

## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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"For you I study..." (C 14)

Satisfactory preparation of the confreres and the quality of our educative work.

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Rome, 15 September 1997  
Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows

My dear Confreres,

Last August we experienced together the XII World Youth Day which took place at Paris with an impressive participation of young people. We were struck by the thirst for the Gospel shown by these youngsters, the attention they gave to the Holy Father and to all those who in communicating the Word of God offered them a sense and orientation for their life. Their desire to hear testimonies of faith and their enthusiasm with regard to the person of Jesus, realistically presented as the "Way, truth, and life", certainly made us think.

This image is contrasted in my mind's eye with the one I have brought back from Cuba, where I recently visited our confreres. I have seen a Church "without the possibilities now commonly available for communicating with the people, poor in the number of priests but rich in experiences of love, service, patience, humility and perseverance"<sup>1</sup>. In it our confreres and Sisters are working as they look forward peacefully to coming developments which seem rich in possible opportunities.

The two images have prompted me to present to you at some length a theme on which the General Council has already reflected and included in the six-year program: that of our preparation for the tasks opening up before us everywhere in the new evangelization of the young.

1. A theme which crops up repeatedly.

Every time *we consider ourselves with respect to our mission*, we are reaffirmed in our conviction about its validity, and at the same time comes the awareness that we must make ourselves more competent to fulfil it in all its possibilities. The frontiers become ever more numerous, requests multiply, urgent needs become ever more pressing; we would like to be better prepared, to be able to offer them in their widely different circumstances the guidance and support they need.

This has been my *experience* too in the first year and a half of my service as Rector Major. Contact with Provincials in different parts of the world has enabled me to see at first hand the vast extent of the youth area, the accumulation of expectations, the prompt response young people give to our efforts, the relevance of our charism for society and the Church.

I have admired the tireless work of communities, often with less than adequate numbers of personnel, in frontier contexts of an advanced social, educative and pastoral nature, intent on expressing the mission in courageous projects and the animation of numerous collaborators.

The harvest is great! More than by the quantitative disproportion between the work and the workers, we are struck by the *challenges* presented by the present situation: the putting forward of a sense of life, education of conscience, accompanying the young on a pilgrimage of faith, building up a broader solidarity, the efficacious embracing of poverty, effective expression of the Gospel, seeing to it that the Word of God is applied to the questions and possibilities of daily life.

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<sup>1</sup> Homily of Card. Jaime Ortega Alamino of Havana, Feast of SS. Peter and Paul (from Ms).

We become aware that to have greater influence it is not sufficient to be more numerous or have more powerful means at our disposal; what is necessary above all is that we be disciples of Christ to a greater extent, entering more deeply into the Gospel, qualifying community life, centering our projects and interventions on a more pastoral aspect. It is, if we may use a word which may seem rather 'secular' a problem of quality; in gospel language it means the genuine nature and transforming force of leaven.

Quality emerges as a necessary requirement in every sector of life, culture and activity. It is spoken of in terms of an 'excellence' to be sought, a 'competence' to be fostered, an overall 'quality' to be attained.

Good will and generous availability are indispensable but insufficient unless they are accompanied by the knowledge and techniques proper to a field of activity, the understanding of cultural phenomena which are a mark of present-day life and, for us, the ability to confront such phenomena with an ever deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ.

The problem is not only for Salesians. It is the common situation of all who want to live, without going astray, through the present cultural transformation, in which to be educators, pastors or simple Christians implies discernment and choice.

Some expressions which have long become common, such as pluralism, an ethically neutral society, secularization, the right to be different, freedom of thought and expression, multimedia culture, subjectivism, remind us of this with the rapid bombardment of advertising.

It is the same challenge which underlies the new evangelization: the ability to live consciously the Christian faith, to bear witness to it with joy, and also to speak up in the modern areopagi and proclaim Jesus Christ in all his richness.

This was felt almost as a constant prodding in our GC24. It was clear from an analysis of the situation of the Congregation, that living the salesian project of consecrated life at the present day with a serene maturity and facing up adequately to the tasks of our mission, require of every confrere a greater spiritual strength<sup>2</sup>, a *qualitative leap* with regard to general preparation, specifically that of a pastor and educator<sup>3</sup>, and new cultural, professional and pastoral skills<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. GC24, 239

<sup>3</sup> cf. GC24, 242

<sup>4</sup> cf. GC24, 242-243; VC 98

I made this trend of the Chapter my own, and in my final address I emphasized the priority of a formation particularly attentive to the cultural dimension as an essential part of educative ability and of the spirituality of the pastor.

In our six-year program we have made this a central point on which all sectors must converge. It seemed important to us to keep alive in every confrere an intention and tendency towards the growth of his own vocation, to arouse the communities to the creation of an environment which fosters the maturing of individuals, and to ask Provincials to invest in the preparation of personnel and on the quality of educative and pastoral projects.

I now return to what was recommended with regard to complete ongoing formation; but I want to focus in particular on the need to recover the love for cultural commitment and the consequent capacity for study.

It is clear that for us, as was affirmed by the GC23, spiritual renewal, pastoral tendency, cultural preparation and educative competence cannot be separated one from another, if the Salesian is to be inserted in the youth context with the ability to dialogue and make effective suggestions<sup>5</sup>. Together they depict the physiognomy of our holiness and the way we approach it. This means that the urgency of a lawful and obligatory qualification must not be confused with an exaggerated search for efficiency<sup>6</sup>. Our hope lies always in the grace which the Father pours abundantly into hearts, in the Cross which is the sign of life and salvation, and in the Word which enlightens us. But as individuals and as a Congregation, a part of the generous response to our vocation is not to leave the talents we have received lying idle.

## **2. "For you I study": an indispensable element of the mission to the young.**

A renewed love for cultural commitment and dedication to study are recommended by the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* to all religious, as an integral part of the experience of life in the Spirit and the condition for apostolic efficacy. It is a question of applying the whole of one's being to welcoming God's mystery, and of reading intelligently and objectively in the light of faith its traces in nature and its presence in human history.

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<sup>5</sup> cf. GC23, 225

<sup>6</sup> cf. VC 38

The text has been frequently quoted, but it will do no harm to hear it again: “In addition to the service of others, within the consecrated life itself there is need for a *renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life*, for dedication to study as a means of integral formation and as a path of asceticism which is extraordinarily timely, in the face of present-day cultural diversity. A lessened commitment to study can have grave consequences for the apostolate, by giving rise to a sense of marginalization and inferiority, or encouraging superficiality and rash initiatives”<sup>7</sup>

The recommendation does no more than endorse a tradition of Institutes of consecrated life, whose communities are always constituted as designs of spiritual life, full of meaning from a human point of view, and also as places of education and culture in line with the particular charisms. The experience of God has always been thought of also as a wisdom which sheds light on individuals and on humanity as a whole, not only by moral example, but also with regard to the world, thought and word, even though in a simple fashion.

Some may think that this is a theme difficult to associate with the tireless activity and ready initiative characteristic of our spirit; a theme somewhat new as regards a certain image of the Salesian and of our communities as always available, and constantly at grips with new projects.. It is in fact a trait characteristic of the figure of Don Bosco who, moved by *Da mihi animas*, offered his life in the service of the young, of the Church and of society; but we also see him attentive to the youth situation and the social and ecclesial circumstances of his time, open to ever broader horizons, and able to grasp the implications of phenomena which have an influence on individual and collective life (the press, emigration, new laws, the spreading of culture, the Italian unification and Risorgimento, etc.).

In the chapter of the Constitutions dealing with the salesian spirit there is an article which characterizes our kind of pastoral charity. “Our vocation – it says - is graced by a special gift of God: predilection for the young. (...) For their welfare we give generously of our time, talents and health”<sup>8</sup>. And the assertion is immediately illustrated by Don Bosco’s expression: “*For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life*”<sup>9</sup>

The growing emphasis of words and actions emphasizes the totality of the life put at the disposition of the young. But it is evident that it is not by mere chance that ‘study’ has found a place in the list of expressions. A series of elements in the biography of our Father leads us to give it a specific

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<sup>7</sup> cf. VC 98

<sup>8</sup> C 14

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

value: the importance that love of study had in the crowning formation of the three years at the Ecclesiastical Institute after priestly ordination for an updated knowledge of moral theology and for the direction of souls; the space given to study in his educative program, in the synthetic formulations of which it is always mentioned (“health, study, piety”); his idea of the educator and the priest which always combine loving kindness with the ability to enlighten, teach and guide; the frequent references to wisdom in his maxims and also the enlightening role attributed to faith and reason.

Expressed in a context of cordiality and affection for his boys, in an “exchange of gifts”, the expression recalls some of his preferences and attitudes which converge without detriment on the central experience of his life: to be completely for the young. Study, not to be reduced to just ‘studies’, is therefore for Don Bosco an indispensable part of our donation to the young, of our fatherly concern to understand them and communicate to them faith, knowledge and the experience of life.

A few facts reveal the real content this expression had in his life. Recall his ability to look at reality, that of the young in the first place, but also the vicissitudes of the Church and the situation of the Country, without getting lost or becoming conditioned, careful to evaluate the whole picture from the educative and pastoral standpoint proper to his own vocation. Recall his readiness for finding adequate responses to problems; providing easily understood messages, using every means at his disposal; committing himself to the diffusion of sacred history, of the history of Italy, of Christian truth and a form of popular literature, all of which involved him in a great deal of personal work in compiling and editing.

“For you I study” recalls the patient effort of elaborating an “original educative system” from pre-existing material, his own intuitions, the contributions of contemporaries and original syntheses. It reminds us also of the launching of a work-project in line with the times. He followed up its functioning and drew up intelligent and practical norms and guidelines with attention to the style in which he wanted them to be expressed and the attainment of his objectives. He was able to share his ideas, to make comparisons, to dialogue with people of widely differing experiences and competence, with leaders in the fields of thought, politics and social life.

Also the well thought out formulation of an experience of life in the Spirit, with spiritual processes for young people and adults, presented in words and writing, implied the mental application expressed in the phrase “*for you I study*”. It meant learning from life, reflecting on educative experience, an openness to verification, without being satisfied with what had been done before or falling into repetition. It was the desire and patient

acquisition of “wisdom” (*“Sapientiam dedit illi...”*), indicated in his first dream as a characteristic of his life, which he learned at the school of the Good Shepherd and Mary the Teacher, in availability to the Spirit, in harmony with the Church; and it was expressed in the discernment of events, in the worth in God’s eyes of spiritual experiences, in the understanding of situations and in the service of the orientation and guidance of others.

*“For you I study”*: it makes us think also of a Don Bosco who could seek times and places which foster active solitude, recollection and planning. They were his times for prayer, the annual spiritual retreat, certain pauses which allowed him greater concentration, but also his desk-work which gave rise to voluminous correspondence, ideas for new projects and the production of a quantity of writings far from negligible.

Charity and competence, study and work, activity and reflection were blended together by the grace of unity for the good of the young<sup>10</sup>. It is an integration not easily brought about, frequently threatened by schizophrenia in the activity or in the mentality to which are exposed those who live a style of life and work where “there is no time” for reflection or comparison; there is the risk that the latter will become disjoined from the pastoral objectives and will end up in line with the principle that a well ordered activity of study and thought does not befit a Salesian.

And yet I would say that, just as without prayer our activity risks contributing nothing to the mission (“work and prayer”), so without “study”, without wisdom and competence, it will be difficult for our works to reach the goal prefigured for our educative and pastoral service.

“Study and piety will make you a true Salesian”, wrote Don Bosco to a confrere. This phrase was put at the beginning of the *Motu Proprio Magisterium Vitae*, with which Pope Paul VI in 1973 conferred on the Salesian Pontifical Athenaeum the title of Pontifical University<sup>11</sup>, as though to repeat at the highest possible level: “Culture and spirituality will make of you an authentic educator and pastor of the young”. Both in fact are necessary for the translation of salesian pastoral charity into a life experience and mission projects. It is not therefore a matter of something marginal which touches only certain moments of our lives or is of concern to those committed on only certain frontiers of the mission. It can take on various forms and expressions according to personal aptitudes and gifts, but will always be one of the conditions for the embodiment of that love of the young which gives significance to our whole existence.

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<sup>10</sup> cf. C 14

<sup>11</sup> cf. ASC 272, pp. 67-73

### **3. Why a new insistence at the present day.**

The question arises almost spontaneously as to the reasons for returning to this insistence after all the efforts of the preceding years, and after a generally positive evaluation of our formative processes.

The verification made by the GC24 led to the following fact: “The participation of the laity in the salesian spirit and mission constitutes for the SDB community a challenge which must be met by an adequate *formation* to the new requirements”<sup>12</sup>. As a motivation for this conclusion with reference to the present day, it is stated: “The formation aims at rendering the individuals capable of living at the present day the experience of their own life with maturity and joy, of fulfilling the educative mission with professional competence, of becoming educators and pastors, and of being solidly animators of numerous apostolic forces”<sup>13</sup>.

It is evident therefore that the new level of formation is not motivated by lack or limitation, but by the very significance of our presence as consecrated persons in a society for which we are delineating the educative and pastoral mission, and by the tasks we receive in the educative communities.

Let us comment briefly on each of these motives.

#### ***An inculturated and prophetic consecrated life***

In the responses received during the preparation of the Synod many said that “consecrated life is appreciated for its activity, but is frequently not understood in its essence; it is often praised for its commitment in the world but, as often happens through the mass media, its image is distorted to the extent of rendering it a senseless reality in the eyes of people in general”<sup>14</sup>

In places where secularization has penetrated into public and private life, what is in question is not so much its utility, especially in certain fields of service (we are appreciated as educators!), as its significance, the legibility of its testimony to God, its capacity for communicating the message which it purposes to give.

On the other hand, says the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, “the Gospel way of life is an important source for proposing a new cultural

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<sup>12</sup> GC24, 138

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Instrumentum laboris*, 15



model. A great many founders and foundresses perceiving certain needs of their time, with all the limitations which they themselves recognized, have given these needs an answer which has become an innovative cultural proposal... The manner of thinking and acting of those who follow Christ more closely gives rise, in fact, to a true and proper point of reference for culture”<sup>15</sup>.

To be aware of and bear witness to the value and sense of God’s presence in life, in a cultural context which does not go beyond temporal horizons and gives priority to functionality and immediate use, implies a deep understanding of one’s own consecrated identity and its educative value, as a renewed capacity for insertion in the environment as prophecy and leaven.

But for this very reason we must render ourselves aware, individually and as communities, through discernment, creativity and coherence as to when and where certain criteria must be applied which lead to an efficacious expression of the option we have made: to take up from the environment whatever is lawful, insert in it what is new that comes from Christ, give or restore meaning to what is still ambiguous, and oppose what is harmful to the person.

Consecrated life cannot be whittled down to meet the current mentality. It needs vigilance, of mind and spirit in the first place, and the ability to interact and react, to make proposals and to challenge.

### ***The new evangelization***

The “new evangelization” is the great task we are called upon to fulfil and the demand in which we are involved in these final years of the old millennium. At a time of epoch-making transformation in which new concepts of life are being elaborated, often without any reference to God or the Gospel, the Church wishes to renew the Gospel and culture, reawakening the sense of faith in existence and expressing the value of the Christian presence in the social reality.

Anyone wishing to commit himself to the new evangelization must make himself capable of an open intelligent and positive confrontation with the new phenomena, understand cultural tendencies, try to make a proclamation in the heart of life, interpret new languages and codes of meaning.

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<sup>15</sup> VC 80

The perspective of the new evangelization includes a radical challenge to being a Christian, an interrogation on the identity of believers, and leads to a convinced dialogue with others in an atmosphere of freedom. On the other hand, our faith itself and the reasons for our hope need to be re-understood and lived with transparency and solidity. *Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and always* is a confession of faith, not just a slogan; it has to do with the salvation of each individual that he may have life in abundance, and with the salvation of the world which is being built so that its projects may not lead it to self-destruction.

The effort to draw near to and understand such a world copies the way of the incarnation and takes its inspiration from the same love which guided the actions of Christ.

### ***The effectiveness of the educative mission***

We feel the pressing need for better formative levels in the preferred area of our mission: *education*. We must in fact face up to the complexity and multiplicity of the situations in which young people are immersed and to the problems posed by the environment to human growth and to the faith; and at the same time we must be able to draw fruit from their innumerable possibilities.

For this reason our situation as educators calls for a *reflective approach to culture* which allows for the updating of contents and methods to meet the demands of the meaning of life for the young<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, adequate and recognized qualifications are demanded at the present day also by the diversification and complexity of educative interventions, which call for more complete knowledge and more consolidated practice<sup>17</sup>. Weak professional quality means an impoverishment of the educative project; it diminishes the impact of our work and, as it gets worse, could lead to our exclusion from the field of education altogether. We notice this risk particularly in some settings in which new items appear more evident like social communication, the university world, and areas of “disadvantaged youth”.

Then too in the new contexts in which we are becoming inserted with a missionary spirit and criteria, and which could seem simpler from an educative standpoint, there is an urgently felt need to create programs adequate to the situation and inculturate our pedagogical methods,

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<sup>16</sup> cf. *Report to the GC24 on the state of the Congregation*, 263.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

overcoming the simple transposition of contents and methods designed for other areas. Inculturation and quality call for commitment by the local educative communities, provincial organisms, and Centres of study and reflection. Increased qualification seems indispensable on all fronts<sup>18</sup>.

We are well aware that sometimes we have to be realistic in meeting urgent needs, and we are always willing to do so, but it must be clearly stated that our future possibilities in the field of education are closely linked with quality<sup>19</sup>. For this reason, if it is true that “the best can be the enemy of the good” (“better a little than nothing at all”), it is also true that we cannot expose ourselves to a generalized form of pastoral and educative work which risks disqualifying ourselves from attaining the purpose of our service<sup>20</sup>.

This is equally true in the *more strictly pastoral sector*. This requires greater competence in specific matters, acquired to a sufficient degree and then followed up by revision and continual extension, and a more professional implementation of ministerial tasks. Direction of consciences, the Christian animation of communities, the presentation of the Word of God in its true meaning and application to current human situations, the shedding of light on ethical questions, presentation of the Gospel, formation to prayer and celebration, and orientation to the experience of God – all these are things which require heart and fervour, but also wisdom acquired through reflection and study.

Add to these the *new dimensions* of pastoral work which have become practically universal: ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and with non-believers, the use of social communication which becomes a pulpit at everyone’s disposal, and participation in public discussions on many questions.

Pastoral work means more than organization and immediate action; it includes also the options to be made as a Christian community and the orientations to be suggested to individuals in the complex situations of life, and hence an ability for discernment, enlightenment and exposition.

A solid cultural and professional formation therefore seems indispensable as a component of spirituality. On this point the Synod strongly insisted with regard to priestly formation, in addition to what we have already quoted about consecrated life<sup>21</sup>. We will do well to listen again to some expressions from *Pastores dabó vobis*, which give us the assurance of

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *cf. Report to GC24, 292; VC 98; CL 58*

being on the Church's wavelength. "If we expect every Christian – the Synod Fathers write – to be prepared to make a defence of the faith and to account for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pet 3,15), then all the more should candidates for the priesthood and priests have diligent care of the quality of their intellectual formation in their educational and pastoral activity. For the salvation of their brothers and sisters they should seek an ever deeper knowledge of the divine mysteries'. The present situation is heavily marked by religious indifference, by a widespread mistrust regarding the real capacity of reason to reach objective and universal truth, and by fresh problems and questions brought up by scientific and technological discoveries. It strongly demands a high level of intellectual formation, such as will enable priests to proclaim, in a context like this, the changeless Gospel of Christ and to make it credible to the legitimate demands of human reason"<sup>22</sup>

### ***The role of Salesians in educative and pastoral communities***

The GC24 has officially sanctioned the change in the way the Salesians work: from the exclusive responsibility of the religious community to that of an ecclesial community sharing responsibility, in which consecrated and secular persons, priests and laity, Catholics and members of other religions, conscious believers and others on the way, Christians and others take part. If previously such a model could be thought of as optional or alternative, today it is clear that it is our normal form of presence and action. We must learn to make it function in the terms which have been stated or perhaps dreamed.

The demands for qualifications arise therefore from the roles the Salesians are destined to play in this new model for work: those of pastoral guides, first in responsibility for the salesian identity of initiatives and works, animators of other educators ("the towing nucleus"), formators of adults who share responsibility in the work of education: in a word, Salesians who are able to carry on a mission together with competent lay people.

It seems that there will be an increase in responsibility on the part of all. And it is not difficult to foresee that the incidence of this work of animation will depend in large part on spiritual formation, on the cultural vision and professional preparation of the Salesians.

Not only will they need a better theoretical and practical knowledge of the problems of the young and of education, but they will also have to develop the ability to interact with adults, beyond simple friendship, on problems of life and faith, of communication and guidance, of the

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<sup>22</sup> PDV 51, which takes up *Propositio* 26 of the Synodal Fathers

authoritative proposal of educational objectives and processes. This will also require a more convinced living of the salesian spirit, a reflex and organic knowledge of the preventive system and a greater awareness of their own identity<sup>23</sup>.

To become and remain capable of animating a broad educative environment, of accompanying with other educators processes of maturing and growth, of guiding individuals, of interacting in the social context, imply that qualifications must be kept always up to date and that time be set aside for rethinking proposals and methods.

Application by confreres and communities to this form of authentic service of the Word is becoming more extensive, but has not yet been taken up by everyone. To some extent it implies the risk that we may get too entangled in organizing structures and arranging means, neglecting the communal rethinking and deeper consideration of the message, and of translating it into forms adequate to the understanding of those for whom we are working<sup>24</sup>. In some cases an evident division arises between equipment and cultural projection, between instruments and evangelizing effects, between buildings and educational objectives; it seems that priority is not given to concern for the cultural and profession preparation of religious and lay personnel<sup>25</sup> and the overall goal becomes lost under the weight of the means to achieve it. And it may be that lack of competence in the work of animation and guidance is the cause of the breakdown.

### ***The increased requirement for qualified personnel***

While the so-called traditional fields of work (oratories, schools, parishes, etc.) need the ability to think and reflect, in addition to intelligent enterprise, because of the cultural change and complexity of the questions which each member and community has to face, we see that the growth of certain kinds of work increases precisely the demand for properly prepared personnel. When we compare the requests with those available we find the latter are always too few, even in simple numbers and leaving aside considerations of age, health and commitments which cannot be abandoned.

We think of the centres for theological studies in which every undue cutback is going to have its repercussions in the future, or post-novitiate study centres with identical demands. And we may add to these the formation communities, which always have need of experts in vocational processes and in salesian formation and spirituality.

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<sup>23</sup> cf. *Report to GC24*, 293

<sup>24</sup> cf. *Report to GC24*, 266

<sup>25</sup> cf. *Report to GC24*, 259, 261, 269

And I complete the list with the rapid addition of the already numerous institutions of university level, the publishing centres where it is not enough to administer structures if you do not have people capable of developing cultural initiatives, the various Institutes created in recent years as a response to requests and needs of the Congregation, the competent contributions we are asked for on various occasions because of the experience we have and our recognized ability for being in touch with the ordinary people.

#### 4. Priority for the qualification of Confreres

In the Report on the State of the Congregation I ended the part dedicated to the “Preparation of the confreres” with the following statement: “The state of our resources, the implications of our commitments and the general growth in the world ask everywhere of our confreres and communities further progress in cultural preparation and spiritual strength. The perspective therefore is to consolidate..., dedicating a special period to the requalification of our personnel, and in particular those in directive positions, sending the greatest possible number of confreres for specialist training, and improving initial formation on the basis of the experience we have already gained”<sup>26</sup>

It was an evaluation I thought to be imperative, open to interpretations not always well understood, but matured in prayer and suffering. It seemed, indeed, like a guideline with fundamental consequences in the six years ahead.

Today I am convinced that we must wager on this priority investment and translate it into some concrete commitments, accepting the consequent limitations which it seems must follow. **A conscious choice is being imposed on the Congregation and Provinces**, which will make possible a qualitative leap in the way` of life of every confrere, in the mentality and practice of communities and consequently in the form in which provincial objectives are set out. It is not a question of a light retouching but of something more radical, though not completely new because in many parts the process has been already begun.

I know that it is not easy to live at a personal level and translate into an action of government the salesian balance between “for you I study” and “for you I always work”, between love and the search for pedagogical and

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<sup>26</sup> Report to GC24, 294

pastoral quality. The urgent needs of the mission, scarcity of personnel, the new opportunities we are offered, the multiplication of projects, constant elements in salesian experience and a positive result of “Da mihi animas”, urge us to be enterprising. And that must continue. But care must be taken that activity does not lead to weariness, repetition, cultural stagnation, mental distractions, and improvisation.

It is not the *first time in the history of our Congregation* that attention is being given to decisive choices for a change of practice, in the light of perceived demands and to prepare for new and flourishing developments which appear possible but only on certain conditions. They follow phases of growth which were necessarily rapid, and by forestalling exhaustion they prepare for others equally flourishing.

I would like to recall three interventions, made at different moments in history but which together emphasize the same concern we have today. All three establish a criterion and a line of action for guaranteeing the preparation of confreres and quality in fulfilling the educative mission.

In the years 1905-1906 **Don Rua** wanted to organize and ensure regularity in the studies of the young confreres. There were many frontiers of work, personnel was on the increase but still insufficient, the criteria for involvement in the works were those of the Founder, but the expansion of the Congregation and the needs of the Church made evident the need for a change. There was in fact the risk of sacrificing formation to the urgent needs of the works and cutting down the course of philosophy and theology.

“We must give greater regularity every day”, wrote Don Rua, “to our own affairs, and to this effect we place before even the most noble of other aspirations, the moral and intellectual formation of our clerics”. “In practice”, he went on, fully aware of the difficulties that would be caused by the decision he was about to announce, “we propose two items:

1. Do not propose to the Superior Chapter, for a period of at least five years, the opening of new houses or foundations, nor the enlargement of those now existing. We cannot do it, and that is all there is to it.
2. Consider carefully your houses one by one, and when you have seen which ones you can suppress for the better arrangement of the rest of the Province, put the proposal to the Superior Chapter. It is not their number we must have at heart, but their proper and regular functioning”<sup>27</sup>.

And in a letter of 1906 he returned decisively to the same points.

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<sup>27</sup> *Circular Letters of Don Rua to the Salesians*, pp.400-402: letter of 22.11.1905 on “The intellectual and moral formation of clerics”

In 1928 there was an intervention of **Don Rinaldi**. Vocations were increasing in a consoling manner (there were about 1,000 novices); salesian works, and especially the missions, were developing at an impressive rate and new requests were being constantly received; Provincials did not have the personnel for so many works and not infrequently studies were sacrificed, and with them the formation of the young confreres.

Faced by such a situation, and aware that the mission could not be fulfilled without the necessary preparation, Don Rinaldi wrote in the Acts of the Superior Chapter of September 1928: "I have therefore decided, with the full approval of the Superior Chapter, that during the four years from 1929 to 1932 no new foundations will be accepted, neither of houses or of missions. This pause, well understood by Provincials and Rectors, will be a benefit for the Provinces; it will bring tranquility to the houses and relief to all the confreres; rather than a harmful break, it will mark a true progress for our Society, because it will serve for a better cultivation of vocations and prepare the Congregation for a more solid development in the future"<sup>28</sup>.

And I complete this reference to our history by recalling some expressions written by **Fr Ricceri** in 1966, in the official presentation of the documents of the GC19. The context is not difficult to understand. Vatican II had recently finished, and we were on the verge of discovering new horizons and pastoral needs, made decisive by the encouraging vision of the Church, its mission and its relationship with the world. "Connected with this need for formation", wrote Fr Ricceri, "there is the other not less important one of qualification of the individual confrere for the various tasks to which obedience calls him. Today society will not accept into its structures utility men, men without cultural, technical or professional training... People, and the Church first of all, consider us authentic specialists in pedagogy and the apostolate. We must, to the limit of our capacity, live up to this reputation... A bit of practice is no longer sufficient... From now on every manifestation of our activity calls for qualified personnel... It is not a question of collecting degrees or specializing for its own sake, and much less of encouraging selfish or ambitious desires to study for one's own satisfaction but with sterile application to the apostolate; what is required is simply an adequate preparation to work fruitfully in one of the innumerable fields of action to which Providence has called us. It can be seen at once what and how many consequences for superiors and confreres follow from these changes"<sup>29</sup>. And some months later he wrote in the Acts of the Council: "If we want to respond to the inescapable demands of our mission, more must be done to give to all

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<sup>28</sup> ACS, September 1928, p.693

<sup>29</sup> ASC 244, Jan.1966, pp.4-5



the activities of Salesians that qualification which is not a luxury but an ever more evident necessity”<sup>30</sup>.

The period immediately preceding our own on the other hand, under the guidance of **Fr Egidio Viganò**, emphasized the same emergency and took efficacious steps to resolve it, with the reorganization of the formative processes reformulated in the Ratio, with the updating of study programs in line with the evolution in nearly all the branches of theology and knowledge, with the beginning and extending of ongoing formation and the foundation of new Institutes corresponding to qualifications for the present day (pastoral work, social communication).

## **5. The principal investment at the present day.**

The moments of history to which I have referred are different from our own and differ among themselves. I have not recalled them to put the brake on missionary thrust or on apostolic creativity, and still less for the purpose of re-imposing materially the measures indicated at those periods. Our own times call more for renewal and reorganization of life than for pauses and stoppages.

But the various interventions highlight *the need to make definite options, to establish priorities*, looking to the future as we face the permanent tensions between what is urgent and the demands of the mission, between generosity and quality of service. Moreover they show us that the growth of the Congregation is something continuous in which at certain times expansion prevails, while at other times we must look to consistency and consolidation which may cause suffering but can also provoke enthusiasm. Finally they teach us that we must not only administer well the resources we have inherited, but that we must also be careful to produce them, multiply them and develop them for the future.

The situations in the Congregation vary greatly even from the perspective we are now considering. Some areas are expanding and others reshaping, in some the average age of the of confreres is below 40 years and in others it is over 60; in some zones pastoral work is complex and in others more simple; there are educative contexts very much institutionalized and dictated from outside, and others in which we can work with greater freedom for initiatives; there are provinces with formation communities and qualified teams of confreres, and others taking only the first steps in some of

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<sup>30</sup> ASC 246, Sept.1966, p.13

these sectors. For all of them the maximum exploitation of human resources is an obligation!

The salesian mission, as we have already noted, is everywhere entering new geographical and cultural frontiers, and this movement will continue in the immediate future. Indeed the worldwide dimension, urgent pastoral needs, the possibility of an influential presence on a broad scale will still determine our way of working. A wise overall vision enables provision to be made for local requirements, while at the same time giving consideration to the contribution to be given to initiatives which extend beyond provincial horizons and express the salesian mission at regional, national and international level.

For all these reasons the qualification of people, the consolidation of centres and teams, the fostering of a certain cultural sensitivity in the Province, cannot be the result of brief periods, restricted by the deadline of the end of a six-year period or by limited calculations. *Continued governmental action and long-term vision* are indispensable. A province that launches a plan for the qualification of its personnel knows already that it will reap the benefits in due time. But it would be sad to lose the “capital” of qualifications thus acquired with sacrifice through failing to exploit the investment previously made or to let it lapse.

While the program for the present six-year period was being drawn up, the General Council wondered how to set up an action at Congregational level so that it would be a real priority investment in formation; how to shape a process for recovering the value of our religious consecration in the educative mission and make us bearers of a lived and communicated spirituality; how to enable ourselves to offer an educative proposal reflecting the style and content of the preventive system for present-day culture; how to give emphasis to the process of education to the faith and foster a kind of communication which renders efficacious what we proclaim in the climate of the new evangelization.

The **fundamental criterion** which emerged was to **strengthen the “quality” of the Salesian, of the community and of the mission**. It is a task which will have to be taken up in convergent form by the different levels of government. On it depend to a great extent the relationships between SDBs and lay people, the effectiveness of religious experience, the incidence of the SDB community as an animating nucleus. We have condensed this commitment into the expression “*governare formando*”, governing by formation. We are aware that governance includes other specific aspects which cannot be neglected, but we consider that the effort to form and qualify the confreres, and in particular those responsible for the

various sectors of activity, is *the best formula for orientation and animation* because it multiplies results and creates unity.

## 6. Some options for investing in quality.

In my closing address to the GC24 I specified what preferential investment in formation meant in practical terms. “Investing means laying down and maintaining priorities, ensuring conditions, working according to a program which gives pride of place to persons, communities and mission. Investing in time, personnel, initiatives and financial resources for formation is a task which is of importance to all of us”<sup>31</sup>.

I now propose some commitments which should be given preference, and I refer successively to the area of **persons** and to that of **structures** (works), starting from some facts which are already common knowledge and accepted.

The first is that the main resource of the Congregation is the confreres, and hence their preparation is an indispensable condition for the effectiveness of the mission. “In our life some aspects are more exposed to wear and tear or to sclerosis and need particular attention. Culture evolves rapidly, knowledge becomes more extensive, new information is continually fed in, while the mentality on the values and concepts of life presents ever new questions. The cultural dimension is one that calls for patient and unceasing effort”<sup>32</sup>.

A second fact: exceptional initiatives will serve little purpose unless at the same time we attend to the quality of daily life and the continuity of our efforts. Opportunities offered to individuals would have little effect if we did not foster the style of community life and the way we carry out apostolic work.

Consequently we must look at both individuals and structures; the invitation to become responsible for quality is addressed simultaneously to every confrere, to every community and to every Province.

## 7. Persons.

*A word to individual confreres: "Attende tibi"*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> GC24, 248

<sup>32</sup> GC24, 242

<sup>33</sup> cf. 1 Tim 4,16

The *mystique of work* appears as one of our characteristics: everywhere to some extent our availability and enterprise are admired. We must thank the Lord for this capacity of total dedication that the Spirit formed in Don Bosco and which we see every day in so many confreres. It is not an impediment to growth but is in fact one of the fruitful traits of our spirituality. But it needs those adaptations which today apply to work, in which manual dexterity and physical force are only a minor aspect. Sometimes the lifestyle we adopt and our rhythm of activity can wear down our spiritual experience, confuse our image in the minds of the young and adults, and undermine our capacity for influencing because of dispersion and multiplicity of work.

In our Founder we admire his constant balance between dedication and depth, between the multiplicity of initiatives and unity of life. Don Bosco was physically drained but he cultivated that wise vision, that understanding of things in the light of the Spirit, that union with God, which gave an original profile – we call it *salesian holiness* – to his personal experience.

As I think of the diversity of the situations and conditions of life of each one and recalling some statements of *Vita Consecrata* with regard to the significance and value of our vocation, I venture to put to each one some questions for reflection: *Do we give ourselves time to consider at ever greater depth our life in the Spirit? Do we nourish the taste for a broader knowledge of what concerns the Christian mystery and the questions which refer to man? With regard to cultural enrichment, in the sense given to it in these pages, what is our program with regard to areas, objectives and time? How do we express in ourselves the ‘for you I study’ of Don Bosco?*

There can be the risk of forming a certain habit according to which work and reflection seem to be in competition, especially when a ruthless rhythm prods us in the direction of what is urgent and seems to leave no time for anything else. The conviction can even gain ground that personal culture, such as reflection on reality in the light of faith, can have little to do with charitable work for the benefit of poor youngsters.

When the GC23 said that interior apostolic conviction is a blend of pastoral charity with pedagogical ability, it was an invitation to us to combine creativity with competence, action with reflection, since both are necessary to the salesian life.

Our Rule of Life strings together in rapid succession a series of suggestions from which we have to arrive at a single objective. It speaks of the Salesian as one who “responds to the ever new demands arising from

the situation of the young and the poor”<sup>34</sup>; he seeks opportunities for “learning to carry out his work with greater competence”<sup>35</sup>; he cultivates “the ability to learn from life’s experiences” especially in relationship to the young and popular environments and exploits the formative efficacy of various situations and possibilities<sup>36</sup>. “Through personal and community initiatives” he nurtures his salesian spiritual life, provides for his own theological updating and maintains his professional competence and pastoral creativity<sup>37</sup>. Each confrere, say the Regulations, “should develop his capacity for communication and dialogue; he should form in himself an open and discerning mentality and a spirit of initiative, and in this way conveniently renew his own plan of life. Each one should cultivate the habit of reading and the study of those branches of knowledge proper to his mission”<sup>38</sup>. He should “study with his superiors his field of further qualification..., preserve the availability which is characteristic of our spirit, and be ready for periodic requalification”<sup>39</sup>. And all this adds up to telling us that there is a gift we have to cultivate with patience so as to keep it full and fresh. And in it the ascetical program: *work and temperance* functions always, which means giving limited attention to what is less important and even useless and distracting, and giving oneself with enthusiasm to what is essential.

In recent years *initiatives* have multiplied for qualification, re-qualification and updating. In several Provinces there are well planned and structured examples. It is up to each one to draw from them the maximum profit.

But a *daily personal commitment* is also needed. The common mentality, newspapers, examples from advertising could well constitute a school which communicates a culture foreign to us, one which is frequently contrary to our own “culture of reference”. Unless we frequent an alternative school (meditation, revision of life, reading, information, study, sharing, discernment, etc.), we shall be insensibly oriented towards a vision of life and a plan of existence which no longer tallies with the one we have professed. We must always ask ourselves by what channels our thoughts and sensitivity are fed; how we construct and illustrate in ourselves the relationship between faith and culture, between pastoral sense and emerging questions.

We must give ourselves time for *cultivating our plan of life*, for savouring the experience of being consecrated persons, for verifying our

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<sup>34</sup> C 118

<sup>35</sup> C 119

<sup>36</sup> cf. *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> cf. C 118

<sup>38</sup> R 99

<sup>39</sup> R 100

process of growth, for preventing wear and tear and for controlling anxiety, for bearing witness to and sharing the deep source of all our activity.

We must give ourselves time also for *enabling ourselves to carry out our work with greater competence*, be it work of educators, animators or pastors. Accompanying individuals and giving direction to communities is a demanding task which is far from easy. There are certain environments which in the present cultural and religious context evince particular difficulties and importance, as for example: the ethical and moral field, problems of life, spiritual and sacramental pedagogy, themes connected with the relationship between faith and culture, the social dimension and solidarity.

This need to find time for ourselves will constitute a *message for the laity* and a stimulus for young people who feel themselves called to the salesian life. Today to the image of the religious as a worker and person of enterprise, socially useful, must be added the prophetic aspect of one who makes a personal experience the source of meaning, guided by the wisdom of the Gospel.

### ***An assignment for communities: foster the quality of life and work***

“Cultural and pastoral quality” finds a stimulus, a setting and almost a school in the *style of life of the community*. Experience shows that after some time in a community of a certain type we have grown in the vision of the youth field and of youth problems, in the relationship with the laity, in the ability for sharing, and in discernment; while in other communities we are more tempted to waste time, we seem to live in a perpetual hurry, from one emergency to another; we become accustomed to an excessively individual way of life, we give way to routine and become mentally isolated.

The pattern of life and work of the local community is therefore a determining factor, as also that of the provincial community since we live today against a background of ample communication<sup>40</sup>. In both cases the level of interest, the quality of information, communication of experiences, type of relationship with the young, the laity and the local context, are not a matter of indifference.

Our communities have undergone changes in their composition and in their life. Modifications have been introduced in the relationship with educative work and the tasks in it assigned to the confreres, linkage with the external social and ecclesial environment, and the working model for the accomplishment of our mission. On the other hand, the insistence of recent years has led to positive results in respect of the assumption of new

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<sup>40</sup> cf. GC24, 242

demands; there has been a big increase in moments of exchange of views and processes which foster reflection, sharing, prayer and working as a team.

It seems clear today that if we want to avoid stress, activism and superficiality, we must necessarily impose *a daily and weekly rhythm*, which fosters recovery of strengths and a relaunching of the quality of life, also from a cultural standpoint, by establishing conditions for offering the confreres an updated content for reflection<sup>41</sup>. The quality of life and work find support and nourishment in the *annual program* which can provide particular opportunities for the qualification of individuals and communities.

This is the line of thought which led to the establishment of the day of the community, a valid means for communal growth, the meetings of Councils and teams, the participation of the community in formative experiences with lay collaborators and other groups of persons (ecclesial and educative environments and those of the religious life), the elaboration and verification of the PEPS to be assessed from the formative standpoint.

The Rector, opportunely prepared and supported by his Council and community, is called upon to cultivate an environment and a form of internal and external relationships which “qualify” the confreres. His is the duty in the first place to circulate and exploit some particular incentives, such as the guidelines of the Bishops and especially of the Pope, the documents of General Chapters and letters of the Rector Major; and he can profit by the intelligent use of other simpler occasions like “good nights”, spiritual reading, and salesian and ecclesial information.

An indispensable location for every local community is the *library* and the corresponding reading room. Their care and the material available in them are indicative: they have a real utility and, as in the case of the chapel, also a symbolic value in the overall physiognomy of the house.

The use made of it by the community has changed. Personal sources of information have multiplied (Books, reviews, CD, internet). But it has a function which is still relevant and necessary for providing, not least for lay collaborators and externs, our specific heritage of history, pedagogy and spirituality, as also the fundamental thought of the Church and the classics of Christian reflection. It should never be lacking, in due proportion, even in missionary residences, in which one should be able to count on sufficient support for pastoral updating and the collecting together of what serves for a good knowledge of local culture.

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<sup>41</sup> cf. GC24, 242, 237

The initiative should also be encouraged of having in the Province one or more libraries which are as complete as possible with respect to the charism and salesian work at Provincil and local level, and writings which can provide an idea of the social and political context in which the works of the Province began and have developed<sup>42</sup>.

***An indication for Provinces: make a plan for the qualification of confreres***

In this period the qualification of personnel must constitute a priority governmental commitment: we seek to govern by forming those who animate and direct, we orientate by giving a better preparation to those working in the different sectors.

An indication in this regard is provided by all organizations. Qualification of top management, of those responsible at intermediate level, and of the workers at shop-floor level has always been given attention by directors. In our case, an *action at provincial level which is programmed and constant* must therefore be added to the personal and communal responsibility already spoken of.

In this connection we have already taken certain steps. I quote, for example, the preparation and follow-up of Rectors. Some Provinces have set up meetings of provincial teams for formative purposes with a program laid down at the beginning of each year by the Provincial Council; they organize a week of spiritual and pastoral reflection, open to all confreres and with a program covering several years. Others have prepared a plan of qualification for directive personnel, and have committed themselves despite difficulties of finance and personnel to offer to some confreres each year the possibility of specialization. There are also those who make the sacrifice of providing qualified personnel for study centres, and still others who have recognized the fact that they cannot do everything on their own and so have established agreements for inter-provincial collaboration by contributing qualified confreres.

This is just a sample, but it serves to show that the urgent need has been accepted and in part is being met. The panorama of the Congregation is very rich and varied, and consequently there are also some dark spots. It is therefore proper to propose for all a more decisive and organic action at provincial level.

To translate such action into practice implies, among other things:

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<sup>42</sup> I do not delay on other cultural benefits, on which recent instructions have been issued by the Pontifical Commission for the cultural goods of the Church.



- Making a *complete list of the qualifications, even partial ones*, of all the confreres for their better evaluation. It often happens that competence acquired in years of study is not exploited in continued or communal form; the same must be done at the level of the Congregation, recalling that the SGC asked us to draw up a program for the exchange of personnel between study centres<sup>43</sup>.
- *Identifying the areas in which cultural and professional competence seem more urgently needed* according to the particular contexts, the state of personnel, and the pastoral and educative situation of the Congregation in present and future perspectives.
- *Qualifying the greatest possible number of confreres* for the various fields and dimensions of the salesian mission, especially for those considered more significant at the present day<sup>44</sup>. This is recommended to all Provinces but particularly to those which have a consistent number of vocations. They should qualify confreres not only in view of immediate needs and particular projects of the Province, but also in line with the criterion of developing to the maximum the available human resources so as to make them available for the needs and commitments of the entire Congregation.

To the examples already given of initiatives of an interprovincial kind, others can be added in virtue of the worldwide and transversal nature of activity in every field. Every day we are driven to looking for confreres prepared for formation communities in emerging areas, for projects of great importance that the Church wants to entrust to us in zones of first evangelization, for our University, for a competent service of reflection and planning at the Generalate. It would be a serious matter to fail to develop evident talents merely because it could not be foreseen that there would be scope for their application in their own restricted setting.

- *Assigning qualified confreres to specific tasks* within the project of the Province and the Congregation. The best preparation of which we are speaking tends to be aimed at improving our work and is directed to that end. It sometimes happens that confreres qualified in a particular field find no outlet for their talents except by opening a new and specific field of work or becoming inserted in projects outside the Congregation.
- Insisting that *qualified confreres stay in the sector of their particular competence*. Especially in study centres there must be *consistence and continuity in the teaching staff and teams*, so as to create a tradition of formative reflection and pedagogy.

All this presupposes the elaboration and realization of a provincial plan for the qualification of personnel, verified year by year, and a wise administration of resources. The GC23 asked for this when it stated: "Every

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<sup>43</sup> cf. SGC, 704

<sup>44</sup> cf. GC24, 243

province will draw up an organic plan for the ongoing formation of the confreres with a view to their spiritual renewal, their pastoral qualification, and their educational and professional ability”<sup>45</sup>. This too is what the program for the present six-year period wanted to make concrete by deciding to: “Ask the provinces for a program for the qualification of personnel, verifying it periodically and fostering its realization”<sup>46</sup>.

Dear Provincials, on you lies the responsibility and the hope expressed in this guideline. I know the difficulties many of you are grappling with each year as you try to fill the posts of work and, with you, I feel the reduced number of new vocations. We must, however, not only solve the crises but sow for the future. The request for a program of qualification will prompt a moment of fraternal communication to become aware of the very many resources we have still to exploit, and to help us to develop all the gifts the Lord sends to our beloved Congregation. Choose with wise care the personnel to be prepared and be magnanimous in ensuring for the Province the conditions for a future which will certainly offer other models of work for which we want to be prepared.

In the plan careful thought should also be given to the task of ensuring *the memory of salesian history*, as the communication of a considered experience expressing in concrete terms our identity as lived in different contexts and cultures, in ordinary times and in exceptional situations.

The Congregation willed the foundation of the Salesian Historical Institute. It is the manifestation of a concern which must be reflected in every Province. Neglect of memories of the past means the loss of roots. Today we are facing the expansion which has taken place over 150 years and reached every continent, and its history has still to be written. We cannot lose a patrimony which is so valuable. Think of the value for us and for the confreres of tomorrow of the story of the implanting and growth of the Congregation in different contexts and in certain countries which have recently recovered their freedom. It is evidently not sufficient to have created a structure or founded an Institute if there were not the men who worked there with love and enthusiasm.

Let every Province feel the responsibility for preserving, studying and communicating its own history in line with criteria that can be suitably indicated. To do this specialized research is indispensable, but equally important is the daily attention shown in keeping the chronicle, in the custody of archives, in the preservation of significant documentation.

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<sup>45</sup> GC23, 223

<sup>46</sup> AGC 358 Supplement, p.23

### ***The starting point: the cultural dimension of initial formation***

The formation of the Salesian is not limited to studies nor measured only by intellectual ability, and so I would not want the insistence on cultural commitment to be interpreted as a selective criterion on the basis of intelligence quotients. We know that all capacities, and in particular those of the heart and self-donation, can find a place in the salesian community and mission. Unusual, however, is the importance given by our *Ratio* to the urgent need for a serious cultural preparation, taking its inspiration from the history of the Congregation and amply sustained by the most recent guidelines of the Church.

For the Salesian – and it applies not only to the young confreres – it is indispensable to have an understanding of the life which leads to a solidly motivated vocational option, and helps to an evermore mature and conscious living, without any complexes or cutting down, his own identity and its human significance. Not unreal is the risk of going astray in the face of currents of thought, or of taking refuge in models of behaviour and forms of expression that belong to the past. In such a case our vocation, isolated from life and culture, would not become leaven and challenge but would rather be relegated to the level of a subjective choice.

The *qualification* we are speaking of is *determined by “for you I study”*; i.e. it receives its original characterization from the mission<sup>47</sup>. For this reason some particular aspects acquire priority – in the first place a special knowledge of the world of youth and the capacity for an educative and pastoral insertion in it. We know from experience that this demands constant attention and reflection. It also requires the practical ability to translate the educative mission into meaningful projects in the present context marked, as it is, by complexity, freedom, pluralism and worldwide extension. An understanding as complete as possible of the pastoral field and the possession of pedagogical competence are a great help, as also is a spiritual frame of reference which, with the “grace of unity” accompanying salesian apostolic consecration helps to translate the exertions of knowledge and action into an experience of life in the Spirit. We have often said that spirituality, pastoral work and pedagogy must be united in the mind and in life: the road to sanctity, pastoral commitment, and the education of the young and of people in general.

Today the urgency of this synthesis has not grown any less. Indeed the tendency to fragmentation, to what is immediately understandable and practicable leaves us exposed to dangerous gaps and lack of completeness.

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<sup>47</sup> cf. R 82

The need for a solid basic culture is strongly emphasized in ecclesial documents and in recent years in our reflections on formation. “It is necessary”, declares the *Apostolic Exhortation* *Pastores dabo vobis*, “to oppose firmly the tendency to play down the seriousness of studies and the commitment to them. This tendency is showing itself in certain spheres of the Church, also as a consequence of the insufficient and defective basic education of students beginning the philosophical and theological curriculum. The very situation of the Church today demands increasingly that teachers be truly able to face the complexity of the times and that they be in a position to face competently, with clarity and deep reasoning, the questions about meaning which are put by the people of today, questions which can only receive full and definitive reply in the Gospel of Jesus Christ<sup>48</sup>. “On many sides”, declared the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod on Consecrated Life, “is emphasized the need for an intellectual, philosophical and cultural formation which is more solid and intense, also in view of an adequate study of theology and of preparation for the new evangelization”<sup>49</sup>.

We must therefore *re-emphasize the importance of intellectual formation and where necessary restore it to levels which correspond to the present day*. In fact, “without an updated cultural preparation which enables the vocation to be lived in a conscious manner, which leads to an adequate vision of reality, creates habits of reflection and provides opportunities for further study”<sup>50</sup>, we cannot even hope to achieve the internal objectives of the Congregation as, for instance, those laid down by the GC24.

Guided by evaluations of this kind, we have expressed in the program of the General Council for this period some guidelines tending to “qualify intellectual preparation during the initial formation phase”<sup>51</sup>. I will refer to three of them which I entrust in a special way to the young confreres and those responsible for their formation.

The first is aimed at “*making the young confreres aware of the necessity of a solid cultural and professional qualification, and of commitment to reflection and study*”<sup>52</sup>. The accent is on awareness. The initial phases of formation, in addition to leaving a synthetic and systematic doctrinal foundation, which can be enlarged and modified, should inculcate also a taste for reflection, a method of study, a plan for further formation and the conviction that a Good Shepherd for the practice of the Word must also

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<sup>48</sup> PDV 56

<sup>49</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, 90

<sup>50</sup> GC24, 247

<sup>51</sup> AGC 358, Supplement, p.23

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

be always a good “doctor”, with a sound knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom and of human life.

And then we want to “*verify and adapt* intellectual formation (set-up, programs, methods etc.) to the needs of our vocation and mission”<sup>53</sup>. This includes contents and competences which regard religious and Christian experience, problems which more greatly afflict the human conscience, and conditions and processes of growth of young people according to the differences in the way their life is presented.

Finally, we are concerned in intellectual formation to “emphasize the *salesian perspective*, the study of ‘salesianity’ and the implementation of the indications of the GC24”<sup>54</sup>. Salesian sensitivity, which is part of the charism and a gift of the Spirit, is the standpoint for original syntheses. We must not fall into genericism. Practice suggests the method for organizing thought and viceversa. On the other hand, explicit salesian material has become abundant: there is history which must not be forgotten, spirituality to be understood, our general pedagogical patrimony and the particular lines of practical pedagogy; and there is the evolution of thought to which salesian literature bears witness.

In this context I also add another indication which I consider important. The awareness of the universality of the Congregation, the composition of the Regions and groups of Provinces, and the tendencies of the world suggest a commitment for the overcoming of linguistic barriers and creating possibilities of greater communication and collaboration. It is therefore opportune to include in one’s personal cultural equipment the learning to a useful level of one or more languages in addition to one’s own.

To the young confreres, who during initial formation devote a great deal of time to study and reflection, I would like to repeat what I said some time ago to the community of our theological studentate of Turin-Crocetta: “I am convinced that a strong and complete intellectual formation is more urgently necessary today than ever before. In certain environments immediate practical ability and contact is not enough. After the first step there is the need for enlightening individuals, groups and large communities; of intervening at times in areas of life and thought which require in the one speaking a deep knowledge of the mystery of God, the vocation of man, and the present conditions in which life is lived. Thoughtlessness, if we may so call it, in intellectual formation pays no dividends in any context, and rushed solutions in pastoral work, if they are immediately successful, soon fail, even in the short term”.

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

## **8. Structures.**

The need for cultural quality involves not only individuals, but refers also to projects and works through which the mission is incarnated.. The process of elaboration of the PEPS has as its first objective the effectiveness of our interventions from the perspectives of evangelization, education and influence on collective mentality. This is not obtained merely by listing fundamental objectives. It is indispensable to make an updated and deeper analysis of the contents and methods which lead to ways for achieving the objectives, of using resources well, and of verifying results.

Given the complexity of certain works with regard to structure and management, clear ideas are necessary for the set-up and adequate capacity for its orientation in order to be faithful to the salesian ethos of the project. The risk is not just imaginary of remaining entangled in organizational aspects and thus weakening the cultural projection and pastoral finality, especially when our collaboration is accepted or requested, but without any openness to our cultural proposals.

Apostolic zeal, attention to cultural orientation and professional competence are necessary in all salesian works; but some seem to have need of them with particular urgency. I refer to those works which for various reasons can give a wider impact, that can communicate a message of particular validity or relevance, that can enter into a wider cultural or pastoral dialogue, that have the possibility of involving other social or ecclesial subjects.

I will dwell on some of these by way of paradigms, but the application extends to all the others.

### ***The Salesian Pontifical University***

The Salesian Pontifical University is preparing to celebrate 25 years of life as a University, in addition to the 30 no less important years as a Pontifical Athenaeum. The path that has been followed in these years manifests a development that can be assessed in various ways. The number of students has increased from 600 in 1973 to about 1,400 today. The number of requests for admission have never fallen off; indeed at present it has to be contained and regulated, in line with the possibilities of structures and personnel. In addition to the Salesians there are 390 religious, 150 diocesan students, and 590 lay people from every continent.

It has established a unique physiognomy among the Roman Universities for its educative and pastoral orientation and for the family style of the university community. Recently it has given life to interesting pastoral initiatives for the service of the students. In addition to the work of teaching, research, cultural development and services to the Church, it assists widely varying sectors of the salesian mission at regional and world level, of which formation is one of the first.

We must affirm once again its irreplaceable function “in the service of the Congregation and as a qualified expression of its mission in the Church, with its specific cultural and formative potential”<sup>55</sup>. It expresses at the highest level the dialogue between salesian charism and cultural applications, and in this sense fulfils a frontier mission. For this reason among the documents of the GC24 we read: “The present development of the Congregation and its worldwide expansion, the challenge of the mission and the demand for quality in its pedagogical and pastoral expression, the perspective of the new evangelization and of inculturation, the fostering of communion and attention to the different expressions of our charism render the function of the UPS of great and relevant importance in the framework of the salesian reality”<sup>56</sup>.

In respect of the nature, criteria of functioning and levels of involvement of a university institution which is pontifical, ecclesiastical and salesian, the identity of our University must be maintained as also the quality of its contribution in the cultural, ecclesial and salesian environment.

Its development must be ensured in line with an organic project, periodically verified, to which corresponds the numerical and qualitative consistency of the academic body. Participation of the laity is already provided for, but it would be a weakness to do this only because the number of Salesians prepared for work at this level is insufficient.

Attention to the effectiveness, salesian characterization, capacity for cultural and religious dialogue, unity and organic nature of the project, and the promotion of a style of academic community are all aspects which must be kept in mind in the highest centre of studies of the Congregation.

The Rector Major with his Council and the University itself are committed to the verification of the situation and to the formulation of an organic operational project which lays down the lines of development for future years.

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<sup>55</sup> GC21, 346

<sup>56</sup> *Report to the GC24*, 229

All this presupposes a decisive investment on the part of the Congregation as regards personnel. Today's geography of the Congregation requires a University which is ever more international in character. It should be considered normal for requests to be made to the Provinces for persons already qualified or to be qualified for service in the UPS, and the availability of confreres to be co-opted and transferred to Rome. Such a criterion, on the other hand, is already taking place in the Congregation. This is clear from the generosity with which confreres and Provinces have responded to recent appeals.

The service of the UPS for the qualification of salesian personnel needs to be further exploited<sup>57</sup>. Here salesian competence and perspectives are offered in a unique synthesis derived from experience combined with the choice and organization of the courses. For us therefore it is not "just the same" as other Universities. After verifying once more the results observable in the Congregation, I repeat the evaluation made by the GC24: "With some small exceptions, often repeated excessively and which we are willing to keep in mind, the net result of the frequenting of such Centres by students is highly positive for individuals, Provinces and the whole Congregation. We do not see any other arrangement that would be more advantageous"<sup>58</sup>.

### ***Other "Salesian" Universities: a significant presence.***

The number of Salesian Institutions of University level has increased in recent years. They differ, one from another; their juridical structure varies, the involvement of the Provinces in them is different, as also is the consistency of the salesian teams which run them. Some are looked after by a solid group of confreres with the well-defined roles of a university institution and also the educative, pastoral and popular objectives of our charism. Others go ahead with a variable number of confreres according to the qualified personnel the Province manages occasionally to free for the purpose.

It must be recognized that in this field it is not easy to ensure the conditions for significant salesian presence at a scientific, educative and pastoral level. In a few cases at the outset attention was directed especially to organizing a service to create the opportunity of a higher education amid the middle and poorer classes and fill the cultural gaps that existed. Nowadays one can no longer think that without specific preparation and an adequate staff one can express the "oratorian criterion" at this level by integrating preoccupation for organization and attention to cultural level,

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<sup>57</sup> cf. GC24, 255

<sup>58</sup> GC24, 255



administrative management and pastoral effect. “Once the first organizing effort required by such initiatives has been accomplished, the moment comes to confront decisively and at community level the cultural and pastoral qualification beginning with the preparation of confreres and lay personnel”<sup>59</sup>.

In the first place it is indispensable to define clearly the identity and orientation of these centres. While recognizing that they have a general set-up that takes its inspiration from the Christian mentality and passes on a humanistic and religious vision, there is always the risk of levelling down to the prevailing mentality rather than entering into dialogue for the sustaining of alternative proposals.

Numerous documents remind us of this effort for a clear structure and organization. The Church is going ahead, in the context of the new evangelization, with a cultural pastoral work aimed at bringing about changes in the economic and social area, in attitudes to life, in the elaboration of ethics, in the creation of new relationships, in proposing a sense which throws light on nature, history and present tensions. The light for all this comes from the mystery of God the Creator, the Saviour of mankind, the strength and goal of his story in the Spirit.

Our Universities must define their orientation in line with their Catholic character and their educative philosophy in harmony with salesian criteria, making themselves centres for the formation of persons and the elaboration of culture of Christian inspiration.

This is a missionary frontier which is relatively new and hence needs to be followed up, coordinated and clarified. It will be necessary to draw up an authoritative line of approach (a *Project for Salesian Universities*, almost a platform for proclaiming their fundamental inspiration), to foster dialogue and exchange of ideas between these institutions and follow up the progress of the Provinces in this new experience. The attainment of salesian objectives must be ensured, even at the level of the statutes.

But in addition to cultural orientation, an efficacious pastoral animation of the university environment must be provided. To the academic structures must be added, in this case, the many activities we carry out among university students, such as residential hostels, groups, religious care and similar matters.

They cannot be without an EPC, and in the first place the animating salesian nucleus. This means the preparation and dedication of salesian

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<sup>59</sup> *Report to the GC24*, 261

personnel, intense collaboration with lay people who have been selected and made aware of the character and purpose of our Universities, an attitude of openness and relationship with other cultural bodies, and the appropriate application of the preventive system and of the spirituality on which it is based. In a word: *a requirement for salesian competence and for cultural and professional quality.*

Just as in Houses of Spirituality we frequently find ourselves managing the structures without having available persons and teams capable of spiritual animation, it can also happen that in our university centres and hostels we may be providing structures and organization but not plans for life and the accompaniment of growth.

From the General Council we want to follow with particular attention the evolution of salesian work in this sector, which presents considerable challenges from an institutional aspect, and from the standpoint of those to whom the work is addressed, the collaborators, financial aspects and especially of the project itself, but which can be exceptionally fruitful for the evangelization of culture and for a particular presence in the world of education. There should be a corresponding commitment on the part of Provincials and their Councils.

### ***Salesian Centres for study and reflection***

The Congregation is committed also in other Centres, which in some cases have a direct incidence on the formation of confreres, and in others collaborate in creating a mentality, accompany young people and adults in a spiritual pilgrimage, diffuse the message of the Gospel by modern methods and communicate the salesian spirit: studentates, publishing houses, pastoral and pedagogical centres, houses of spirituality.

Our Regulations encourage Provinces which are able to do so to have “their own study centre for the formation of the confreres and to provide qualified services of animation” to the Provinces themselves and to the local Church<sup>60</sup>. There are in fact quite a number of Provinces that can count on such centres. They constitute a commitment which is by no means light, but makes a valid contribution to the life of the Province and to its mission. They should therefore be sustained and strengthened, and reshaped if necessary, at regional level, rather than be multiplied without previous understandings.

The search for cultural and formative quality leads to a verification of the consistency, incidence and capacity for renewal of these Centres and

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<sup>60</sup> R 84

especially to an ensuring of the conditions for their adequate response to the demands made on them.

In particular, as far as salesian study centres are concerned, it is necessary to ensure the composition and commitment of the teaching staff, which cannot be limited to a mere guaranteeing of the timetable of lessons; to foster collaboration and shared interprovincial responsibility when the centre provides services for more than one Province; the regular functioning of the “curatorium”, affiliation or aggregation to our own Pontifical University, and the careful selection of non-salesian collaborators.

In this context, we must also consider our participation in study centres managed jointly with other institutions (Congregations, diocese, etc.), and also give attention to the formative orientation of the studies of confreres in initial formation who frequent centres in the direction of which we do not share responsibility. The influence of teachers on the development of personality is often more decisive than that of other formation guides; one cannot therefore simply “delegate” the intellectual formation of young Salesians.

Similar remarks, in respect of personnel and projects, apply to other Centres which produce and diffuse culture (publishing houses, radio stations, etc.) if we want to ensure their maximum efficiency and an adequate service to the Gospel and to the people<sup>61</sup>.

## ***Conclusion***

The pursuit of wisdom permeates the whole life of Don Bosco: love and knowledge at the service of the young. It is the gift and task entrusted to him at the moment of his calling, in response to his question as to how he was to succeed in carrying out such a mission. To reach it he was given a Teacher.

It is certainly a matter of that wisdom which is the ‘knowledge of God's mystery’<sup>62</sup>, the “knowledge of Christ” which St Paul requested for the faithful<sup>63</sup>, which in Christ includes the totality of human life and the development of history. It comes to us as a gift with faith and, for us Salesians, as a particular orientation with the charisma of predilection for the young.

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<sup>61</sup> *Report to the GC24*, 269

<sup>62</sup> cf. 1 Cor 2,6 ff.

<sup>63</sup> cf. Eph 3,18-19

May Mary most Holy, who was Don Bosco's Teacher, be the same also for us.

This is the wish I send to each of you and to your communities, together with my fraternal greetings.

Juan Vecchi