



Contribution to discussion in Council of Europe Migrants and refugees: challenges and opportunities – What role for religious and non-religious groups?

Brief context of our organizations

Don Bosco was a man of vision who put into practice an exceptional youth project already some 150 years ago. Since then, Don Bosco's Salesians have aimed to enhance young people's lives, especially the poor and underprivileged who need greater support.

The essential threats to young people's lives at the time that Don Bosco was founding his Salesian Congregation were the same many youths are facing today: homelessness, migration and delinquency. Unaccompanied minors need concrete support from caring adults in any country they find themselves in.

Some data about us:

- Salesian Congregation is present in 132 countries and runs approximately 3650 schools, 830 T-VET Centres, 2000 Youth Centres, 2300 Parishes, 526 colleges/universities.
- In the field of social inclusion we coordinate nearly 700 projects or institutions working for the most vulnerable young people. We develop a great variety of projects, services and facilities for youth at risk:
 - o works for street children: school/home, day care centres, family homes, reception centres for refugees;
 - o services for young people with special needs: minors under protection; offenders; child soldiers; children who are exploited or abused;
 - o attention to immigrants: literacy; psycho-pedagogical support; legal advice; contributions to social and professional skills;
 - o educational services for coping with the school failures; integration in poor neighbourhoods and cultural activities in fringe areas
- In Europe, Salesians of Don Bosco have focused on unaccompanied minor refugees as it is within the DNA of the institutions and the founder's mission started catering for young migrants of Piedmont reaching the city of Torino in the middle of 19th Century. Based on this experience
- A second important aspect is that Salesians of Don Bosco are focused on the educational itinerary leading to integration rather than in the first reception of young migrants. To do, we provide different resources depending on the young person, but always a combination of formal (via Schools and T-VET centres) and non-formal education (via Social Works and Youth Centres) that enhances the real integration of these young people.

In the following section, we intend to share some of the crucial aspects that we have identified, based upon the practices developed in the last years in many European countries, gathered and revised by some of our experts.



Salesian approach to Unaccompanied Minor Refugees

Don Bosco's Preventive System remains at the heart of the Salesian calling. The great Saint responded to the needs of the youth of his time with a system based on love, reasonability, a sense of God in life and positive engagement that focuses on the potential of every adolescent.

One can only exercise Salesian pedagogy when the young feel at ease in the presence of the adults around them. Thus Salesians extend a warm welcome to every young person, irrespective of their background, gender, creed or education. As a Salesian Family we work side by side with youth and for youth, for our pedagogical style is based on warmth, cordiality, happiness and optimism.

Competence, qualification, and individual, social, spiritual and technical expertise are indispensable for all those working under the Salesian umbrella while a reflexive style of pedagogical planning and evaluation is a must have.

This mind-set is basic to our work with unaccompanied minors, regardless of whether they are refugees or migrants coming from difficult backgrounds. To help create uniformity of practice we here list some fundamental principles of our work:

1. Appropriate support.

We show complete commitment to unaccompanied minor refugees (UMR) by treating them as individuals. Every human being should receive the kind of help he really needs but in practice this should be determined individually by professionals. Support also includes psychological services. We underline the need to provide UMR with long-term support, that commences on engagement and extends beyond the age of 18 until such time as the young adult can effectively rely on his own support network. We set a high value on transparency in immigration-related legislation.

2. Cooperation is important.

Commitment to UMR requires solid cooperation. We work with the relevant institutions to promote community and regional networking, which helps deliver individualised, holistic assistance as appropriate. Cooperation beyond borders is essential for international intervention programmes to succeed.

3. Education is key.

We want UMR to maximize their educational possibilities at the earliest. For Salesians education is understood holistically so we also support their searching for jobs or professional orientation as well as their attempts to obtain an apprenticeship. We foster the development of intercultural competences and try to accompany their necessary resolution of diverse cultural values while promoting the value of active citizenship.

4. Unaccompanied minor refugees have Rights.

In accordance with the Christian vision of mankind we promote human dignity and the right to respect it. When we stand up for the rights of UMR we practice a Christian vision of politics by promoting a rights-based approach based on the U.N. Guidelines and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. We place ourselves at the service of guardians of UMR who wish to make use of our particular competence in this field.

5. Specific integration.



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Salesians of Don Bosco in European institutions

We strongly support the concept of Residential Care Homes that has proven its worth in the past. It is essential to provide an adequate atmosphere in these facilities and promote Homes that accept both nationals and migrants, so that we integrate these youngsters right from the start (right after reception) in order to avoid ghettos. We consider permanent substantial assistance and carefully planned integration programmes to be essential for UMR.

6. Language is the bridge.

Knowledge of languages is a basic necessity without which there can be no professional formation and integration for UMR. We support the young to learn languages. Moreover, when engaging translators we seek to ensure that these are persons of integrity since they often become trusted persons for the unaccompanied minor.

7. A qualified approach.

All those engaged in a pedagogic role with the Salesians embark on a process of periodic improvement of their skills in meeting young people's needs. When considering the offering of a new service for UMR we place particular emphasis on flexibility and reliability.

In conclusion, for the Salesians of Don Bosco the unaccompanied minor remains the centre of the whole educative process. He is not only seen as a recipient of services but as a person with an opinion which needs to be heard and respected, as we consider the young person to actually be the main actor of the process of his integration.