



**Youth Advisory Team Report
Salesian Vocations Survey**

In response to the Provincial's request to explore the decline of Salesian vocations within the Salesian province, the YAT conducted a survey to investigate people's experiences and attitudes towards Salesian vocation, and suggestions for what could be done to help increase Salesian vocations.

“They need to be understood as normal people who have worries and feelings and who do sometimes question their faith”

We have come up with some practical suggestions which may help to increase vocations in the province. However, it must be stated at the outset that these things will act as a complement but not a quick fix solution to the decline in vocations. What will do most to encourage vocations is a much more general and long term goal and it essentially lies within the foundations of what it is to be Salesian, especially the practice of Salesian presence. If SDBs continue to perfect this practice of being with the young, then firstly young people will have a first-hand example of what it means to be a Salesian and secondly they will have a 'way in' to the Salesian world. We hope that our suggestions can help in the process of reinterpreting what 'Salesian presence' could involve in our particular cultural context.

It is the changing attitudes and perspectives of our current culture, of young people today which came across most strongly in our survey. Today's culture is much more dismissive of the prospect of religious commitment as it is deemed to be other-worldly and too restrictive (young people are very aware of the sacrifices involved in a religious vocation but not aware of the rewards!). Young people today very rarely think of their future in terms of their vocation or even a lifelong commitment and without this context, religious vocation is often excluded from consideration.

After careful consideration of the results we received from the survey we discussed the issues at length to try to come up with a picture of why the numbers of people considering and pursuing a Salesian Vocation are lower than they have been in the past, and what might help to solve some of these issues. The report will be structured in these two sections: what the issues are, and what could be done to help address them.

“I think it's difficult, especially at a young age to know if God is calling you to something specific or if God is calling you at all”

About The Survey

The survey was taken by forty eight people, of which fourteen were male and thirty four female. All but one of the forty six respondents who stated they were under thirty six, thirty nine were between nineteen and twenty seven. When asked the question 'Have you ever been involved in a Salesian Project, sixteen replied 'no', the rest of the respondents replied with a variety of Salesian projects, the most prominent being BOVA. There was not however any notable pattern in the kinds of responses that came from people who had been volunteering at one specific Salesian project. Half of the respondents said that they had not considered 'a Religious vocation', the other half said that they had. Most of these had talked to somebody about it, sometimes friends, Priests, Sisters or Nuns, and less frequently family.

It is worth noting that this is not a rigorous study with a huge sample size, but should be considered rather more as thoughts on the matter. It is also worth pointing out that other issues did come up in the surveys, but we made a judgement and excluded some of the reasons people chose not to look further into religious life to ensure our suggestions were all things we thought were achievable by the efforts of the Salesian Province of St Thomas of Canterbury. An example of this would be the suggestions we received about allowing priests to marry.

***“I did not think they would have
use for an economics graduate”***

Survey Findings

We found there were many reasons why a person might feel apprehensive about embracing religious life, many of which were expressed in the survey at the same time and appeared to come together to form good reasons of why not to consider religious life for those surveyed.

Some of these are based in misconceptions about the nature of religious life:

People have a narrow conception of what it is to be a priest; they do not realise the plurality of roles that priests can undertake. There seemed to be a sense that to be a priest was to do a specific job, the job of a parish priest. There was no understanding of the many different and varied roles SDBs and FMAs carry out across the province and also the variety throughout their lives.

“From the outside, it is a very mysterious world, I think to try and open it up so it’s easier to see from the outside what’s going on”

That a candidate to the priesthood must be overwhelmingly holy and educated – seemingly unachievable to many. They feel as though they have to be saints already. Some seemed to be put off by the thought that they would not be good enough, people were not aware of the process of discernment and formation that was involved and seemed to feel that before getting in touch, they already needed to be like the older SDBs or FMAs that they knew.

“I feel young people see it as something ‘special’, but ‘distant’ from them”

Confusion over the nature of calling; they might expect a clearer sign than they have perhaps been given. What it is to be called is something that is not always easily understood. It seemed that many understood it to be a sudden, life changing event which, if they did not experience then it is not worth seriously considering.

That people feel they have to be sure about their intentions about joining the priesthood before approaching someone. Many people expressed that they had thought about it, some very seriously but had not spoken to anybody about it. There seems to be a great deal of apprehension and possibly even embarrassment about talking about these things to others among young people.

In addition to these misconceptions, respondents outlined a number of reasons for being apprehensive about pursuing religious life:

They are not sure what's involved in the day-to-day life of someone engaged in religious life. The life of a religious seems mysterious and distant from 'normal life'.

The process itself of becoming a priest or a brother is ambiguous and/or unclear. Many appeared to be scared by the sacrifices involved; young people are much more likely to be aware of the sacrifices rather than the rewards.

Many are concerned of the perceived age-gap with other priests and those who would form their community. People were apprehensive because there were not many young people going into religious life. It adds another element if you are committing to an order which is made up of people from a very different generation than yourself.

“I believe that everyone has a vocation, and not all are called to be priests, monks or nuns! I do consider my own vocation to be just as important”

Our Suggestions

Our suggestions are primarily about different ways of thinking about things and being aware of how the Salesians appear to those it comes into contact with. From these we give some practical suggestions about how this could be done, especially how the internet can be used for these ends. Our ideas come mostly from our discussions, but some of the ideas come straight from those surveyed.

The reason we are looking at thinking in different ways, and becoming aware of how the Salesians appear to others is because the issues that have come up which can be tackled by the Salesians are misconceptions. They are based upon a lack of information, knowledge or awareness about the nature of religious life.

“I do not feel that a religious life is suitable for me at this time in my life, as I do not feel I am strong enough to keep and fulfil the vows that are taken”

We are in a culture where it is seen as something odd to look into religious life and the Salesians need to be aware of this. The starting point of any publication, talk or even thinking about vocations needs to start from this point. It must not assume that people understand what vocation is about or what is involved as many Salesians may have done when they were thinking of religious life.

If the Salesians want a renewed emphasis on vocations it is no longer enough to leave it to those who are interested to do their own research, find these things out and come all of the way themselves. Of course this journey is important, but the Salesians can come part of the way to meet those who may be interested. In whatever forms it may take, a renewed emphasis on vocations will inevitably involve a discussion on how exactly to present religious life. We believe that there are some elements which should be key to this:

Salesian Vocation should be thought of and presented in a wider sense than just about taking vows and entering into religious life. To include becoming an SDB or FMA within the wider bracket of Vocation, or Salesian Vocation it puts it as one option among others that many people are choosing. We think this would help people to understand Religious life as something less alien and distant, helping to present it as something much more 'normal' in our culture.

Furthermore, to whatever extent the Salesians can help with this, Vocation should be presented in a wider sense even than Salesian or religious vocation. Encouraging young people to think about any life choice they make whether it be married, single, working in Venezuela or becoming prime minister as ‘vocation’ could go a long way to encouraging a more positive attitude to religious vocation.

Careful consideration should go into how the younger SDBs appear in this. While of course you do not wish to present the order as something that it isn’t, but it is important that people see that there are young people still going into it, people that are in many ways like young people today.

People are very aware of the downsides, the sacrifices that come with becoming an SDB or FMA. These concerns should not be ignored, but could rather be explored as positives rather than negatives and in a realistic context.

Stories and examples must be central to all of this, whether that be stories of SDBs personal vocation stories, their journeys into religious life or examples of active mission and a ‘day in the life’.

A development of this point which is also very important is to highlight what the process may look like for you if you were to move forward into religious life. To show what your story may look like would be key to addressing some of the misconceptions we found.

YAT suggests that there are two specific media that it would be worthwhile putting resources into which would help the Salesians reach out and make a noise about vocations. We think that it is important to have people who are younger and have a good understanding of this media to have input into the look at feel of both of these suggestions.

Website. A new professional looking website dedicated to, or a big section within a new modern and fresh looking website dedicated to vocations could really help to tackle many misconceptions people have. This could include videos of peoples vocation stories, frequently asked questions and could contain a huge amount of information which would help those who were considering religious life. A good example of this that we found was the Jesuit Vocations website

<http://www.jesuitvocations.org.uk/>

Publications. The Salesians could produce publications and resources to have around schools/youth clubs where young people are, or produce specific resources for lessons or to send around to catholic societies at universities each year. These publications could contain the same kind of information which was on the website.

These suggestions are of course in addition to the present ways Salesians are present currently with young people and others across the province, these active and face to face examples of active mission are the most important thing. The points mentioned above these suggestions however still ought to be taken into consideration in how Salesians are present throughout the Province.

The importance of getting the word out about what the Salesians are doing to help promote vocations (e.g. examples of active mission etc.) must also be seen as part of something wider. This wider point is how important this is not just to vocations but to all of the Salesians work. Currently the Salesians can do a lot more to promote the good things that are happening all the time; to be heard in our current context these things need to be shouted about. The timing of this report fits with several calls for Churches to make more effort to get their voices heard, even the Pope has been urging Catholics to get onto the internet and make use of it as best they can.

<http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=17711>

<http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=17638>

<http://www.infoans.org/1.asp?sez=1&sotSez=13&doc=6178&Lingua=2>

In addition to these suggestions there were some more general ideas that we thought could benefit the Salesian community which may help vocations in the long term.

Offer spiritual direction to those involved with the Salesians more widely. Some have been offered it, while others would really love the opportunity but did not know that it was available. This would really help some to consider what their vocation really is.

Promoting all Salesians commitments, SDB, FMA, Co-operator and even VDB. We found that many people felt that they had a vocation, but it was to work with the young and the poor in different ways and in different contexts; it was not about taking vows. If they are all seen as different aspects of the same commitment then this goes some way into neutralising some of the concerns people have, for example that you will only be living and working with older SDBs. If you were also working with FMAs, Co-operators and VDBs on a daily basis this would not be the case for example.

Try to establish links to University Catholic Societies and other groups, so that they are aware if they ever wanted anybody to come in and talk to them about these things, the Salesians may be able to help with this.

Follow Up

This report is built upon the responses that we received, however there are many ideas and thoughts that have come up through this process which more in depth and rigorous research could help to get a deeper understanding of the reasons why people are not attracted to Salesian vocation.

One area of particular interest which was raised, but was not reflected in the responses was about how GAP year volunteers experiences of community life related to interest in vocations. Does the way that community life is structured at the two Salesian retreat centres have a different affect upon people's attitudes to vocation?

More thorough research would also include talking to those who are currently discerning and those who have recently committed themselves to the Salesians.

If you wish to find out any more about these issues, please don't hesitate to email us

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Photos courtesy of Chris Knowles and Savio House Retreat Centre

