
The Role of Rectors and Superiors of Communities as Spiritual Directors and Animators



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THE ROLE OF RECTORS AND SUPERIORS OF COMMUNITIES AS SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS AND ANIMATORS

Have you noticed that our Constitutions and Regulations speak of the Rector and Leader of the community as the “Spiritual Guide” of the confreres and the community?

Has the indication in the Ratio (art 201 in the new Ratio promulgated in 2016 and 233 and 262 in the version of 2016) that indicates the freedom of individuals to choose spiritual guides taken away the duty of the Rector of the community to be the Spiritual Guide of the community and individual confreres?

To reflect on finding answers to these two questions, we could begin by drawing our attention to what the Constitutions and Regulations tell us.

Article 55 of the Constitutions state clearly that the Rector is a “Spiritual Guide”. It also states that the “first task” of the Rector is to “animate the community so that it may live faithful to the Constitutions and grow in unity”. This first task is primarily spiritual, while including also involves material compliances. This article also states that the Rector has direct responsibility toward each confrere to help him “realize his own personal vocation”.

Article 176 of the Constitutions states that the Rector of the local community is “first in order of responsibility for its religious life”, as also for its apostolic activities and administration.

But we must remember that Article 45 of the Constitutions, speaking of the mission entrusted to the community also states that “each of us is responsible for the common mission and participates in it with the richness of his own personal gifts...”

When we study articles 176 and 45 together, we understand that the superior is “first in order of responsibility” but not the only one responsible. He is also not simply “one of the many responsible”. The balance of these two extremes is crucial: Neither eliminating the responsibility of others by taking over completely, nor shirking the responsibility because there are others who share the responsibility.

Article 175 of the Regulations indicate how this role of “Spiritual Guide” is to be exercised on a regular basis. It speaks of “common spiritual direction, conferences, good-nights and informal meetings.”

The full text of these articles is reproduced below for reading with the key to look out for the primary role of Rectors and leaders of communities.

Article 55 of the Constitutions states that:

“The rector represents Christ who unites his followers in the service of the Father. He is at the centre of the community, a brother among brothers, who recognize his responsibilities and authority.

His first task is to animate the community so that it may live faithful to the Constitutions and grow in unity. He coordinates the efforts of all, bearing in mind the rights, duties and capabilities of every member.

He also has a direct responsibility toward each confrere; he helps him realize his own personal vocation and carry out the work entrusted to him.

He extends his solicitude to the young for whom we work and to our collaborators so that they may share in the community's mission with increasing responsibility.

In his words, frequent contacts and opportune decisions he is a father, teacher and spiritual guide.”

Article 176 of the Constitutions states that:

“The superior of each local community is called the rector.

He is first in order of responsibility for its religious life, its apostolic activities and the administration of its goods. With the collaboration of his council, he animates and governs the community according to the Constitutions and General Regulations.”

Article 175 of the Regulations state that:

“Basing himself on Salesian sources and by means of common spiritual direction, conferences, good-nights and informal meetings, he should take care that the community becomes deeply imbued with our Spirit and lives it in an intense way.

In addition, he will see to it that official documents of the Church and the Congregation are brought to the knowledge of all the confreres.”

To reflect further on the two questions that we began with and to consider the role of the Salesian Brother as superior of the community (Rector) and spiritual guide of the community, we can find help in an expert of Salesianity, namely Fr Martin McPake who, before his death in 1995, looked after the “English-speaking” areas of the Congregation. A novice master for thirteen years and several years in post-novitiate formation, he dedicated his life to Salesian formation. Recently, Fr John Dickson William (INM) of the Association of Promoters of Salesian History (ACSSA in Rome) published a critical edition of a talk given by Fr Martin McPake on 20 November 1980 entitled “Salesian Animation and Spiritual Direction: the Role of the Superior” that was found in the archives of the Salesians in England. The talk was given to SDBs and FMAs at Savio House, Bollington, the Salesian Retreat Centre.¹

We could do well to focus on four of the arguments used by Fr McPake to develop his talk:

1. The sacramental character of our life together
2. The role of any religious superior in the teaching of the Church and as reflected in our Salesian family documents
3. The meaning of ‘spiritual direction’ in such documents
4. The ideal cherished by Don Bosco for his superiors

¹ William John Dickson, “Martin McPake and the Salesian Animation and Spiritual Direction, the Role of the Superior” in Wim Collin – Paolo Vaschetto and Michal Vojtas (Editors), *Testi e Contesti Salesiani: Miscellanea in onore del Prof. Aldo Giraudo* (Roma: LAS, 2025) 169-183.

The sacramental character of our life together and spiritual guidance

The sacramental character of our life together (religious community as also the Christian community) indicates that every member of the community is a source of divine communication to the other. Each Christian is called to be involved within the unique mediation of Christ by communicating the Gospel to others. In this sense all of us (irrespective of being leaders/superiors or not) are engaged in the work of animation by reason of our baptism and our religious life. This would mean that every brother is a sign of Christ and the superior is one sign among many.

In his *Simple Commentary* on the Constitutions, McPake said, "Obedience is all about listening with a humble heart, together in Christian friendship, and the '*rendiconto*' is one of those moments which brings into focus some of the basic attitudes that guide us together."²

Often a question is asked about individual charisms of members. I find an answer given by *Mutuae Relationes* useful. "Individual religious, too, certainly possess personal gifts, which without doubt usually come from the Spirit. They are intended for the enrichment, development and rejuvenation of the life of the institute, in the unity of the community and in giving proof of renewal. Discernment of such gifts, however, and their correct use will be measured according to the consistency they show both with the community commitment of the Institute and with the needs of the Church as judged by legitimate authority."³

More importantly when we speak of the sacramental character of our community life, it means that Christ is the anima/soul of our communities. It means that Christ is "there right in the centre of our sinfulness, rising up in the midst of our weakness, as the Lord and Master, as the animator, as the director, as the 'Way the Truth and the Life'."⁴ It is from this shared experience of faith that all spiritual direction and all spiritual accompaniment starts. This understanding that Christ is the centre of spiritual guidance is so important that every spiritual director/animator should know to get out of the way! Nobody needs to feel burdened by directing or animating others because humans are not the true spiritual directors. All should remember that "in every person's life there is only one true animator, only one spiritual director, none other than the Spirit of Christ."⁵ Following this understanding, the focus of the director and directee should be the Lord Jesus.

The role of any religious superior in Spiritual guidance

McPake refers to article 13 of *Mutuae Relationes*⁶ which presents the service of authority as involving the three-fold function of pastoral ministry: teaching, sanctifying, and governing. It is good for us to pay attention to some details of the text of article 13 with special attention to the parts underlined for the purposes of our reflection:

a) Regarding the *office of teaching*, religious superiors have the competency and authority of spiritual directors in relation to the evangelical purpose of their institute. In this context, therefore, they must carry on a veritable spiritual direction of the entire Congregation and of its individual communities. They should

² Martin McPake, 173 footnote 13.

³ *Mutuae Relationes*, 12 as found on https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_14051978_mutuae-relationes_en.html.

⁴ Martin McPake, 171.

⁵ Martin McPake, 172.

⁶ *Mutuae Relationes*, no. 13 states "... Considering then the fact that the *prophetic, priestly and royal* condition is common to all the People of God (cf. *LG* 9, 10, 34, 35, 36), it seems useful to outline the competency of religious authority, paralleling it by analogy to the three-fold function of pastoral ministry, namely, of teaching, sanctifying and governing without, however, confusing one authority with the other or equating them. ..."

accomplish this in sincere harmony with the authentic magisterium of the hierarchy, realizing that they must carry out a mandate of grave responsibility in the evangelical plan of the Founder.

b) As to the *office of sanctifying*, the superiors have also a special competency and responsibility, albeit with differentiated duties. They must foster perfection in what concerns the increase of the life of charity according to the end of the institute, both as to formation, initial and ongoing, of the members and as to communal and personal fidelity in the practice of the evangelical counsels according to the Rule. This duty, if it is rightly accomplished, is considered by the Roman Pontiff and the bishops a valuable help in the fulfillment of their fundamental ministry of sanctification.

c) As to the *office of governing*, superiors must render the service of ordering the life of the community, of organizing the members of the institute, of caring for and developing its particular mission and of seeing to it that it be efficiently inserted into ecclesial activity under the leadership of the bishops.

Here it is good for us also to pay attention to the fact that *Mutuae Relationes*, when it speaks of religious superiors does not make a distinction between priest superiors or others – male or female. This can give us insights into how to interpret the new reality in our Congregation of having Salesian Brothers as the Rector/superior of communities. They too are called to be spiritual guides as all superiors are called to be. This is true also of a superior of an FMA or MSMHC or VSDB, or Maria Auxiliatrix, SMI Sisters of the Disciple Sisters and Brothers (examples of members of our Salesian Family). When speaking of the pastoral duty of religious superiors to be spiritual directors spoken of in the context of the teaching role, we must remember that in the early history of the Church there were female spiritual directors/mothers in the deserts along with spiritual fathers. Today we have St Teresa of Avila, St Catherine of Siena, St Therese of Lisieux and St Hildegard of Bingen who are declared female Doctors of the Church. This background indicates that all religious superiors are expected to be spiritual guides.

Before we proceed, we need to understand the term “spiritual guide” as used by Constitutions no. 55 and “common spiritual direction” used by Regulations no. 175.

“55. The rector represents Christ who unites his followers in the service of the Father. He is at the centre of the community, a brother among brothers, who recognise his responsibility and authority. His first task is to animate the community so that it may live faithful to the Constitutions and grow in unity. He coordinates the efforts of all, bearing in mind the rights, duties and capabilities of every member.

He also has a direct responsibility toward each confrere; he helps him realise his own personal vocation and carry out the work entrusted to him. He extends his concern to the young and to our colleagues, so that they may share in the community’s mission with increasing responsibility.

In his words, frequent contacts and opportune decisions he is a father, teacher and **spiritual guide**.”

“175. Basing himself on Salesian sources and by means of **common spiritual direction**, conferences, “good nights” and informal meetings, he should take care that the community becomes deeply imbued with our spirit, and lives it in an intense way.

In addition he will see to it that official documents of the Church and the Congregation are brought to the knowledge of all the confreres.”

The meaning of ‘spiritual direction’ and/or ‘spiritual guidance’

Here the distinction McPake makes between the two terms “spiritual director” and “spiritual guide” becomes handy. Acknowledging that these two terms are used interchangeably in most cases, he points out a subtle distinction. Official church magisterium does not use the distinction but the sense of it is present in the writings of some saints.

McPake says, “in its classical and strictly technical sense, spiritual direction is an aspect of or a response within a relationship that is characterised by a complete opening of conscience on the part of the directee. Not surprisingly, this kind of relationship often merges into the sacramental context of penance, with the result that spiritual direction in its clearest and classical form is

more commonly associated with a relationship in which one of the persons is a priest. Yet there is in fact nothing intrinsic to the nature of the situation which demands that such be the case. Some of the greatest spiritual directors in the history of the Church have been layfolk or religious men and women.”⁷

McPake then defines spiritual guidance. “The second situation is much wider, or it can be. It may never merge with the sacramental context, it may not necessarily be noted by any deep opening of conscience, and it will often signify, not a one-to-one relationship, but a one-to-many.

After making this distinction McPake pointed out that all superiors of religious are to be spiritual guides and that beyond it, all should be at least ready to get involved in the deeper level (especially priests), but with due preparation. When done outside sacramental context spiritual direction would need all the more care and prudence.

In hindsight to this distinction, I am not able to identify if this meaning was kept in mind when the Constitutions used the two terms: “spiritual guide” (Constitutions no. 55) and “common spiritual direction” (Regulations no. 175), in the context of the role of the Rector/superior, while article 84 in a different context speaks specifically of entrusting oneself to a “spiritual director”. Intentional or not, when we compare the current reality with the context of Don Bosco’s desire to have the Rector as the confessor in his houses it makes sense as we shall see further ahead.

Article 84 of the Constitutions:

“Our chastity is not a conquest made once for all time. It has its moments of peace and moments of trial. It is a gift which because of human weakness demands a daily pledge of fidelity.

For this reason the Salesian, faithful to the Constitutions, lives a life of work and temperance, practices mortification and the custody of the senses, makes discreet and prudent use of the means of social communication, and does not neglect the natural means which contribute to physical and mental health.

Above all, he implores God’s help and lives in his presence; he nourishes his love for Christ at the table of the Word and the Eucharist, and humbly purifies it in the Sacrament of Reconciliation; he entrusts himself with simplicity to a **spiritual director**.”

Ideal cherished by Don Bosco for his superiors

In the first years, the Salesian Rector was effectively the spiritual director for all members in the classical sacramental sense in which “spiritual director” is understood. He was also the confessor. Hence in the text of the Elenco (catalogue) of 1875 it was stated: “For the smooth running of our Congregation and in order to preserve its spirit of unity, a regular confessor or director is appointed for the members of the Society as is done in other religious institutes. In Turin, Fr. John Bosco and his substitute, Fr. Michael Rua. In other houses: the rector of each and his substitute, the Prefect” (cf. BM 12, p.40).⁸ Right through the life of Don Bosco this was the custom. It all changed definitively in April 1901 with the decree *Quod a Suprema* issued by the Vatican expressly forbidding Salesian superiors from being the ordinary confessors of their subjects. Don Rua struggled to accept this change.

While this Salesian tradition was stopped by the intervention of the Holy See, another tradition continues and is called “friendly talk” as indicated in Constitutions no. 70. As we can notice this article comes closer to the meaning of “spiritual guidance” discussed above.

⁷ Martin McPake, 174.

⁸ Martin McPake, 176.

Article 70 of the Constitutions:

"Faithful to Don Bosco's recommendation each confrere meets frequently with his superior for a friendly talk.

This is one of the best opportunities for dialogue, both for his own personal advantage and for promoting the good running of the community.

In it he speaks with confidence of his own life and work and, if he so wishes, also of the state of his conscience."

From the spirit of these two traditions (one discontinued and other in existence), we can conclude, as McPake states, "[it is absolutely clear that Don Bosco considered a superior's first concern to be for the spiritual care and guidance of the members of the community.](#)"⁹

Clearly, Don Bosco wanted his Salesian superiors (SDBs and FMAs and all other religious members of the Salesian Family) to be concerned with the spiritual animation of the community and its members above all other tasks. The motto of the Salesians "Give me souls take away the rest" is to be made visible most of all in this role of the superiors.

After arguing for spiritual guidance to be the primary task of the Salesian superior, McPake gives a definition of spiritual direction (generic use of the term) after insisting that as Christians we are all part of disciple-communities where no one stands alone. "[Spiritual direction is any form of sustained spiritual help given to an individual by way of counsel, support, encouragement, and, very important, guidance into the ways of spiritual discernment.](#)"¹⁰ He then went on to point out that "[the end of spiritual direction then is quite simply to help someone to attain the end for which he or she was created, in keeping with their unique place in the plan of God.](#)"¹¹

The [Salesian method](#) of spiritual guidance follows St. Francis de Sales and Don Bosco who stressed encouraging the practice of [virtue](#) rather than focusing on overcoming temptation. It focuses more on the [attractiveness of the good](#) than the fear of evil. It is said that St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello told Fr John Costamagna who had a fondness for fire and brimstone sermons to speak more of the love of God than the fear of hell because that is what moves her more.¹²

McPake spoke of [three necessary qualities](#) needed for a good director [after the basic humility](#) to know that the ultimate shaper is not the guide but the Lord Jesus.¹³ A) Holiness. All Salesians are called to be holy, and the superior is called to continue that task of getting closer to the Lord. B) Prudence or discretion. This capacity for right judgement is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The superior should seek it in prayer. C) Knowledge. This knowledge should proceed first from the Word of God enlightened by the magisterium and then from the Salesian sources. Wider knowledge also is needed to have a sense of perspective. All Salesians are expected to cultivate this type of knowledge based on the Word of God and the Salesian Charism read in the context of the times, but the superiors have the [duty of state](#) to do so. Salesians understand sanctification to be bound up with the performance of one's duty of state.

Regulations 175 indicates some of the [main avenues](#) for the Salesian superior to give spiritual guidance to the members of the community and to the community as a group: [conferences, good nights, friendly talk, recollections and informal meetings where the Salesian 'bonta' is at work.](#)

⁹ Martin McPake, 176.

¹⁰ Martin McPake, 178.

¹¹ Martin McPake, 180.

¹² Martin McPake, 180.

¹³ Martin McPake, 181-182.

Conclusion

We can clearly recognise from the study of our Constitutions and Regulations and the interpretations of Fr Martin McPake that **the first task of the Salesian superior is the spiritual animation** of the members and the community.

Since our Salesian understanding of sanctification is faithfulness to our duties, the duty of the superior calls for using the recommended avenues for spiritual guidance in our communities, while leaving the freedom of the individuals to choose their “spiritual directors”. That all of us are called to have our spiritual directors of choice does not in any way dispense the superior of his duty to be the “Spiritual Guide” whose first task is to “animate the community so that it may live faithful to the Constitutions and grow in unity” and to help each confrere to “realize his own personal vocation” (Constitutions 55). The Rector/superior of the local community is “first in order of responsibility for its religious life” (Constitutions 176). Regulations 175 requires that the Rectors/superiors exercise this role of “spiritual guide” on a regular basis. In the state of being a Rector/superior, the practice of the motto “Give me souls take away the rest” applies most of all in giving priority to this task of spiritual guidance.

Ongoing formation of all confreres calls for “openness to community spiritual direction” (cf. Regulations 99).

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(Ideas contained herein have been shared and discussed in animation meetings of the Rectors and Leaders in almost all provinces of South Asia by the Regional in 2025-2026, following the formulation of the six-year plan of the Region. Updated on 24 May 2026).