* for a qualified evangelising education and for the building of a new vocational culture.

4. The aim of the Animating Core Group of the Educating community

In order to further understand this proposal, it might be of help to deepen some of the aims of the ACG.

a. To promote an environment where we experience a lifestyle inspired by the Gospel

"The educational environment acts as a bridge between Gospel inspired values and the socio-cultural context" (n. 142). It is an important task of the members of the ACG to assure that the environment is permeated by authentic evangelical and typical Salesian values: faith, joy and optimism, freedom and spontaneity, friendship and leadership of youth, sacramental life, love for Mary and for the Church, solidarity and preferential option for the poor, generous service, vocational discernment, etc. (cf *GEM* n. 137, 142-144, 156, 159). This style does not only influence personal convictions, but also moulds the relationships with the young and with educators (cf *GEM* n. 87, 99), there where the synthesis faith-life is being done in mutual accompaniment (cf *GEM* n. 120).

b. To create and/or strengthen a vocational culture

If all the members of the EC are called to promote a vocational culture, this task is specifically entrusted to the ACG. An authentic vocational culture recognizes the evangelical meaning of life as a gift received and to be offered. With their lives, the members of the ACG witness to the diversity of vocations lived in the dynamicity of the *sequela Christi* (cf *GEM* n. 100, 112). "The quality of the educational environment, steeped in Christian values, not only attracts the younger generations to God, but awakens in them the desire and the openness to receive this gift, and strengthens their ability to decide to respond to a vocation of total commitment to Christ" (*GEM* n. 100).