

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE MEMBERS OF GC28

Dear brothers!

I greet you affectionately and thank God that even from a distance I can share a moment of the journey that you are making.

It is significant that, after a few decades, Providence has led you to celebrate your General Chapter at Valdocco, the place of memory where the founding dream came true and took its first steps. I am sure that the noise and clamour of the oratories will be the best and most effective music for the Spirit to rekindle the charismatic gift of your founder. Do not shut the windows to this background noise... Let it accompany you and keep you restless and fearless in your discernment; and let these voices and these songs, in turn, evoke in you the faces of many other young people who, for various reasons, find themselves like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mk 6:34). This clamour and restlessness will keep you awake and alert to any kind of self-imposed anaesthesia, and will help you to remain in creative fidelity to your Salesian identity.

Rekindle the gift you have received

Reflecting on the profile of the Salesian for the young people of today implies accepting that we are immersed in a time of change, with all the uncertainty that this generates. No one can say with certainty and precision (if ever one could) what will happen in the near future on a social, economic, educational and cultural level. The inconsistency and “fluidity” of events, but above all the speed with which they happen and are communicated, means that any prediction is an interpretation condemned to being reformulated almost immediately. (cf. Apostolic Constitution [*Veritatis Gaudium*](#), 3-4). This outlook on things is even more marked by the fact that your Works are addressed to the world of young people, a world that is itself in movement and continuous transformation. This calls for a twofold docility on our part: docility to the young and their needs and docility to the Spirit and to everything He wishes to transform.

Taking up this situation responsibly – both on a personal and community level – involves leaving behind the kind of rhetoric that has us continually saying “everything is changing” and which, by dint of repeating it over and over again, ends up with us being obsessed by a paralysing inertia that deprives your mission of the *parresia* proper to the Lord's disciples. Such inertia can also manifest itself in a pessimistic outlook and attitude towards everything around us, not only in relation to the transformations taking place in society but also in relation to our Congregation, our brothers and sisters and the life of the Church. This is an attitude that ends up “boycotting” and preventing any kind of alternative response or process, and can give rise to the opposite stance: a blind kind of optimism that can dispel the strength and novelty of the Gospel, preventing us from concretely accepting the complexity that situations require and the prophecy that the Lord invites us to carry out. Neither pessimism nor optimism are gifts of the Spirit, because both come from a self-referential vision capable only of measuring oneself by one's own strengths, capacities or abilities, preventing us from looking at what the Lord is accomplishing and wants to accomplish among us (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [*Christus Vivit*](#), 35). Do not either adapt to the culture in fashion, or take refuge in an heroic but already disembodied past. In changing times it is good to pay good attention to St Paul's words to Timothy: “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 *Tim* 1:6-7).

These words invite us to *cultivate a contemplative attitude*, one that is able to identify and discern the focal points. This will help you to enter into the journey with the spirit and the contribution of Don Bosco's sons and, like him, to develop a “bold cultural revolution” (Encyclical *Laudato si'*, 114). This contemplative attitude will allow you to outdo and go beyond your own expectations and plans. We are men and women of faith, which presupposes that we are passionate about Jesus Christ; and we know that both our present and our future are imbued with this apostolic and charismatic force called to continue to permeate the lives of so many young people who are abandoned and at risk, poor and needy, excluded and discarded, deprived of rights, deprived of a home... These young people await a gaze of hope capable of contradicting any kind of fatalism or determinism. They are waiting to encounter the gaze of Jesus who tells them “that in all the dark and painful situations... there is a way out” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, 104). That is where our joy dwells.

Neither pessimist nor optimist, the Salesian of the 21st century is someone filled with hope because he knows that his centre is the Lord who can make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5). Only this will save us from living in an attitude of resignation and defensive survival. Only this will make our lives fruitful (cf. *homily*, 2 February 2017), because it will make it possible for the gift received to continue to be experienced and expressed as good news for and with the youth of today. This attitude of hope is capable of establishing and opening up alternative educational processes to the prevailing culture which, in not a few situations – both out of destitution, extreme poverty, and out of abundance, which can be extreme in some cases – end up smothering and killing the dreams of our young people, condemning them to a deafening, creeping and often drug-induced conformism. Be neither triumphalist nor scaremongering, but cheerful and hopeful men and women, crafts-persons, not robots, who can “point to ideals other than those of this world, testifying to the beauty of generosity, service, purity, perseverance, forgiveness, fidelity to our personal vocation, prayer, the pursuit of justice and the common good, love for the poor, and social friendship” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, 36).

The “Valdocco option” of your 28th General Chapter is a good opportunity to compare yourselves with the sources and to ask the Lord: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*”.¹ *Tolle* especially anything that has been accumulated along the journey and that remains, and that in other times might have been an appropriate response but today hinders you from configuring and shaping the Salesian presence in a meaningful evangelical way in the different situations of the mission. This requires that we overcome the fears and apprehensions that may arise from believing that the charism was reduced to or identified with certain works or structures; it implies a *change of mentality* in the face of the mission that must be carried out.²

The “Valdocco option” and the gift of the young

The Salesian Oratory and everything that arose from it, as the *Memoirs of the Oratory* tell us, came about as a response to the life of the young with a face and a history. This set a young priest in motion who was incapable of remaining neutral or unmoved by what he saw happening before him. It was much more than a gesture of good will or kindness, and even far more than the result of any “feasibility study on numbers and charism”. I think of it as an act of ongoing conversion and response to the Lord who, “tired of knocking” on our doors, waits for us to go and look for him and meet him... or let him out when he knocks from within. It was a conversion that involved (and complicated) his entire life and that of those around him. Don Bosco not only did not choose to separate himself from

¹ The motto with which the first missionaries were branded. I recall Fr James Costamagna’s letter to Don Bosco where, after telling him about the difficulties of the journey and the various failures they had to deal with, he concludes by saying: “We are unanimous in asking just one thing: to be able to soon go to Patagonia to save countless souls.” The awareness that they were sent to seek souls in the peripheries and to continue overcoming any apparent failure is a feature of identity on the basis of which to compare and measure the charism: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*”.

² We recall the Lord’s warning: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition” (*Mk* 7:8).

the world to seek holiness, but he let himself be challenged by it and chose *how* and *which* world to live in.

His choice and acceptance of the world of children and youth who were abandoned, without work and an upbringing, allowed them to experience God's fatherliness in a tangible way, and gave them the tools with which they could recount their lives and their story in the light of unconditional love. And in turn they have helped the Church to rediscover its mission: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (*Ps* 118:22). Far from being passive agents or spectators of missionary work, they became, beginning with their own circumstances – in many cases they were "religious and social illiterates" – the main protagonists of the entire founding process.³ Salesianity is born precisely from this encounter capable of arousing prophecies and visions: welcoming, integrating and giving growth to their best qualities as a gift for others, especially for those who are marginalised and abandoned from whom nothing is expected. Paul VI said this: "The Church is an evangeliser, but she begins by being evangelised herself... In brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelised, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigour and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15). Every charism needs to be renewed and evangelised, and in your case especially by the poorest young people.

Don Bosco's youngsters yesterday, and those of today's Salesian were and are no mere recipients of a prior planned strategy, but living protagonists of the oratory which was to be created.⁴ It is through them and with them that the Lord shows us his will and his dreams.⁵ We could call them co-founders of your houses, where the Salesian will be the expert in summoning and generating this kind of dynamic without feeling that he is the boss. This is a joint effort that reminds us that we are an "outgoing Church", and that mobilises us to do this: a Church capable of abandoning comfortable, secure and in some cases privileged positions, to find in the least the fruitfulness typical of the Kingdom of God. This is not a strategic choice, but a charismatic one. A fruitfulness sustained on the basis of the cross of Christ, which is always a scandalous injustice for those who have blocked their sensitivity to suffering or have come to terms with injustice towards the innocent. "As a Church, may we never fail to weep before these tragedies of our young. May we never become inured to them, for anyone incapable of tears cannot be a mother. We want to weep so that society itself can be more of a mother" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, 75).

The "Valdocco option" and the charism of presence

It is important to say that we are not formed *for* the mission, but that we are formed *in* the mission. Our whole life revolves around it, with its choices and priorities. Initial and ongoing formation cannot be a prior, parallel or separate instance of the identity and sensitivity of the disciple. The mission *inter gentes* is our best school: beginning with this we pray, reflect, study and rest. When we isolate ourselves or distance ourselves from the people we are called to serve, our identity as consecrated persons begins to be distorted and becomes a caricature.

³ Thanks to the help of the wise Cafasso, Don Bosco discovered who he was in the eyes of the young prisoners; and those young prisoners discovered a new face in Don Bosco's gaze. So together they discovered the dream of God, who needs these encounters to manifest Himself. Don Bosco did not discover his mission in front of a mirror, but in the pain of seeing young people who had no future. The Salesian of the 21st century will not discover his own identity unless he can suffer with "the large numbers of young lads... fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me... Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates" (*Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, 48); and we could add: youngsters of our very Church.

⁴ Today we see how in many regions young people are the first to rise up, organise themselves and promote just causes. Your Salesian houses, far from preventing this awakening, are called to become places that can stimulate this consciousness of Christians and citizens. Let us remember the title of this year's Strenna of the Rector Major: "Good Christians and upright citizens".

⁵ I invite you to always keep in mind all those who do not share them but whom we cannot ignore if we do not want to become a closed group.

To this effect, one of the obstacles that we can identify does not have to do so much with any situation outside our communities, but rather is the one that touches us directly because of a distorted experience of ministry..., and that hurts us so much: clericalism. Clericalism is the personal quest to possess, monopolise and control things, minimising and nullifying the anointing of the People of God. Clericalism, living out our call in an elitist way, confuses election with privilege, service with servility, unity with uniformity, differences of opinion with opposition, formation with indoctrination. Clericalism is a perversion that fosters functional, paternalistic, possessive and even manipulative ties with all other vocations in the Church.

Another obstacle we encounter – one that is widespread and even justified, especially in this time of precariousness and fragility – is the tendency towards rigorism. By confusing authority with authoritarianism, it claims to govern and control human processes with a scrupulous, severe and even petty attitude towards one's own or someone else's (and above all others') limitations and weaknesses. The rigorist forgets that wheat and tares grow together (cf. *Mt* 13:24-30) and “that not everyone can do everything and that in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace. In every case, as Saint Augustine taught, God commands you to do what you can and to ask for what you cannot” (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 49). With great finesse and spiritual subtlety, St Thomas Aquinas reminds us that “the devil had deceived many: some by leading them to commit sins, and others by excessive rigour against sinners; so that if Satan cannot get them for having committed sin, he at least destroys those he already has by the severity of prelates who drive them to despair by not correcting them in a compassionate way. Hence, he destroys these, and the others he puts in the snare of the devil. And this happens to us, if we do not forgive sinners.”⁶

Those who accompany others in their growth must be people with broad horizons, capable of holding both limitations and hope together, thus helping them to always see things, ultimately, from a saving perspective. An educator “who is not afraid to set limits and who, at the same time, abandons himself to the dynamics of hope expressed in his trust in the action of the Lord, is the image of a strong man, who directs and guides that which does not belong to him but to his Lord.”⁷ It is not lawful for us to stifle and prevent the strength and grace of what is possible, the realisation of which always hides seeds of new and good Life. We learn to work and to trust in God's times, which are always greater and wiser than our short-sighted measures. He does not want to destroy anyone, but to save everyone. It is urgent, therefore, to find a style of formation capable of structurally taking on the fact that evangelisation implies the full participation, and full citizenship – with all its potential and limitations – of the baptised, and not only the so-called “professionals” (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120); it is a participation where service, and service to the poorest, is the fundamental pillar that helps to better manifest and witness to our Lord, “who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (*Mt* 20:28). I encourage you to continue your efforts to make your houses an “ecclesial laboratory” capable of recognising, appreciating, stimulating and encouraging the different calls and missions in the Church.⁸

In this sense, I am thinking concretely of two presences in your Salesian community which can help as elements in comparing the place held by the different vocations among you; two presences that are an “antidote” against every clericalist and rigorous tendency: the Coadjutor Brother, and women.

Coadjutor Brothers are a living expression of the gratuitousness that the charism invites us to safeguard. Your consecration is, above all, a sign of the gratuitous love of the Lord, and for the Lord in his young people, which is not defined primarily by a particular ministry, function or service, but by a presence. Even before things that need to be done, the Salesian is a living reminder of a presence in which availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential features which give rise to

⁶ *Super II Cor.*, Chap. 2, lect. 2 (towards the end). The passage St Thomas comments on is *2 Cor* 2:6-7 where, concerning those who had caused him pain, St Paul writes: “you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”

⁷ J. M. BERGOGLIO, *Meditazioni per religiosi*, 105.

⁸ An ecclesial vocation, before being something that differentiates us or makes us complementary, is an invitation to offer a particular gift which helps the growth of others.

processes. The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any kind of technical and functional reductionism. The first call is to be a joyful and gratuitous presence among young people.

What would have become of Valdocco without the presence of Mamma Margaret? Would your houses have been possible without this woman of faith? In some regions and places “there are communities that have long preserved and handed on the faith even though no priest has come their way, even for decades. This could happen because of the presence of strong and generous women who, undoubtedly called and prompted by the Holy Spirit, baptized, catechized, prayed and acted as missionaries. For centuries, women have kept the Church alive in those places through their remarkable devotion and deep faith” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, 99). Without a real, effective and affective presence of women, your works would lack the courage and the ability to transform presence into hospitality, into a home. Faced with the rigour that excludes, we must learn to generate the new life of the Gospel. I invite you to implement approaches in which the female voice, her outlook and her actions – appreciated for her individuality – finds an echo in making decisions; not simply as a helper but as someone fully involved in your presences.

The “Valdocco option” as expressed through many languages

As in other times, the myth of Babel attempts to impose itself under the guise of globalisation. Entire systems create a global and digital communications network capable of interconnecting all corners of the planet, running the serious risk of levelling and homogenising cultures, depriving them of their essential characteristics and resources. The universal presence of your Salesian Family is a stimulus and an invitation to guard and preserve the richness of many of the cultures in which you are immersed without trying to get them all to conform. On the other hand, strive for Christianity to be able to take on the language and culture of the local people. It is sad to see that in many places, the Christian presence is still experienced as a foreign (especially European) presence; a situation that can also be found in formation programmes and lifestyles. (cf. *ibid.*, 90).⁹ Instead, let us be inspired by this anecdote about Don Bosco, who when asked what language he liked to speak in, answered: “The one my mother taught me: it is the one with which I can communicate more easily.” Following this certainty, the Salesian is called to speak in the mother tongue of each of the cultures in which he finds himself. The unity and communion of your family is able to absorb and accept all these differences, which can enrich the whole body in a synergy of communication and interaction where everyone can offer the best of themselves for the good of the whole body. In this way Salesianity, far from being lost in uniformity without nuance, will be expressed in a more beautiful and attractive way... it will be able to express itself “in dialect” (cf. *2 Mac* 7:26-27).

At the same time, the intrusion of virtual reality as the dominant language in many of the countries where you carry out your mission demands, in the first place, recognition of all the possibilities and good things it produces, without underestimating or ignoring its impact in terms of creating bonds, especially at the emotional level. Nor are we consecrated adults immune from this. The widespread (and necessary) “screen ministry” asks us to inhabit the internet intelligently, recognising it as a place of mission¹⁰ which requires, in turn, that we put all the necessary mediations in place so as not to remain prisoners of its circularity and its peculiar (and dichotomous) logic. This trap – albeit in the name of the mission – can lock us in on ourselves and isolate us in a comfortable, yet superfluous

⁹ Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 116: “The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, ‘remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root.’”

¹⁰ Indeed, today “What is called for is an evangelisation capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 74).

virtuality with little or no contact with the lives of young people, with the members of the community or with apostolic commitments. The internet is not neutral, and it has enormous power for creating culture. Behind the *avatar* of virtual closeness, we can end up becoming blind to or distant from the real life of individuals, flattening and impoverishing our missionary vigour. Individualistic withdrawal, so widespread and fashionable in this profoundly digitized culture, requires special attention not only with regard to our pedagogical models but also with regard to the personal and communal use of time, and of our activities and assets.

The “Valdocco option” and the ability to dream

One of Don Bosco’s “literary genres” was his dreams. They were the Lord’s way of entering into his life and into the life of your whole Congregation, enlarging the idea of what was possible. Far from keeping him asleep, his dreams helped him, as they did St Joseph, to embrace another dimension and depth of life, born out of the depths of God’s compassion. It became possible to live the Gospel concretely.... He dreamed a dream, and gave it form in the oratory.

I would like to offer you these words just like the “goodnights” in every good Salesian house at the end of the day, inviting you to dream and to dream big. Know that the rest will be given to you as well. Dream of open, fruitful and evangelising houses capable of allowing the Lord to show so many young people his unconditional love and also allowing you to enjoy the beauty to which you have been called. Dream... not only for yourself and for the good of the Congregation, but for all young people deprived of the strength, light and comfort of friendship with Jesus Christ, deprived of a community of faith to sustain them, of a horizon of meaning and of life. (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49). Dream... And get others to dream!

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 4 March 2020