

Social Inclusion and Diversity in Education: The Salesian Experience in Italy

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Abstract

The paper is an effort to explain “social inclusion” in the Italian panorama, and the work being carried out by the Salesian Congregation in Italy towards inclusion or social integration. It describes some of the best practices for social inclusion that the Salesians are executing in Italy. The goal of this article is not to describe patterns that cannot be compared or exported, but to contribute in realizing that the heart and passion of Don Bosco, today, continues to be present through his charisma in every part of the world, in Italy as in India: the procedures and forms are different, the dynamics and motivations are the same.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, Integration, Salesians, Migrants

The “struggle against poverty and social exclusion” for the European Union is one of the main goals of recent years. Europe wants to act as the most competitive knowledge-based society of the world, with more and better jobs, a greater social cohesion through policies that are able to satisfy the demands of competition, employment, social progress and environmental sustainability. In order to achieve this ambitious target Europe has identified one of the fundamental bases to start with: a social policy of investment in people able to fight social exclusion, equal in dignity and importance to economic development, competitiveness and employment growth.

It is apparent that an economic development or a growth of employment and wealth that does not go hand in hand with the availability of these resources for the greatest number of people, without exception, cannot be effective and sustainable. It is within this framework, therefore, that we considered with special attention to the phenomenon of social exclusion which is present in different segments of the population and due to multiple causes, and which has especially worsened in recent years due to the global economic crisis. As a result, there has been a commitment, through diverse methods and actions to encourage and favour inclusion or social integration.¹

¹ There is a debate on the use of the two terms: “integration” may be intended as the inclusion of a person in an environment different from his own, thus cancelling or ratifying his own characteristics and cultural peculiarities. The term “inclusion” seems to respect more the individual peculiarities which can be inserted in and make this new context richer.

The main area in which policies for the integration or inclusion develop is currently the world of work, but it is easy to realize that it is necessary to broaden our vision and commitment involving all areas of life: it is necessary to see the person not only as an employee or worker, but to consider him or her globally in his or her existence. Our attention will, therefore, be focused, in the latter part on children and their education and training.

Italy

Italy is a country which lives, in these years, with a strong social unrest due to important migration flows: flows of an internal nature, with a shift from the South to the more productive North of Italy, and flows of external character. These external flows occur mainly through two lines, which could be called a “corridor” and a “bridge”.

The corridor that connects with the East: after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the enlargement of the European Union, has become particularly busy, with many people coming from Romania, Moldova, Belarus, etc. The migration from the East, in recent years, has become very significant even by Chinese, Indian and Pakistani migrants etc.

The bridge of the South: due to its particular shape and position in the Mediterranean, Italy is a kind of bridge between coasts of North Africa and Europe: this proximity² feeds in many people the illusion of an easy life and a refuge from the violence of war, persecution, hunger (particularly in the countries of Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, etc.). Rather, as a matter of fact, very often, these “journeys of hope” across the sea, turn into illusions, or even worse, into dramas and tragedies.

In many cases foreign women and children, in other cases adults, who as soon as they find their own accommodations ask and obtain permission to be joined by their family members. The number of “resident aliens or foreigners” in Italy is approximately over 5,100,000³, of a total population of about 60,000,000. The number of children is now around 1.3 million units, on a total number in Italy, a little over 10,000,000 children.

There is no time, in this brief report, to highlight the significant contribution that migrants give to the Italian economy and social system. Many studies show the percentage of “GDP - Gross Domestic Product” and the wealth of the country, which can be considered due to work (as an employee and/or as an entrepreneur) of foreigners in Italy, the importance of the care for sick and elderly by the “careers” from Eastern Europe, or even the occupation of many foreigners in heavy or strenuous work (agriculture, livestock, some industries, etc.) that Italians no longer want to carry out. Next to this, one cannot fail to mention many negative elements too: from areas of criminality,

² Even if this is a “relative” closeness since we are talking about several miles of navigation, in extreme conditions across a sea which has become a tomb for thousands of people.

³ These figures are relative to “regular” foreigners to whom we have to add the thousands of foreigners who are not registered or who are waiting to have their position regularized.

particularly petty crime, attributed to gangs of foreigners, or behaviors at the edge of legality; attitudes, at times, of isolation and rejection of integration and inculturation by many of them. All this has a negative effect on the perception of Italians and is the origin of prejudices and stereotypes that prevent a clear assessment of integration.

In recent years, many Italians have forgotten that they themselves are children of immigrants: at the end of the 19th Century and for more than half of the 20th Century, thousands of Italians left to seek work in other European countries and in America, especially Latin America. This historical memory seems to be very weak today, and we are witnessing phenomena not of openness but of closure, marginalization, and social exclusion towards foreigners living in Italy or who arrive in the country in search of a more secured accommodation.

Social Crisis, Economic Crisis, Family Crisis

Italy is experiencing, in recent decades, a profound crisis affecting various sectors of society. There is no time for careful analysis, but we can mention some of the most serious evidence of this widespread crisis: an aging population⁴, family crisis, a crisis of institutions, and, in recent years, there has been a severe economic crisis that has made some of these problems even more acute. As usual, the problems of adults weigh very strongly on children and teenagers, who become more and more the “weak and shaky end of society.”⁵

There is a high risk of exclusion of many young people who, for different situations, are “borderline”, or, to use the words of Pope Francis, not only live “in” the outskirts of cities, institutions, or projects, but “constitute” today, the suburbs of existence to which it is necessary to direct an increased attention. The commitment to avoid social exclusion passes through the ability and the duty to prevent its causes, intervening mainly in the education and training of children and young people.

In this direction, even Europe has undertaken an urgent task of intervention. Among the four 2014 to 2020 cornerstones of the European project, the second concerns the social inclusion of children and young people, this action has been identified in the investment of education, skills and lifelong learning through these integrated actions:

Reduction of early school leaving and promoting equal access to good quality pre-school education, primary and secondary education; Improvement of the quality, efficiency and availability/openness of high school education, and equivalent levels, in order to increase participation and attainment levels/success; Improvement of equality of access to lifelong

⁴ Italy is one of the “oldest” countries of the world: the average age has changed from 41.4 years old in 2002 to 43.5 in 2013, and, in the same year, 1514 elderly every 100 people below the age of 14.

⁵ San Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie biografiche, Turin, Italy*.

learning, upgrading the skills and competences of the workforce and increasing usefulness of the systems of education and training for the labour market.⁶

The Salesian Response to Exclusion

In the light of and considering many elements and negative indications, it should be stressed that in Italy there is a very strong and dense network of people, individuals or associations, who operate within the Welfare System: that you can count on and there are many initiatives in favor of recovery, re-integration, protection and assistance for the most disadvantaged sections of the population, and among them, there are many children in difficulty.

It is an Italian tradition that has its roots in the past centuries, and which has seen, in recent years, an important action of “regeneration of social bonds” for the construction of a fairer and more inclusive society.

The Salesian Congregation in Italy, is no stranger to this process, and despite the progressive aging of the Salesians and the reduction of their number, we witness the blossoming of new projects and actions in response to the new needs of children and young people.

To grasp the originality and relevance of the Salesian commitment in Italy it is necessary to consider some interesting aspects.

Creativity of Christian Charity

In Italy, as well as in Europe and in many parts of the world, the most timely and urgent answers to the needs of the people and to difficult situations, come from the Christians. The Christians are those who, before any other civil or social institution, intervene where there is urgency or an emergency. Historically, this is what has occurred: schools and hospitals, shelters and support structures, community and education centers, expressions of solidarity towards those who are on the margins of society (the sick, the drug-addicts, the elderly, the disabled, HIV patients) are the response of the Evangelical creativity and resourcefulness to the ills of mankind. When a natural disaster or a humanitarian crisis occurs, the Christian NGOs are again in the forefront.

The Church, through the “genes of evangelical charity”⁷ has created, and continues to create, the “prototypes”, the models of intervention, assistance and care. States, governments, other institutions, usually arrive after: they copy or imitate these prototypes, and begin to produce them in series (hospitals, schools, recreation centers, etc.) by making them “their own” and sometimes imposing their own laws and rules for their operation/implementation.

⁶ European Union, “Social Inclusion and Fight against Poverty in the Proposed Cohesion Policy of the European Union 2014 - 2020”.

⁷ Exemplified in the great “social” saints of the XIX centuries as Don Bosco and other saints have been defined.

The Salesian Creative Praxis

The Salesians, from St. John Bosco onward, have always turned this educational and welfare creativity in favor of the poorest children and youngsters looking for and inventing, during these two centuries, quick responses to old or new and immediate needs of the children.

Our characteristic behaviour, recognized in different environments (social, political as well as academic and university), is to act promptly giving concrete answers to the pressing needs of the moment, and only afterwards, reflect, develop theories, plan further action and strategies. When Don Bosco was asked to explain his preventive method, he replied: "My method. Well ... I, myself do not know it. I have always gone on/forward as the Lord inspired me and the circumstances demanded."

This did not mean, and does not mean lack of reflection and awareness, or a light and superficial attitude, but the belief that to a real and urgent need you have to give a concrete and urgent answer. We could say that, in the Salesian house, practice inspires theory. In Italy there is an expression that says more or less: "If a man is hungry, do not give him a fish, but the fishing rod", the Salesian translation is: "If a boy is hungry, give him a fish, and also the rod to fish."⁸

New Frontiers in the Salesian Italy

In this sense, I would like to list and describe some best practices for social inclusion that the Salesians are carrying out in Italy. The goal is not to describe patterns that cannot be compared or exported, but to contribute in realizing that the heart and passion of Don Bosco, today, continues to be present through his charisma in every part of the world, in Italy as in India: the procedures and forms are different, the dynamics and motivations are the same.

Oratories and Youth Centers

Oratories and youth centers are more and more characterized as places where one can meet and make informal relationships in which everyone feels at home. In many cases they become real laboratories⁹ of social inclusion. These inclusion labs are particularly important because they are held within places of informal, or non-formal, education, so different from the school. Often the school is a place of competition and focuses on results and performance, which makes the gap between different children more evident, thus causing or increasing phenomena of exclusion, very often "bullying" is a symptom and an expression of deep discomfort.

⁸A strong impulse to the Salesian action to counteract new forms of poverty comes from the Magisterium of the Rector Major, in the 26th General Chapter, exhortation to dare into the "New Frontiers." In the Italian context a conference held a few years ago titled "Give more to those who gave less" was particularly significant.

⁹In the Italian Language there is a similarity between the word "oratory" and "laboratory."

School Support Projects

Other areas in which there is a strong experience of “inclusion” are projects to support the study of children and young people. In a growing number of oratories with opportunities to help children in their study engagement (homework, school remedial tests, help in cases of “specific learning disabilities”) are thus created. These initiatives, often referred to as “after the school bell” are booming, and collect especially foreign children and/or children who are semi-abandoned by their families. In these cases, apart from the school aid, these moments can become an opportunity to experience positive relationships with significant and welcoming adults. In some areas these experiences, started in a limited way in the day, have expanded the area of protection and assistance, to become daytime and, in some cases, even full-time experiences: some community groups or family homes have been created for the temporary custody of the child (as we will see below).

Vocational Training

A third area of strong work experience in favour of inclusion is vocational training. In line with the Salesian tradition there are hundreds of vocational training courses in Italy dedicated to boys and girls who, in schools such as high schools, technical institutes or others, would be at serious risk of marginalization and school drop-out. The choice of vocational training, a strikingly modern intuition of Don Bosco, allows children most in need to achieve the professional goals that can include them in an operational and active way in society and the production sector. Vocational training is the place and the environment in which boys or girls can express themselves through their work, their intelligence and creativity, and rediscover their own value and talents: this helps them to become aware of their dignity and enables them to achieve their dreams and their projects.

If the intelligence of the head, in the school, creates exclusion, the intelligence of the hands, in the lab, promotes work and cooperative learning, problem solving, autonomy and relationships. This is very important and effective in the perspective of social inclusion.

Special Projects

The Educational Communities for Minors

These are homes where children in the area of need are welcomed and within which qualified and professional people, who through shift work ensure their stable presence within the walls, work, thus communicating an atmosphere of warmth and familiarity and providing education on an ongoing basis. The friendly and familiar atmosphere, loving and caring, always want to be able to ensure the physical and mental growth of

children, and to provide them with an educational space where the relational aspect, based on trust, is able to promote and develop safety and autonomy within each of them.

The Family Communities for Minors

As those mentioned above, these are homes where children and under aged youngsters in need are welcomed, but, unlike the former, here, there is a stable family that offers their entire time and life to welcoming these children with loving kindness. The presence of a mum and a dad offers these children the opportunity to witness and to experience strong and durable emotional relationships. This ensures among the family members a coexistence which is based on the stability and continuity of emotional relationships and especially expresses a strong parents' educational responsibility towards their children, and towards all the children who are entrusted to their care. There are thirty family homes where, through our offices, we are able to accommodate children and young people.

Community Multifunctional Daytime Centers

These are real centers where children at risk or with problems or those of the deviance can find a place where they can study, make up for the school deficiencies, play and eat. Some children spend only the morning hours at the center, while others remain in the centre in the afternoon too. It is always a structure belonging to the Public Administration which through qualified professionals who are included in the program of recovery and prevention of children at risk through conventions or agreements that ensure the biennial continuity, welcome at-risk adolescents who find space for socializing, studying, learn a trade, grow spiritually and form their own character.

Aggregation Centers

These centers are oratories that have conventions with the Public Administration, in which they are located and where the presence of specialized operators offers educational services to children who attend the centers. The premises in this case and the open spaces are those of the parish church or of the Salesian house that hosts the center. The main goal is not to remove these children from the nuclear family of origin, thus promoting full development of their individual abilities/skills. The activities carried out within the day care centers are many and varied. They range from psychological support, through the help of professionals, to the educational support through the figures of the specialized operators; from help with the study and revision of lessons aimed at obtaining the middle school diploma, or literacy in the case of foreign students, to vocational courses ranging from cooking to mechanics and other artistic activities such as theater and music classes.

There are seventeen day centers where, through our offices, we can accommodate kids in need, with 500 young people a year.

Residential Therapeutic Communities

These are recovery centers where people with addiction problems, with the help and support of people in a similar situation and of practitioners and specialists can: receive, at an early stage, guidance towards a change for their life choices; consolidate, at an intermediate stage, a personalized change through the use of all the tools and services offered by the community; experience/experiment, at a final stage, a progressive re-entry into society, through forms of, employment and social support and reintegration in a broad sense.

Non-Residential Therapeutic Communities

A counseling center for addiction as a network point on the territory, a mediation, even informal, which allows you to get in touch with emotions belonging to the inner self and is able to process and interpret the language "of the road", a place where people live and consume their discomfort. It is a service that offers listening, support and accompaniment in a protected and reserved environment. Listening is the main function which takes place through individual interviews at the headquarters of the centre and which can be accessed to, by a phone appointment or through informal requests.

There are six residential and listening recoveries from addictions centers in which, through our offices, we can treat and prevent various types of addictions. About 480 young people were reached through all the various recovery programs implemented in 2012. And again, the projects inside prisons, support and assistance to refugees, activities with street children and in areas at high risk of crime, and so on.

Conclusion

Thus it can be seen, for the European Union, Social inclusion has remained as one of the main goals in recent years. To achieve their goal of being the most competitive knowledge-based society of the world, they have put forward the importance of equality for all with respect to employment, economic growth; thereby trying to create a social policy that leads to social inclusion. To avoid social exclusion one needs to prevent its causes, and intervene mainly in the education and training of children and young people. The Salesian congregation in Italy, following the principles of Don Bosco has responded immediately to the need of the hour or during emergencies despite the progressive aging of the Salesians and the reduction of their number. The congregation is carrying out several new educational and training projects, with a continuation of the old ones to achieve the goal of inclusion, keeping the motive of empowering children and youth.