

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

INCULTURATION OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM

«So though I am not a slave of any man I have made myself the slave of everyone so as to win as many as I could » (1Cor 9,19)

1. “The Law of all evangelisation”. 2. Changing cultural paradigms. Globalisation. – Inter-religious dialogue – The youth situation. - The digital world, a continent to be leavened. 3. The early Church, a model and norm for inculturated evangelisation. A mission which succeeds because it is well inculturated . – Unity in faith, diversity the way it is lived. – Remembering the poor. – A living together that brings problems with it. – The fact and the principle. 4. Looking at Don Bosco. A gesture very much to the point. - “Some special souvenirs” - «We want souls and nothing else ». - «Always remember that God want us to exert all of energies for poor and abandoned children ». - «A mission having been started efforts should always be made to set up and consolidate schools ». - «God called the poor Salesian Congregation to promote ecclesiastical vocations among poor youth ». - «Absolutely all of you can become true evangelical labourers ». - «Let the world know that you are poor». - «With the gentleness of Saint Francis of Sales the Salesians will draw to Jesus Christ the peoples of America». - «Constantly promote devotion to Mary Help of Christians and to the Blessed Sacrament».
Conclusion.

16 August 2011
Anniversary of the birth of Don Bosco

My Dear Confreres,

I am writing to you on the day when the three years of preparation for the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco begin. We hope and pray that each one of us may be a faithful incarnation of our beloved Father, so that like him we may become signs of the love of God especially for the young.

I wanted to take as a starting point for this circular letter a beautiful and meaningful passage from the first letter to the Corinthians in which Saint Paul, renouncing his rights as a free man, declares that he has freely become the slave of everyone in order to bring to faith in Christ the greatest number of people. He made himself “a Jew with the Jews,” a man outside the Mosaic law for those outside the law, and he made himself “weak for the weak”; in a word he made himself “all things to all.” And he concludes: “I still do this, for the sake of the gospel, to have a share in its blessings” (cf. *1 Cor 9,19-23*). Here we find the model of the missionary: he is someone who identifies himself totally with each one of those to whom he is sent, with the sole purpose of winning as many as possible for his Lord!

In my last letter, dear confreres, I invited you: “to live your lives in every part of the world with a genuine missionary spirit”; for this I offered you “a reflection on the missionary nature of the Church and of the Congregation and, in particular, on evangelisation as the context of the normal activity of the Church” as it is for

the Congregation. Today I want to reflect with you on a subject which is closely connected with those dealt with previously, and develops an extremely important aspect to ensure that our mission in the Church is genuine and effective. I want to speak to you about the inculturation of the Salesian charism - a task which the more I come to know the situation around the whole Congregation I see as extremely urgent.

The Salesian charism, “the principle of unity in the Congregation,” is and can remain, the source of the “different ways of living the one Salesian vocation” (C. 100), if we succeed in implanting it, with both fidelity and creativity, in those places where we have been sent and where we work. We can say that this “planting of the charism” in different cultures is a task carried out for over a hundred years by our Congregation, starting with the first missions launched by Don Bosco in Argentina; and we can recognise that consoling fruits have not been lacking. Nevertheless we have to admit that today the challenge is much more demanding, as we find ourselves present in all the continents and in contact with the most diverse cultures. We are convinced that in order to remain faithful to God who sends us and to the young who are those to whom especially we are sent, we have to live our Salesian identity with generosity; but this does not mean that we have to put it into practice in the same way everywhere. The Salesian mission will be meaningful and effective, and will therefore have a future, if we succeed in being at the same time faithful to ourselves and also “at home” in the cultural context in which it is carried out, that is to say if, thanks to his sons, Don Bosco knows how to assume the features of each of the cultures that welcomes him.

1. “The Law of all evangelisation”

“The Salesian vocation places us at the heart of the Church and puts us entirely at the service of her mission” (C. 6). And the Constitutions also recognise that the “mission sets the tenor of our whole life” and “specifies the task we have in the Church” (C. 3). This means that the mission is part of our charismatic identity; so that the failure of the mission would indicate the failure of the charism. A mission which is not adequately inculturated is, without doubt, a failed mission: “the [inculturated] accommodated preaching of the revealed Word ought to remain the law of all evangelisation”.¹

The mission owes its origin not to the Church but to the Risen Lord (cf. *Mt* 28,19; *Acts* 1,8), who has entrusted it to his witnesses (cf. *Lk* 24,46-48) assuring them of the presence and of the assistance of his Spirit (cf. *Jn* 20,22-23). What is more, the mission of Christ owes its origin not to him but to the Father who “so loved the world” (*Jn* 3,16) as to send “his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as sons.” (*Gal* 4,4-5). Therefore the mission comes from the inner life of God who has generated the Son and has sent him to become incarnate in human history, and revealing his love in this way, to bring the work of salvation to its completion. From God the Father too proceeds the Paraclete whom Jesus has sent to his Church (*Jn* 15,26); and as had already happened with Jesus (*Lk* 4,18-

¹ *Gaudium et Spes* 44.

19), she began her mission when she received and welcomed the gift of the Spirit (Act 2,1-33). As it is for the Church, so it is for the Congregation: its mission is not primarily what, in some way, it does for others; its mission is rather making God present in the person of those He has sent: the Son, the Spirit, the community. In this way the mission is freed from the excessive burden of responsibility for the results, and becomes the effective and visible proclamation of the love of God which shows itself first in the lives and then in the action of those He has sent. The Church only has meaning as the sign and the instrument of the communication of this “missionary” love of the Triune God; in fact, “all the Church’s activities are to be imbued with divine love,” which is “the source of the Church’s mission.”² And it is with this mission that we, by our vocation, are associated, being “in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor” (C.2).

Therefore, when “the fullness of time had come,” and God wanted to redeem those who were under the law and make them his adopted children, “he sent his Son” among us: the eternal Word of the Father (Jn,14), came to be part of human history humbling himself in the womb of a woman as in the context of a particular culture. It is this “making himself small” of the Word, this assuming the condition of a slave without clinging on to his equality with God but emptying himself (cf. *Phil.* 2,6-7), and it is this making himself contingent in time and in space – not pretending but truly so – which reveals God’s condescension to mankind, proclaiming his infinite love. So you see in fact Jesus of Nazareth fully assuming the culture of his contemporaries with all its greatness and its limitations, the son of a particular people, Israel of those days. Truly obedient to the Father and truly obedient to man!

And it is precisely in obeying this plan that the Son became our Saviour. «Quod non est assumptum, non est sanatum»; «quod semel assumpsit numquam dimisit»³: these two well-known axioms of the Church Fathers express very well this paradoxical law of salvation: there is no salvation without incarnation, nor is there incarnation without inculturation. Affirming, therefore, “the natural missionary role of the Church means essentially bearing witness to the fact that the task of inculturation, as the total spreading of the Gospel and its subsequent translation in thought and life still continues today and constitutes the heart, the means and the scope of the *new evangelisation*.”⁴

2. Changing cultural paradigms

Those carrying out the mission of the Salesians in today’s world are a community of about sixteen thousand members present in all the continents and spread through 132 different countries. Even though not all the confreres are aware of it, the well-known phenomenon of globalisation is a fact of life in our Congregation. This presents us with the challenge ever more pressing, of the

² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to those taking part in the X Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, Rome, 7 June 2008.

³ Cf. A. GRILLMEIER, *LThK* 8, pp. 954-955; Id., *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*. I, Freiburg 1979.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Address at the end of the work of the International Council for Catechesis*, Rome, 26 September 1992.

realisation of the one Salesian charisma in a multiplicity of varied social, religious and cultural contexts. There is no doubt that the Salesian charism is one and the same, valid for all and for each individual; but it cannot be lived out in an univocal way; if it is not well rooted in the culture in which the community carries out its mission, it will not be able to release the potentialities for salvation it contains, neither will it have significance in the world of today, nor will it survive in tomorrow's.

Not rarely during my visits to the Provinces, I have the impression that many of our confreres, taken up with the urgent apostolic needs of the moment, do not give sufficient attention to this responsibility. There are also some doubts about initial formation: it is natural that in the formation years, emphasis is given to the personal acquisition by the young confrere of the charism, but perhaps there is some neglect of education to an appropriate cultural sensitivity, with particular regard to youth cultures, or the right weight is not given to it.

We are living through a period of great change, from which neither the Church nor the Congregation is immune, a change giving rise to crises and to insecurity, but nonetheless evoking new expectations and offering real opportunities, scarcely imaginable a short time ago. I feel I must here refer, if only briefly, to some of the facts which best illustrate the change taking place and which raise questions about our way of living as consecrated educators and of carrying out our mission.

Globalisation

Without doubt globalisation is a special feature of the times in which we are living. A recent unstoppable phenomenon which regards in the first place the new kinds of juridical, productive and financial organisations, evolved in the so-called 'first world' with the precise intention of creating on a world scale a single market to maximise profits, globalisation has succeeded not only in unifying and homogenising economic conditions but also styles of life, culture and more generally 'politically correct' ideologies in conformity with the western model. Globalisation has eliminated distances and frontiers, has brought peoples and individuals closer together; nowadays it is possible to send to all parts of the world an almost infinite number of pieces of information. This possibility of linking together in a few seconds places thousands of miles apart has also resulted in conditioning systems of production and commerce: capital no longer has a homeland, nor are fixed places of work guaranteed nor the security of citizens - given the flow of migrants and the phenomena linked to them. It should be recognised that globalisation has offered and still offers undoubted advantages, but it also has to be said that it has conditioned and still conditions every aspect of modern day society, by now changed into a " global village", so that societies which formerly were distinct for their cultures, traditions, beliefs and customs are now sinking into an amalgam which threatens their separate identities.

It is a matter therefore of an ambiguous situation, with a tendency to reduce everything and everyone to the same level according to parameters which have no respect for differences and which exclude anyone who does not fit in. "One has

the impression that the complex dynamism, caused by the globalisation of the economy and the media, eventually tends to reduce the human person to a market variable, to a piece of merchandise, which really makes the person a totally irrelevant factor in the decisive options. Man risks feeling trampled by the faceless globalised mechanisms and increasingly loses his identity and dignity as a person. In virtue of such a dynamism, cultures also run the risk of being homogenised if they are not accepted and respected in their originality and richness, but forcefully adapted to the needs of the market and fashion. The result is a cultural product, bearing a superficial syncretism, imposing a new scale of values, derived from criteria that are regularly arbitrary, materialistic, consumerist and opposed to any kind of openness to the Transcendent.”⁵

In the Congregation, as in the Church, we are not outside this process and we will have to take seriously the challenge to promote and pass on “a living culture, a culture capable of fostering communication and brotherhood between different groups and peoples, and between the different fields of human creativity. Today’s world is challenging us, in other words, *to know and respect one another in and through the diversity of our cultures.*”⁶ Through our apostolic presences, and first of all within our religious communities, becoming more and more pluricultural, we are being called to live and to bear witness to a communion in which “solitude is overcome through concern for one another, in which communication inspires in everyone a sense of shared responsibility, and in which wounds are healed through forgiveness...The nature of the charism in communities of this kind directs their energies, sustains their fidelity and directs the apostolic work of all towards the one mission. If the Church is to reveal her true face to today’s world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelisation, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the “new commandment”.⁷

Living together as brothers and as workers for peace and solidarity with everyone, we promote the unity of the human family and the transformation of the world according to the heart of God; “from faith lived with courage, today as in the past, flows a rich culture of love for life,”⁸ which is a distinguishing feature of the Salesian charism. In this way we can effectively respond to our task and offer an original contribution, which is that of having “to face in a creative way the challenge of inculturation, while at the same time preserving their identity”⁹.

Inter-religious dialogue

In the context of our apostolic activity, in addition to the process of inculturation, we find ourselves more and more faced, and at times challenged, by cultural pluralism and especially by religious pluralism, phenomena which

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the members of the Pontifical Academies at the Sixth Public Session* (8 November 2001).

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Representatives of the World of Culture and Science*, (Tbilisi, Georgia, 9 November 1999).

⁷ VC 45. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi* (23 June 2011).

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the II Ecclesial Convention of Aquileia* (7 May 2011).

⁹ VC 51. “The challenge of inculturation ought to be taken up by consecrated persons as a call to fruitful cooperation with grace in facing cultural diversity” (VC 79).

pervade the present world. The tendency to level everything down, a feature of the current process of globalisation, is opposed by a strong affirmation of particular cultures and religions, both ancient and modern; they demand to be recognised and respected, they try to affirm or to protect themselves, demonstrating at times fundamentalist reactions when they perceive threats to their identity and to their freedom of expression. In this way in the current historical circumstances inter-religious dialogue has taken on new and inevitable urgency, thus becoming an essential element of the mission.

For some time the Church has been committed to “building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions, in order to seek the true good of every person and of society as a whole”.¹⁰ And although the Gospel continues to be “the permanent priority” of its mission, “inter-religious dialogue is a part of the evangelising mission of the Church”¹¹; dedicating themselves therefore to evangelisation, each one of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to put this dialogue into practice.

For the Salesians who nowadays are working for young people in every situation imaginable, the *missio ad gentes* included, inter-religious dialogue cannot be considered a marginal activity in our lives as believers and as we place ourselves at the service of the faith, nor as a purely personal or Congregational choice but needs to be seen as “an essential service to humanity,”¹² indeed as, “something which arises from the very demands of the faith. It issues from the faith and needs to be nourished by the faith.”¹³

In fact, dialogue between believers of different faiths and also with non-believers, “must be a journey of faith”;¹⁴ it does not require us to renounce any element of our Christian identity, neither in what we believe nor in what we practise, nor to put it in parentheses or even in doubt; just the contrary: those who question us, be they the youngsters we teach or the people who share in our work of education, want to know clearly, and quite rightly, who we are, what we think, and for Whom we are working. Certainly, we educate and accompany young Christians in their faith journey; but we are equally aware that, in ever growing numbers, young people or co-workers belonging to other religions or indifferent from the religious point of view, and even non-believers, seek us out as educators, travelling companions and guides. We draw close to them therefore with heartfelt interest, we live and work with them fully respecting their freedom, always presenting ourselves as joyful witnesses of Jesus Christ and loyal members of a faith community.

For us dialogue, rather than a ‘method’ for carrying out the Salesian mission, is the very “way” of achieving it. And if there is a “dialogue of action” which leads

¹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to delegates of other Churches and ecclesial communities and of other Religious traditions*, Rome, 25 April 2005.

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*. Encyclical on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, 44.55. Rome 12 September 1990.

¹² JEAN LUIS, CARD. TAURAN, *Address at the VI Conference of Doha on Interreligious Dialogue* (13 May 2008).

¹³ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Letter to the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on the Spirituality of Dialogue* (3 March 1999) 1.

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the participants in the X Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, Rome, 7 June 2008.

us to seek concrete forms of genuine collaboration, “as we apply our religious insights to the task of promoting integral human development, working for peace, justice and the stewardship of creation,” we ought above all as educators to concentrate, on the “dialogue of life” which involves simply “living alongside one another and learning from one another in such a way as to grow in mutual knowledge and respect.”¹⁵

In this way dialogue changes into proclamation: “two ways of implementing the mission of the Church.”¹⁶ We do it as believers and educators: entering into dialogue with other believers we bear witness to Christ and we imitate him “in his concern and compassion for each one and with respect for the individual’s freedom.”¹⁷ In a world marked by religious pluralism, proclaiming one’s faith has new consequences, still to be explored; having given ourselves completely to God we walk together with people of different faiths and cultures towards the one Father, placing them at the centre of our concerns, listening to and making our own the questions which torment them, seeking together for answers which give meaning to our shared history.

The youth situation

While globalisation and inter-religious dialogue are factors that nowadays challenge the Salesian mission ‘from outside’, that is to say which come from the change in the current cultural paradigm, I seem to observe in the Congregation a rather worrying phenomenon which could undermine the inescapable responsibility we have to inculturate the Salesian charism for the benefit of the young through education and evangelisation. Here and there I note among the confreres a more or less conscious resistance, and at times an openly expressed inability to approach sympathetically, to throw light on wisely - the result of personal study, and to welcome cordially the new forms of expression which are a feature of today’s young people, as well as the collective experiences by means of which they give expression to their ‘spectacular’ life styles,¹⁸ that is to say those which they normally demonstrate in their free time, almost always on the fringes of ordinary social institutions.

Some of the results of the profound cultural change in which we are immersed in the West are, for example, the interpretation of reality more as something that is changing rather than something of its nature stable, and the self-affirmation of the individual who sees himself and wishes to be seen as of absolute value constantly seeking himself, endowed with an almost limitless freedom to experiment and proud of his personal autonomy. In this context, the young – half

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Clerical and Lay Representatives of other Religions*, London, 17 September 2010.

¹⁶ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue *Dialogue and Proclamation. A Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 82. Rome, 19 May 1991.

¹⁷ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Letter to the Presidents of Bishops’ Conferences on the Spirituality of Dialogue* (3 March 1999).

¹⁸ Cf. J. GONZÁLEZ-ANLEO – J. M. GONZÁLEZ-ANLEO, *La juventud actual*, Verbo Divino, Estella 2008, 44. For a description of the life styles of young people in western societies see the monograph “De las ‘tribus urbanas’ a las culturas juveniles”, *Revista de estudios de Juventud* 64 (2004) pp. 39-136.

the world population is under 20 years of age – unfortunately become victims rather than protagonists. Without roots and detached from any firm foundations they are forced to create their own personal identity alone, and to choose the path to its fulfilment. They do not find in society, and often not in the Church either, models to be imitated, attractive aims to be pursued or reliable guides to turn to, even more so since the family is not present or is inadequately prepared, while the school appears to be far removed from the world of youth and ineffective in its methods both educational and didactic.¹⁹ Living according to a freedom more and more without norms or limits, immersed in a cultural climate ever more complex and confused, surrounded and sometimes overwhelmed by a market with a multitude of differing religious and moral values, they are obliged to “invent their own lives without a guide book.”²⁰

The GC 26 highlights this situation when, speaking about the new frontiers, it states: “we also acknowledge the expectations of young people who are spiritually and culturally poor, and who ask us to be involved: young people who have lost meaning in life, lack affection because of family instability, those left disillusioned and empty by the consumerist mentality, the religiously indifferent, those lacking motivation because of permissiveness, ethical relativism, the widespread culture of death.”²¹

This affective solitude is not the only, nor I would say the most widespread form of existential poverty which today’s young people meet. By far the greater majority of those living in the so-called ‘Third World’ are very familiar with economic want, the precarious state of family life, racial discrimination, educational and cultural shortcomings, the lack of work preparation, shameless exploitation by third parties, illegal employment as labourers, the closure of all forms of escape in their lives, various dependences and other forms of social deviance.

The current picture of the lost generation of youth is so desolate that it demands an urgent conversion and compassion (cf. *Mk* 6,34; 8,2-3) no less than action (cf. *Mk* 6,37; 8,4-5), because all of us feel that we are sent to be for them “signs and bearers of the love of God” (C 2). A simple list of situations will make clear how urgent the matter is:

- The millions – about a hundred – of street children who have decided to make the street their natural, ‘habitat’ so intolerable was their family situation. Some find a refuge in caves or drains, a thousand in Bucharest alone, a million in western Europe, 12 million in the world.
- About 300,000 child-soldiers, who operate in a regular army or as mercenaries, mere youths but already engaged in the service of death.
- The ever-growing number of violated youngsters, victims of pedophilia and of the so-called sex tourism: a million children according to UNICEF statistics are being introduced every year in the sex market, a market with a turnover of 13 billion dollars every year.

¹⁹ “Is this not to hide from young people the signs of the sun going down on our culture?” (U. GALIMBERTI, *L’ospite inquietante. Il nichilismo e i giovani*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2008, p. 13).

²⁰ J. A. MARINA, *Aprender a vivir*, Ariel, Barcelona 2004, p. 183.

²¹ GC26, 98

- There are 250 million minors, boys and girls between 5 and 15 years of age forced to do work - illegal because of its physical, psychological or mental dangers, made into slaves, and this more than a century after the legal abolition of slavery.
- The number of poor and marginalised youngsters, deprived of access to any of the benefits to which every human being has the right is beyond calculation: more than 600 million children are living below the poverty threshold, 160 million of those are undernourished; 6 million die every year of hunger: 17 thousand a day, 708 every hour...
- The nobody's children without parents, homes or country number about 50 million. Those without education, illiterates come to 130 million. At least 6 million babies have been mutilated and it is said that about 4 million women and children have been forced to be organ donors.
- Every minute in the five continents 5 babies contract AIDS. There are almost 11 million children who have contracted the virus. In Africa alone there are 13 million orphans as a result of AIDS. And how many are the babies suffering from tuberculosis, malaria, meningitis, hepatitis, cholera, ...?
- There are more than 50 million babies who are displaced or refugees victims of racial hatred, wars, persecutions, crowded into refugee camps or wandering here and there.

Faced with such a tragic picture of the ills of the world of the young, we Salesians cannot but be, like Don Bosco, "on the side of the young, because we have confidence in them, in their willingness to learn, to study, to escape from poverty, to take their future into their own hands ... We are on the side of the young because we believe in the worth of the individual, in the possibility of a different kind of world, and above all in the great value of working for education." So many evils pricked our consciences: on 20 April 2002, at the end of the GC25, I and 231 representatives of the Salesians in the world signed an appeal addressed to all those with responsibilities regarding the young, but which above all we took as our obligation: "Before it is too late let us save the youngsters, the future of the world."²²

The digital world, a continent to be leavened

"If she wishes to remain faithful to her mission as the universal sacrament of salvation, the Church needs to learn the languages used by men and women of every time, ethnic background and place. And we Salesians, in a special way need to learn and to use young peoples' language... Basically it is a question of a communication problem, of the inculturation of the Gospel in social and cultural situations; a problem of education to the faith for the new generations."²³

This effort to inculturate the Salesian view of life in today's world necessarily has to take into account the new *digital continent*, which is not merely a technical matter; in fact it shapes new cultural models; and if it be true that it creates

²² Cf. GC 25, "An appeal to save the young people of the world", *The Salesian Community today*. Chapter Documents, AGC 378 (2002), pp. 110-112.

²³ PASCUAL CHÁVEZ, "Concluding Address at the GC 26, in *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*". Chapter Documents GC26, S.D.B. Publishers, Rome 2008, p. 140.

previously unheard of possibilities for inter-communication, it also presents dangers previously unknown.

The term “digital continent” is the happy choice of Pope Benedict XVI in his World Communications Day Message for 2009, in a context where he was appealing to young people to evangelise their peers.

There is a biblical image which can help us understand what it means to inculcate the charism in the digital continent, one we find in Mt 13:33 (and Lk 13:20-21): the woman who 'hides' yeast in three measures of flour until it is 'leavened all through'.

What, then, might it mean to 'leaven' the digital continent all through? It is a homely image but one that strikes home right now at a time when the World Wide Web, to take one example, is moving from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, from a Web which has concentrated on linking people interactively to one which now seeks to link data meaningfully. This change is happening subtly under our very eyes, not unlike the secret activity of yeast in dough. Which of us has not clicked on a link to a major city to be then presented with a variety of options – lodgings to stay in, events to be part of, places to visit, and quite possibly according to our personal interests! Did the computer know those interests? Not as such, but it knew how to make a few meaningful connections. The answer lies in semantics, and only human beings can (and they do, and this is what we must not overlook) offer these semantics in ways that machines can interpret.

The Christian classic spiritual tradition offers us a further image which can be helpful in this context, to be found in St Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, a text which is timeless in its application: “I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle, made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal”²⁴, she says, and then leads us through seven 'mansions' or rooms, each a place on the path to ultimate union with God at the centre. It too can be a helpful image in the digital continent. Think of the castle as the digital continent, with many 'rooms' and 'links'. How do we find our way around? Are various rooms meaningfully connected? Could we find certain paths to arrive at the centre? The centre is still God, by the way, and Christ is the guide, but “...the proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately.”²⁵

Or we might want to bring our 21st century fascination with ecology to the task. Think of a garden, maybe a bit overgrown but with paths and lots of vines and creepers. We could follow those paths and creepers and find our way around, but we can also imagine how things are just beneath the soil where everything is thriving with the complex, messy, but eminently ecosystemic stuff of life!

All three images, the yeast, the castle, the ecosystem, help us appreciate more deeply what it might mean to inculcate the charism in the digital continent. It is one of the tasks of New Evangelization. In some ways it is a hidden task but with recipes we can follow. There is a true Guide to the virtual castle if

²⁴ Teresa of Avila, St. ((Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, 1515-1582), *Interior Castle or The Mansions*,

²⁵ Benedict XVI, Message for the XLIII World Communications Day (24.01.2009).

we can but coax the technologies into serving our mission. And we are invited into the complex, maybe messy, but eminently ecosystemic stuff of life, conscious that Jesus wants us to be there in His name!

We cannot avoid living, or at least partly living in the digital continent today. As Manuel Castells has sagely said: "One might say, 'Why don't you leave me alone? I want no part of your Internet, of your technological civilization, of your network society. I just want to live my life'. ...If this is your position, I have bad news for you. If you do not care about the networks, the networks will care about you, anyway. For as long as you want to live in this society, at this time and in this place, you will have to deal with the network society."²⁶

Instead of being dragged unwillingly into the digital continent, we have a duty to be there effectively and efficiently. Today this means, amongst other things, taking care of meaningful structure, introducing meaningful connections into our documents and data. We can guide search technologies, for example, with documents focused more on semantic structure than how 'pretty' they might need to look, and especially with semantically prepared data. The former task belongs to every Salesian who 'tweets', emails, or writes! The latter, to those who have responsibility for the thousands of Salesian websites around the world.

This latter group is no minor cohort of the Congregation! Very few communities, centres, works are without a website. Those responsible, ultimately we hope a Salesian SDB or lay partner, play an increasingly significant role in how the charism is to be understood and inculturated in the digital continent. They can, in fact, determine how 'charism' becomes an important search word today, leading to contexts which we wish to determine rather than leaving it to the search engines to guess, and guess wrongly.

In other words, entering the complex stuff of life that is today's digital continent requires awareness, clarity and a thirst for appropriate knowledge on our part. Our Social Communication department is certainly working at this and can already offer confreres and lay partners interesting reflections and in some cases precise technical advice. None of it is advice for advice' sake, nor technology for the sake of technology. The Social Communication sector is working hand in hand with the Youth Ministry, Formation, Missions sectors as represented by their respective departments, on behalf of the charism and the common mission. Together they are helping us to inculturate, propose and spread a faith perspective based on our Father Don Bosco's vision, in a rapidly changing world.

Summing up: the Congregation is committed through education and anticipation to give a voice back to the young, to help them to find themselves, and to accompany them with patience and trust as they build their own lives, and to offer the means to gain a livelihood; but at the same time, we are committed to offering them a way of relating to God they will find suitable for them. And we want to do this living in their world and speaking their language, walking side by side with them, not only as those for who we primarily work but above all as travelling companions. Or does the fact have nothing say to us that

²⁶ Cf. M. CASTELLS, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, University Press, London 2001, p. 282.

we came into existence as a Congregation, on far off 18 December 1859 *among* a group of youngsters, to be exact *with* 16 of them, adolescents between 15 and 21 years of age, who having experienced the effect on their own lives of being rescued and helped by Don Bosco, wanted to take part in his mission, taking on a role of major protagonists?

To recreate the Salesian charism in the most varied situations in which we find ourselves, it is not enough to adapt it to the different circumstances of young people; much rather, it is necessary to invest in the young, helping them to become the protagonists, the trusted co-workers without ever forgetting that they are the very reason for our consecration to God and for our mission.

3. The early Church, the model and norm for inculturated evangelisation²⁷

The gospel came to birth, was formulated and proclaimed within a particular culture. We know that the first affirmations about the resurrection of Jesus (cf. *1 Cor* 15,3-5; *Acts* 2,24-35), about his being the Messiah (cf. *Acts* 5,42; 9,22) and his universal Lordship (cf. *Acts* 2,36), as well as the calls to conversion (cf. *Acts* 2,40; 3,19), were all formulated in the cultural categories proper to Israel. While this new faith was being presented to the Jews, there was no need to add long explanations of expressions used (cf. *Acts* 3,21-26), nor an introduction to the underlying thought (cf. *Acts* 2,25-32.34-35). It is enough to think of Peter's first preaching in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (cf. *Acts* 2,14-41) in order to find a good example of evangelisation that is perfectly inculturated in the religious mentality of both the preacher and his listeners.²⁸

A mission which succeeds because it is well inculturated

Only twenty five years after the death of Jesus, and thanks to the marvellous missionary expansion undertaken by the group of the 'Hellenists' (cf. *Acts* 6,1; 9,29), in Christian communities believers of pagan origin and culture become the majority. It is obvious that the oldest disciples of the Lord were not prepared to cope with the situation which was developing as a consequence of the opening up of the gospel to the Gentiles and of their incorporation in the life of the community.

It was no longer a question of finding a place in the community for single individuals, as had been the case with the eunuch (*Acts* 8,26-40) or with the centurion Cornelius (*Acts* 10,1-11,18). It was necessary to become accustomed to the presence of whole communities of different ethnic extraction, mentality and customs, within the one and definitive people of God. The community of Jerusalem itself, where from the beginning there had been believers from varied cultural backgrounds (cf. *Acts* 2,5-12; 6,1; 9,29), had experienced the difficulties which living together had brought (*Acts* 6,1-6) and had even suffered persecution

²⁷ For this biblical reflection I have relied on JUAN J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Paolo di Tarso. Una introduzione alla vita e all'opera dell'apostolo di Cristo*, LAS, Rome 2009, pp. 177-192.

²⁸ Another good example of the inculturation of the Gospel, which was not successful however, is the address by Paul at Athens, "a city full of idols" (*Acts* 17,16-31). When Paul spoke to a curious audience about a God unknown to them, they let him speak until he mentioned the resurrection of a dead person ..., an affirmation culturally unacceptable.

because of it (Acts 8,1-3). What was at stake was the very identity of the new shared common life arising from the one confession in Christ Jesus.

The detailed information provided by the sources confirms the importance attributed to this conflict by both Paul, one of those directly involved (Gal 2,1-10), and Luke (Acts 15,1-35). Even though the two accounts are not a complete formal summary nor even impartial, one can gather the essentials from them; the discussion centred on the problem of circumcision: should it or should it not be imposed on new non-Jewish Christians? Basically there was the desire to integrate the pagans among the Jewish people as a condition *sine qua non* of their insertion in the Christian community. Circumcision had been and continued to be, the *sign of the covenant* (Jn 17,11), the identification mark of the people of God and the proof of its fidelity; consequently it was not considered sufficient to believe in Jesus; this faith had to be grafted onto the regime of the mosaic law.

The praxis of Hellenist Christians, for whom circumcision was not imposed – as on the other hand the Jews did with the ‘fearers of God’ – so as not to raise obstacles in the way of the conversion of pagans, was considered by some an opportunistic tactic contrary to the salvific will of God. We owe it to Paul that he clearly made known and passionately defended a missionary practice which did not impose on the believers coming from paganism the need to become like the Jews; it is true that it was not he who initiated this approach, but he made it his own coherently and with conviction (Acts 11,22). Paul speaks about the distinction between the ‘gospel of noncircumcision’ he preached, and the ‘gospel of circumcision’ (Gal 2,7), which had Peter as its main spokesman. It should be noted that here it is a matter of two expressions which are unique in the whole of ancient literature. In this way the one gospel (Gal 1,6-9) is accepted in different ways, according to the ‘cultural’ perspective of those listening; what is preached is always and only Christ Jesus; but not in the same way, and not with the same practical implications, for Jews and Gentiles.

Unity in the faith, diversity in the way it is lived

Behind these events a paradigm can to be found, in other words a norm to guide action: in fact, a great change is beginning to take place in the history of Judaism, in which an heir to its own promise makes an appearance; he does not feel obliged to observe the law, which until then had been the only guarantee of participation in the covenant with God. This fact is even more decisive for the origin of the Christian community, since the gospel of Jesus was already being lived, ‘independently of the Mosaic law’ (Rm 3,21), freed therefore from that Jewish culture which until then had been its womb and covering.

At stake was nothing less than the [self]awareness of the Christian community, which saw itself progressively detached from the law of Moses and therefore no longer just Jewish. It was not that the law had become useless; it had preserved its value but only for some, while faith in the Lord Jesus was offered to all and for the salvation of all. The followers of Christ, whether Jews or gentiles became from that time on and for always the new people of God, the true Israel.

If on the converts from paganism no other servitude was to be imposed than that sweet yoke of faith in Christ, the pagan-Christian communities were recognised as members by absolute right of the body which is the Church; within it all were living the one faith, but not all in the same way. As Paul was to write half way through the 50's, each one was to continue to live 'in the part which the Lord has allotted to him' (*1 Cor 7,17*): just as the pagan did not have to become a Jew in order to be a Christian, likewise the Jew did not have to give up living as a Jew in order to become a Christian. In this way Christian life was expressed in a plurality of cultures because a single culture exclusively Christian did not exist.

For the Judo-Christian communities, and for the evangelisation of the Jews, the prescriptions which were valid until that time remained in force. But that Jewish understanding of the law, of the history of salvation and of the people of God which did not permit along side it any other way to salvation was destroyed. This meant a great change – painful certainly – for the first Christians who were all Jews: they could continue to obey the law (*1 Cor 9,20-21*), as part of their ancestral way of life and customs, but they could not exclude their non-Jewish brethren from the faith. In this way the way was open not to the fusion of groups culturally heterogeneous, but focusing rather on living together as brothers, each one preserving his own identity.

Remembering the poor

The agreement reached by both parties made it possible to proclaim the Gospel to two separate audiences, that of the pagans and that of the Jews, and declared equal rights between the two missions already in fact in operation: one could be, indeed one should be Christians, according to Jewish custom or that of the pagans (cf. *Gal, 2,14*). Thus there were different ways of living the faith, while it remained the one, just as the common shared life was one.

This unity, sealed by a handshake "in a sign of communion" (*Gal 2,9*), was confirmed by a request to "remember the poor" which Paul and Barnabas were only too ready to accept. This fact is not insignificant. Paul at once declared that he took this task very much to heart; and in fact, collecting money for the poor of Jerusalem became for him an integral part of his mission of evangelisation (cf. *Gal 2,10; Rm 15,25-26; 1 Cor 16,1-3; 2 Cor 8-9*). The 'poor,' it should be remembered, were the Christian Jews in Palestine, who at a time of great enthusiasm for the immediate return of the Lord had placed at the disposal of the community "goods and possessions" (*Acts 2,45; 4,32-35*). Not forgetting them became for Paul an important part of his ministry, in order to strengthen the communion between the different churches (cf. *1 Cor 11,23-26; Rm 15,27*), so much so, that he came to consider it as a form of worship, and himself the minister of Christ (*Rm 15,16*).

This 'remembering' was not limited solely to economic assistance, but brought about in a practical way the unity of the Church; it was a way of fulfilling a mutual 'debt of love' among them (*Rm 13,8*). Paul could not imagine a believer, Jew or pagan, who could think that he had no need of the other (cf. *1 Cor 12,14-26*).

A living together that brings problems with it

An important question left unanswered by the assembly, to judge from Paul's own testimony (cf. *Gal* 2,11-21), was the freedom to take part in the common table on the part of Christians coming from the pagan world. The social and cultural reluctance shown by the Jewish Christians to sit at table with everyone (*Lv* 17,8-14; 18,6-9) reflected a traditional and deeply felt fear – a way of thinking always present in a minority of communities – of being assimilated and of losing their own identity. Two models of the mission, with different ritual and cultural demands, could only make life together difficult. The living together of Jews and pagans, within the same Christian community, in this way was put under threat. Would it not have been better to confess the same faith in communities kept separate by social, cultural, religious barriers?

Even though, for different reasons, neither Luke nor Paul agreed with this suggestion; Luke mentions the so-called 'apostolic decree' (cf. *Acts* 15,13-29; 21,25). In this it was forbidden to eat meat sacrificed to idols (*Lv* 17,8; *1 Cor* 8,10); they were to abstain from blood (*Lv* 17,10-12) and from the flesh of animals which had been suffocated (cf. *Gn* 9,4; *Lv* 17,15; *Dt* 14,21); they were to avoid illegal unions (matrimony between blood relatives?) (cf. *Lv* 18,6-18; *1 Cor* 5,1-13). These commands, cultural in origin, were based on Old Testament laws for pagans living in Israel (cf. *Lv* 17-18); and, according to rabbinical tradition, were part of the seven commandments which everyone had to obey.

The existence of such a decree presupposes in the Christian community a twofold presence, Jewish and pagan, and shows that difficulties remained in the common life to which the mission to the gentiles had given rise. The prohibitions of things considered 'abominations,' were connected to the fact of 'ethnic Christians' belonging to the Judeo-Christian community 'and were aimed at facilitating relations between the two groups. They were intended therefore to encourage living together, eliminating the more repugnant connotations which the Jews associated with the pagans. Imposing only these obligations on the 'ethnic Christians' (*Acts* 15,29), did not raise questions about their Christian identity; rather it sanctioned freedom regarding circumcision and the law, but asked for some renunciations of a cultural nature, in order to facilitate the common life for the Jewish Christians. There is a principle here: more important than one's own culture is the brother for whom Christ died, as Paul will say elsewhere (*1 Cor* 8,11).

Paul appears to ignore this imposition: he does not speak about it in his account of the events (*Gal* 2,9) and it never appears in his letters, even though on some occasions he had to face similar problems (cf. *1 Cor* 5-6; 8,1-11,1; *Rm* 14). In any case, the lack of any regulation which would give full recognition to Christians coming from paganism as brothers loved by God, soon became evident.

The fact and the principle

On account of these tensions, within the Christian community of the 50's a dangerous situation, close to a schism, was created which the assembly of

Jerusalem wished to overcome. It was recognised, not without considerable effort, that the Christianity which was coming into being was not just a Jewish style of a Messianic movement. If it were considered possible to be conscious of one's own identity, the universal nature of salvation ought to be defended all the more.

The Council of Jerusalem offers us some points to resolve our problems about the inculturation of the gospel, offering us openings regarding ways of facing up to and resolving them. We can learn to see:

- 1° That the real problems of the Christian communities are those which arise *from the preaching of the gospel*. The concern to safeguard the gospel in all its truth (*Gal 2,5.14*) came after the work carried out in the mission, and was a logical consequence of it. And again: with regard to the problem dealt with in Jerusalem, Christians did not have ready-made solutions; they sought them in the community by means of dialogue and fraternal discernment.
- 2° That the preaching of the gospel, having to be adapted to *Jews and Gentiles*, responds to the practical historical circumstances, and has to be adapted to the needs of the listeners; precisely on this account problems will not be lacking for the confession of the one faith and for life in common. These problems, however, in so far as they are inevitable, cannot break the communion which arises from the one vocation to salvation.

If in order to communicate salvation to the one hearing the Word, the preaching of the gospel needs to be 'inculturated', in order to live the common shared salvation, one's own culture is negotiable; it is Paul himself who witnesses to this: "So though I was not a slave to any human being I put myself in slavery to all people to win as many as I could. To the Jews I made myself as a Jew, to win the Jews; to those under the Law as one under the Law (though I am not), in order win those under the Law. To the weak I made myself weak to win the weak. I accommodated myself to people in all kinds of different situations so that by all possible means I might bring some to salvation. All this I do for the sake of the gospel that I may share its benefits with others." (*1Cor 9:19-23*). On the other hand, it is the brother for whom the Lord died who can never be sacrificed. The line that can never be crossed in the proclamation of the gospel is not therefore the culture through which it is transmitted, nor that in which it is received, but the companion in faith who can never be rejected. The reason for this is that culture, while very important, does not have an absolute value, because only love is absolute.

4. Looking at Don Bosco

In the seventies Don Bosco reached "the summit of his enterprises and his activities", guided solely by "the primary aim he had always taken as his life's mission: the salvation of the young, assistance, education"²⁹: to the care and expansion of the by now numerous works for youth were added the worries and the laborious procedures needed to give life to and to obtain juridical recognition for the organisations of support and of animation, which were the Salesian Congregation, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the

²⁹ PIETRO BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. II, LAS, Rome ³2009, p. 9.

Union of Salesian Cooperators. “At the same time as this, in 1875, the final initiative was developed, the missionary one ... There quickly followed the universalisation of the educational methods and the so-called Salesian spirit, giving rise to an operational and spiritual movement virtually as vast as the world.”³⁰

The ideal of the missions had always accompanied Don Bosco³¹: he lived in a period of a great missionary re-awakening, so that his call to be an apostle of youth came to him and developed as “the development of an initial idea ..., that of winning souls through the Christian education of the young, especially the poor, and through the style and the methods devised for this”³² in his educational system. So, for Don Bosco, the missions became “the priority area in which it was possible to exercise his special vocation as the apostle of youth.”³³ As he was gradually discovering God’s plans, he turned towards projects which were different but complementary: “he continued to turn his attention to the problem of the missions and, at the same time, he began to favour the idea of founding his own Institute.”³⁴

Certainly, the evangelisation of Patagonia was a *missio ad gentes*, a genuine *plantatio Ecclesiae*, which was deliberately preceded by the presence of the Salesian missionaries among the Italian emigrants in Buenos Aires and San Nicolás de los Arroyos, 250 km to the north-west of the capital. This, not only because of their cultural proximity and their moral support, (in fact “they would not find themselves isolated, but among friends, among their fellow Italians”³⁵), but above all, because the disastrous religious and moral situation of the immigrants made “more necessary a presence among the Italians than among the natives.”³⁶ Don Bosco agreed that his confreres should apply themselves, in the first place, to the priestly ministry, and to the education of the sons of the Italian workers’ families. This was an apostolate not so very different from what the Salesians were undertaking everywhere else. He believed, among other things, that in this way his missionaries would be able to prepare themselves better for

³⁰ PIETRO BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I, LAS, Rome ³2009, p. 370.

³¹ Cf. BM X, pp. 46-48. “The former missionary aspirations which in the years of the Convitto led him to learn a little Spanish and to pack his bags in order to join the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Don Bosco himself explains, never left him.” (PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità cattolica*. Vol I: Vita e Opere, LAS, Rome ²1979, p. 168).

³² Cf. ALBERTO CAVIGLIA, “La concezione missionaria di Don Bosco e le sue attuazioni salesiane”, in *Omnis terra adoret Te* 24 (1932) p. 5.

³³ LUIGI RICCERI, ‘Il Progetto missionario di Don Bosco’, in *Centenario delle Missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*. Discorsi commemorativi, LAS, Roma 1980, 14.

³⁴ AGOSTINO FAVALE, *Il progetto missionario di Don Bosco e i suoi presupposti storico-dottrinali*, LAS, Roma 1976, p. 10. Don Bosco’s missionary project gave rise to an exceptional increase in vocations; as he himself recognised: “One of the effects of the missionaries’ departure was the increased number of applicants, priests included, for the Congregation...an ever greater number applied for admission into the Society.” (BM XI, p. 382).

³⁵ Cf. PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità cattolica*. Vol I: Vita e Opere, LAS, Roma ²1979, p. 171.

³⁶ DON CAGLIERO, *Lettera a Don Bosco* (04.03.1876), ASC A1380802.

the mission among the indigenous people (“savages”, as he used to call them)³⁷, in obedience to the command of the Lord.³⁸ In his own mind, in fact, the ‘missions’ in Patagonia occupied the first place.³⁹

But both in the apostolate among the Italian immigrants, and in the mission centres among the aborigines, Don Bosco gave special preference to young people most in need and to providing education: “But we can, I saw it in a dream,” it is Don Bosco speaking, “we know that a missionary who gathers a goodly group of young men about him will make progress and do much good.”⁴⁰ And speaking with the Pope about the evangelisation of Patagonia, he says that he had considered planning “a chain of schools ...along our side of the border almost separating it from the rest of the continent.”⁴¹ Fr Barberis says, “Don Bosco’s best hopes for *the successful future of his missions was linked to his Salesians’ preference for poor youngsters*: one who starts out on this road, the Blessed declared, will not go backwards.”⁴²

The decision to “work for the ordinary people with the education of poor youth”⁴³ was not only an inspired, because effective, method of evangelisation⁴⁴ but was and is the strategic choice which defines the missionary dimension of the Salesian charism⁴⁵: “without education, in fact, there is no long-lasting and profound evangelisation, there is no growth and maturing process, there is no change of mentality or of culture.”⁴⁶

Until 1966 the missions appeared in the Constitutions as one of the apostolic works “on behalf of youth especially the poor and abandoned” (art. 7) and in the present Constitutions it is said that missionary work, recognised as “an essential

³⁷ “ ‘Savages’ as used by Don Bosco is a broad term indicating all the inhabitants of Patagonia, no longer only the Indians in an uncivilised state; this explains how he could hope to find sons of the Indians ready to be prepared for the priesthood” (EUGENIO CERIA, *Commento alla lettera 1493, A don Giovanni Cagliero*, 12.09.1876: *Epistolario* III Ceria, 95). Cf. FRANCIS DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)*, SEI, Torino 1996, pp. 957-958.

³⁸ See the farewell address of Don Bosco at the departure ceremony on 11 November 1875, in GIULIO BARBERIS, *Cronichetta*, quad. 3 bis, 3-9; *Documenti* XV, 311-319. The idea of the *missio ad gentes* will re-appear in Don Bosco’s farewell address to the departing missionaries in the following years.

³⁹ Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO, ‘Dalla pedagogia dell’Oratorio alla pastorale missionaria’, in Pietro Braido (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore. Scritti e Testimonianze*, LAS, Roma³1997, p. 200.

⁴⁰ BM XII, p. 200.

⁴¹ BM XII, p. 162.

⁴² BM XII p. 200 (the italics are mine)

⁴³ It seems to be an expression of Don Bosco, taken from a long conversation with Fr Barberis on 12.08.1876. Cf. GIULIO BARBERIS, *Cronichetta*, Quaderno 8, pag. 75: ASC A0000108.

⁴⁴ “Having Poiché attirati i giovani, one could also, by means of the education of the sons spread the Christian religion among the parents” (GIULIO BARBERIS, “La Repubblica Argentina e la Patagonia”, in *Letture Cattoliche* 291-292 [1877] 94).

⁴⁵ “In other words a ‘Salesian’ mission in the course of its efforts to form the first nucleus of the people of God, will leave in the newly born Church the stamp of the sensitivity of Don Bosco’s charism, especially as regards the education of the new generations and concern for problems in the youth sector” (AA.VV., *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco. A guide to the Salesian Constitutions*, SDB Publications, Rome 1986, pp. 308).

⁴⁶ Letter of His Holiness BENEDICT XVI to Fr Pascual Chávez, Rector Major S.D.B. on the occasion of the General Chapter XXVI, in “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”. *Documenti Capitolari*. CG26, Editrice S.D.B., Roma 2008, p. 91.

feature of our Congregation”, “mobilizes all the educational and pastoral means proper to our charism” (C. 30).

At the death of Don Bosco the Salesians were present in America in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. They were different countries with different needs and solutions, but the missionary strategy of Don Bosco remained unchanged. He had such confidence in his intuitions that he had no doubts in predicting (1876) a promising future for his missionary strategy: “In time it will also be adopted in all the other missions. Why do things differently in Africa and the Orient?”⁴⁷

Committed as we are to taking God to the young, dear confreres. let us take up the challenge of the inculturation of the Salesian charism as a fundamental part of our mission, “as a call to fruitful cooperation with grace in facing cultural diversity”⁴⁸ in the young people with and for whom we are working. Let us look again at Don Bosco, so that we can, indeed we must, learn from him and from his farsighted apostolic wisdom, made evident in the transplanting of the Salesian life and mission in America, “the greatest enterprise of our Congregation.”⁴⁹

For this reason I want to present to you **some of the elements which I consider essential for implanting and developing our charism** wherever, we as Salesians carry out the mission of the Church. Living and working in all the political, social, cultural and religious contexts imaginable, we always need to be identified with Don Bosco, with his non-negotiable pastoral options, and with his pedagogical method which is right on the mark.

A gesture very much to the point

“When the Venerable Don Bosco sent his first sons to America,” Don Rua wrote on 1 December 1909, “he wanted a photograph taken which showed him in their midst as he gave Don Giovanni Cagliero, the leader of the expedition, the book of our Constitutions. How many things Don Bosco was expressing in this gesture! It was as though he were saying: ‘You will be crossing the high seas, going to unknown lands, you will have to deal with people with different languages and customs, perhaps you will be exposed to great trials. I should like to accompany you myself, to comfort, console and protect you. But what I cannot do myself, this little book will do.’”⁵⁰

Don Rua was referring to the historic photograph which today – an inspired choice! – is in our Constitutions, at the beginning of the text.⁵¹ In it, in a pose

⁴⁷ GIULIO BARBERIS, *Cronichetta*, Quaderno 8, pag. 84: ASC A0000108. Cf. JESÚS BORREGO, “Originalità delle Missioni Patagoniche di Don Bosco”, in MARIO MIDALI (a cura di), *Don Bosco nella Storia*. Atti del 1° Congresso Internazionali di Studi su Don Bosco, LAS, Roma 1990, p. 468.

⁴⁸ VC 79.

⁴⁹ Don Bosco, *Letter to Don Giuseppe Fagnano* (31.01.1881): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 14. At the beginning of the mission he had written to the Pope that Patagonia was “the principal objective of the Salesian mission” Cf. *Letter to Pius IX* (09.04.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Fr Michael Rua, *Letters and circulars to the Salesians*, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Turin 1965, p. 498.

⁵¹ It was the first photograph Don Bosco specifically wanted, and he made use of the services of the well-known and expensive, Turin studio of Michele Schemboche. Don Bosco wanted to

specifically chosen by himself, Don Bosco preserved for posterity his handing over in person the book of the Constitutions to Don Cagliero; through them he was handing over himself. That Don Bosco is present in the Constitutions is not a clever invention of his successors,⁵² the identification comes from Don Bosco himself. In fact he wanted his sons to think of the Constitutions as a loving souvenir from him, his living testament.⁵³ “If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our constitutions,” he wrote in his Spiritual Testament.⁵⁴ Rightly therefore, Salesian tradition, from Don Rua onwards, has seen in the Constitutions “always present Don Bosco, his spirit and his sanctity.”⁵⁵

The inculturation of the Salesian charism has therefore, as an essential prerequisite the practice of the Constitutions, a joyful and faithful practice, *sine glossa*, but suited to the times and places of the mission, open to the culture of the place and of the young, a practice which, in addition to ensuring that we obey his words and make our own his choices, is a credible expression of our “staying with him” and a filial commitment to “doing as he did” for the salvation of the young. Don Bosco will be able to accompany us wherever we may be sent, he will comfort and console us, he will protect and guide us, if we associate ourselves closely *with him* living *like him*. Living the Constitutions is to incarnate Don Bosco: the Salesian who practises the Constitutions represents Don Bosco and makes him return among the young. For them nothing is more urgent: they need him, they have a right to him.

“Some special souvenirs”

In the address he gave at the solemn and moving farewell celebration for the first Salesian missionaries⁵⁶ on 11 November 1875, Don Bosco promised to leave them “some written mementos that would be a father’s testament to the sons he would perhaps never see again. He had jotted them down in a notebook while on

immortalise the event for posterity and to publicise it. Mr Giovanni B. Gazzolo, the consul of Argentina, who had come from Savona, is wearing a splendid uniform; the missionaries are dressed in the Spanish manner, with the characteristic cloak, and the crucifix on display; Don Bosco is wearing a cassock for formal occasions. “We can therefore consider this picture as symbolic of him, his ‘official photograph’” (GIUSEPPE SOLDÀ, *Don Bosco nella fotografia dell’800 (1861-1888)*, SEI, Torino 1987, p. 124).

⁵² “We can say that in the Constitutions we have all of Don Bosco; in them his unique ideas about the salvation of souls; in them his perfection with the holy vows; in them his spirit of seetness, amiability, tolerance, piety, charity and sacrifice” (DON FILIPPO RINALDI, “Il Giubileo d’oro delle nostre Costituzioni”, ACS 23 [1924] p. 177)

⁵³ “Make every point in the Holy Rule a souvenir of me” (MB X, p. 647. Cf. MB XVII, p. 296)

⁵⁴ Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma ³1997, p. 410.

⁵⁵ AA.VV., *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*. A guide to the Salesian Constitutions, SDB Publications, Rome 1986, p. 80.

⁵⁶ A moving and contemporary chronicle of the event can be found in CESARE CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina*. Lettere dei missionari salesiani, in *Lectures Cattoliche* 286-287 (1876) pp. 41-60; “Partenza dei missionari salesiani per la Repubblica Argentina”, in *L’Unità Cattolica* 266 (1875) p. 1062; MB XI, pp. 590-591.

a recent trip by train. He had had copies made, and he gave one to each missionary as he left the altar of Mary Help of Christians.”⁵⁷

Written in his own hand and almost without any corrections, the short text appeared to be a collection of a variety of pieces of advice mainly of an ascetical nature; but in fact they are, “notes for a very practical treatise on missionary ministry,”⁵⁸ “a short synthesis of missionary ministry and spirituality,”⁵⁹ based on four key ideas: zeal for the salvation of souls; fraternal, apostolic and educational charity; a profound religious life and aspects of missionary strategy.

When Don Bosco drew up the ‘Souvenirs’ between September and October 1875, his missionary experience was limited, and that of his sons non-existent. He was writing shortly before sending the first expedition, forced by circumstances and full of paternal concern regarding his young missionaries and “he did his best to make them happy, giving generously of the treasury of his experience”⁶⁰, an experience acquired through contact, personal or by letter, with great missionaries during and after the First Vatican Council, and which he himself would continue to reflect on during the succeeding years while carrying out his missionary project in America.⁶¹

In spite of this, Don Bosco repeatedly insisted that the ‘Souvenirs’ should not be forgotten. The first missionaries were still on the high seas on the way to Argentina and he already asked Fr Cagliero to read “together the souvenirs I gave you before your departure,”⁶² and it was a request he would often repeat.⁶³ In fact, during the decade 1875-1885 his correspondence consisted solely in “a strong recommendation, explicit or implicit, about the ‘Souvenirs,’”⁶⁴

Why did Don Bosco give such importance to these pieces of advice, even though he was not an experienced missionary and he did not have any specific competence in the area? Without doubt it was because he was very concerned that his young missionaries should cultivate religious life, personal and community, remaining faithful to the typically Salesian way of life; he considered this even more important than being and presenting themselves as able apostles and competent missionaries. Everything was based on the awareness that the mission in Argentina was the first *missio ad gentes* that he had undertaken, that his young missionaries would have to create a new form of apostolate, both

⁵⁷ BM XI, p. 364-5.

⁵⁸ ANGEL MARTÍN, *Origen de las Misiones Salesianas*. La evangelización de las gentes según el pensamiento de San Juan Bosco, Instituto Teológico Salesiano, Guatemala 1978, p. 172.

⁵⁹ PIETRO BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. II, LAS, Roma ³2009, p. 156.

⁶⁰ BM XI 366. Cf. CESARE CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina*. Lettere dei missionari salesiani, in *Lecture Cattoliche* 286-287 (1876) pp. 57-58.

⁶¹ Thus AGOSTINO FAVALE, *Il progetto missionario di Don Bosco e i suoi presupposti storico-dottrinali*, LAS, Roma 1976, p. 76; FRANCIS DESRAMAUT, *Il pensiero missionario di Don Bosco*. Dagli scritti e discorsi del 1870-1885, in *Missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*, LAS, Roma 1976, pp. 49-50.

⁶² *Letter to Don Cagliero* (04.12.1875): *Epistolario* II Ceria, p. 531.

⁶³ Cf. *Letter to Don Cagliero* (14.11.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 113; *Lettera a Don Valentino Cassinis* (07.03.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 27.

⁶⁴ JESÚS BORREGO, “Recuerdos de San Juan Bosco a los primeros misioneros. Edición crítica – Posibles fuentes – Breve comentario en la correspondencia de Don Bosco”, *RSS* 4 (1988) p. 181, nel quale sono citate parecchie lettere di Don Bosco ai missionari in Argentina.

among the emigrants and with the indigenous peoples, that they would have to transplant a charism not yet well defined and, what was more, far from himself and from the religious and cultural environment in which they had grown up.

In my opinion, in the 'Souvenirs to the missionaries' one can see the preoccupation of the Founder, almost the apprehension of the Father⁶⁵ regarding the fate of the mission; and this from the dawn of the stupendous Salesian enterprise as was the presence in Argentina. Some suggestions should also be noted in order to be an incentive for missionary activities and foundations, and even more determining, ***some sound advice for safely facing up to the present challenge of the inculturation of the Salesian charism***. What I am about to refer to is certainly not everything that has to be done, but, and I am convinced of this, it is the essential; there can be other things, but this must not be missing. *It is Don Bosco who is speaking to us:*

«We want souls and nothing else »

The supreme objective, the fundamental reason, the *point of departure and the criterion for the assessment* for any kind of effort in Salesian inculturation is not different – nor could it be – from that of the Congregation, that is the salvation of souls, nothing else. Don Bosco repeats it to the missionaries from the very start, in his words of farewell (“God [...] for the good of their souls is sending you”⁶⁶) and in the first of the souvenirs he gives them (“Seek souls and not money, honours or dignities”⁶⁷). He will repeat this constantly in his letters to the youngest missionaries – a significant fact.⁶⁸ Ten years later Fr Lasagna was to write: “We want souls and nothing else, Make this resound in the ears of our confreres.” And on his death bed, in a moment of “great anguish,” to Bishop Cagliari he said just these words: “Save many souls in the missions.”⁶⁹

«Always remember that God wants us to exert all our energies for poor and abandoned children »

Among the characteristic features of Don Bosco's missionary strategy the most distinctive and significant was his “*choice of the working classes*”, “a constant and unwavering choice which follows the two parallel lines of the poor and the young ... In mission lands this is as clear as the sun.”⁷⁰ Don Bosco wanted the fundamental option, his personally and that of the young

⁶⁵ In the farewell address Don Bosco said to the missionaries: “I only say that even though a in this moment my soul is saddened at the thought of your departure, my heart is greatly consoled in seeing our Congregation strengthened.” “Never forget that here in Italy you have a father who loves you in the Lord, and a Congregation that thinks of you in every circumstance, provides for your needs and will always welcome you as brothers” (BM XI pp. 361.362).

⁶⁶ BM XI, p.360.

⁶⁷ BM XI, p. 364.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Lettera* al chierico A. Paseri (31.01.1881): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 10; *Lettera* al chierico A. Peretto (31.01.1881): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 11; *Lettera* al chierico L. Calcagno (31.01.1881): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 13; *Lettera* al chierico J. Rodríguez (31.01.1881): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 17.

⁶⁹ BM XVIII, p. 449.

Congregation, to be transplanted in America by his first missionaries: he shows this in the fifth piece of advice (“Take special care of the sick, the children, the aged and the poor”⁷¹), which he was to repeat with almost the same words ten years later: “take special care of the children, the sick and the aged.”⁷²

A year had not passed since the first expedition and he was already thinking about sending another “twenty heroes for the other world”, when he writes to Don Cagliero: “Do what you can to gather together poor young boys, but give the preference to those, if it is possible to have them, who come from among the indigenous peoples”;⁷³ and a fortnight later he was insisting: “Always remember that God wants our efforts to be directed towards the Pampas and Patagonia and towards poor and abandoned children.”⁷⁴ That this special concern was not merely an opportunistic tactic is clear from his ‘Testament,’ when, after having wished for the Congregation “a happy future ahead” “prepared by Divine Providence,” he adds: “The world will always welcome us as long as all our concern is for the under-developed peoples, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger,”⁷⁵ To serve and evangelise the young, and among these those most in need, is the reason for our being in the Church (C. 6), an element “very specifically part of Don Bosco’s charism”.⁷⁶ In the places where we are sent we must choose the young, and among these the most wayward or abandoned, if we want to be true Salesians. It is up to us, present throughout the world and close to so many young people, to incarnate God and to inculturate the Salesian mission.

«A mission having been started, efforts should always be made to set up and consolidate schools »

The missionaries sent by Don Bosco to Argentina did not ‘have to’ open schools to assist the Italian immigrants nor to evangelise the indigenous people. If they took the risk of doing so it was on Don Bosco’s precise instructions. “Once a foreign mission has been founded,” he said in the “Spiritual Testament” it shall be continued with energy and spirit of sacrifice Always concentrate your efforts on opening schools.”⁷⁷ This is in fact the missionary strategy put into practice in Patagonia, so that Don Bosco himself said: “I just want to spend the remaining

⁷⁰ SEBASTIANO CARD. BAGGIO, “La formula missionaria salesiana”, in *Centenario delle Missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*. Discorsi commemorativi, LAS, Roma 1980, p.43.

⁷¹ BM XI, p. 364.

⁷² Letter to don Pietro Allavena (24.09.1885): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 339.

⁷³ Letter to don Giovanni Cagliero (13.07.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 72.

⁷⁴ Letter to don Giovanni Cagliero (01.08.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 81. Don Cagliero presto se ne persuaderà.

⁷⁵ BM XVII, p. 250. Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma ³1997, p. 437.

⁷⁶ PASCUAL CHÁVEZ, Concluding Address at the GC 26, in “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”. Chapter Documents GC26, S.D.B. Publishers, Rome 2008, p. 138.

⁷⁷ BM XVII, p. 250. Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma ³1997, p. 438.

days of my life”⁷⁸, which he did entirely in the field of education: “opening colleges in the towns bordering the lands of the Indians, welcoming there the sons of the indigenous people, and through them drawing close to the adults. It was a tactic similar to the one which his long experience as an educator and director of schools had found effective in civilised places.”⁷⁹

For Don Bosco, the *Missio ad gentes* and education were not two different or successive apostolic activities; he was convinced (and this is a particular characteristic of his way of carrying out the mission in the Church)⁸⁰ that in order to have an effective mission it was necessary to make great efforts in the education of youth. “The corner stone and the vital principle of Salesian missionary practice is [...] the redemption of unbelievers by means of the ministry of education among the youth and the children ... Where the mission is a Salesian one, along side and together with the priestly role there should be the school ministry and teaching. All Salesian houses [...] are a school ..., a specific means for evangelisation.”⁸¹

This strategic choice of Don Bosco, my dear confreres, should make us think; it is an invitation to rethink and perhaps even, and why not, reorganise our apostolate: if the young are “the home ground of our mission” (Fr Egidio Viganò), their education is the ordinary way in which we reach out to them, and the stable way of being with them as bearers of the Gospel. A presence of ours which is not clearly educative, a Province which does not promote the formation, formal or informal, of the young, ... how can it be called Salesian? To multiply and re-enforce the education we offer in the whole world and in each of our works is the right way to inculturate our charism.

«God called the poor Salesian Congregation to promote ecclesiastical vocations among poor youth »

Once a mission was begun, the effort to set up schools had as its aim “cultivating vocations for the priesthood and finding some sisters among the

⁷⁸ Don Bosco, *Letter to Card. Alessandro Franchi* (10.05.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 60.

⁷⁹ PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità cattolica*. Vol I: Vita e Opere, LAS, Rome 1979, p. 174. Cf. JESÚS BORREGO, “Estrategia misionera de Don Bosco, in Pietro Braido (ed.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa a servizio dell’umanità*. Studi e testimonianze, LAS, Rome 1987, pp. 152-164.

⁸⁰ The priority given by Don Bosco to education soon gave rise to surprise and some criticism: “Some people are saying that in Don Bosco’s missions in America they are now only concerned with opening colleges and setting up hostels” (GIOVANNI B. FRANCESIA, *Francesco Ramello, chierico salesiano, missionario nell’America del Sud*, Tip. Salesiana, San Benigno Canavese 1888, p. 117). Fr P. Colbachini, a Missionary of St Charles (Scalabrinian), wrote to a priest friend of his in 1887: “The Salesians in Rio, in San Paolo, in Montevideo, Buenos Aires, and all the Salesians in the world, except for a few in Patagonia, don’t concern themselves with the mission [...] They become teachers and directors of colleges of arts and trades ...: it is a great mission, but it is very different from what most people would think” (M. FRANCESCONI, *Inizi della Congregazione Scalabriniana (1886-1888)*, CSE, Roma 1969, p. 104).

⁸¹ ALBERTO CAVIGLIA, “La concezione missionaria di Don Bosco e le sue attuazioni salesiane”, in *Omnis terra adoret Te* 24 (1932) pp. 5-10.12.20.24-26.

girls.”⁸² For Don Bosco the forming of vocations was the “hidden” project which guided his most important decisions, especially in the field of education.⁸³ As he wrote in his ‘Spiritual Testament,’ he was convinced that “God called on the poor Salesian Congregation to foster ecclesiastical vocations among boys who were poor or of low social status.”⁸⁴

Scarcely six months had passed since the first expedition when, in July 1876, he asked for and received permission to open a novitiate in America; the Salesians – just ten and very young⁸⁵ – had discovered, he tells Pius IX, “some boys who show a desire to become priests, and seven of these having made their request were accepted into the Salesian Congregation. It is their desire to become missionaries and, they say, to go to preach to the under-developed peoples.”⁸⁶

As well as indicating the enthusiasm for vocations which the presence of the young missionaries provoked, this note also reveals Don Bosco’s firmest intentions: to see to it that “the Patagonians evangelise the Patagonians”. For him to have native vocations was “the most suitable means to attract adults to the faith, to give to Patagonia its new Christian and civilised face.”⁸⁷ Native vocations therefore were the priority means in advancing and ensuring education and evangelisation in the missions. “They [vocations] have already begun to appear among the local people and I hope that from this in a few years only an occasional expedition [of new missionaries] will be necessary.”

“Wherever you go,” he writes to Don Fagnano, just appointed Prefect Apostolic of Southern Patagonia – “try to set up schools, set up junior seminaries too, so as to cultivate, or at least seek out some vocations for the Sisters and for the Salesians.”⁸⁸ And in the report presented to Leo XIII, he will list among the purposes of the Salesian missions in America, “to open hostels close to the indigenous peoples so that they may serve as junior seminaries for the most poor and abandoned. In this way we are making progress in propagating the gospel among the Indians.”⁸⁹

⁸² BM XVII, 250. Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma ³1997, p. 438.

⁸³ Cf. ARTHUR J. LENTI, *Don Bosco. Historia y Carisma. I: Origen: De I Becchi a Valdocco*. Juan J. Bartolomé – Jesús G. Graciliano (eds.), CCS, Madrid 2010, pp. 495-96; ARTHUR J. LENTI, *Don Bosco. Historia y Carisma. II: Expansión: De Valdocco a Roma*. Juan J. Bartolomé – Jesús G. Graciliano (eds.), CCS, Madrid 2011, pp. 558-559. 574.

⁸⁴ BM XVII, p. 236. Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma ³1997, p. 415.

⁸⁵ All between the 37 years of age of Don Cagliero and the 20 of the cleric Giovanni B. Allavena.

⁸⁶ Cf MB XII, p. 659. *Letter to Pius IX* (07.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 70,

⁸⁷ PIETRO SCOPPOLA, *Commemorazione civile di Don Giovanni Bosco nel centenario della sua morte*. Tipografia Don Bosco, Roma 1988, 22.

⁸⁸ *Letter to Don Fagnano* (10.08.1885): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 334. “If in the missions and *in any other way* you come across a young man who gives some hope of the priesthood, be aware that God is placing a treasure in your hands” (*Letter to Don Pietro Allavena* (24.09.1885): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 339. The italics are mine)

⁸⁹ *Memoriale* on the Salesian Missions presented to Leo XIII (13.04.1880): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 569.

Don Bosco was so convinced of the urgent need for vocation promotion among the natives, and of the immediate success it would have, that before sending the missionaries, he offers them, again among the 'Souvenirs,' a "small treatise" for the cultivation of *ecclesiastical* vocations, concentrated entirely on love, prevention and frequent reception of the sacraments.⁹⁰

That he did not see his dream fulfilled during his lifetime,⁹¹ does not weaken but rather re-enforces the strength of his conviction. Like him, we Salesians, "are convinced that many young people are rich in spiritual potential and give indications of an apostolic vocation" (C. 28). The lack of vocations experienced in some Provinces and the vocational frailty which occurs to some extent everywhere challenge us even more than in Don Bosco's day to create "a vocation culture in every setting, such that young people may discover life as a call."⁹²

A ministry, which, even if well-planned and effective in its results, does not promote a vocation culture in our centres would not be Salesian. The norm, criterion and the process of the inculturation of the Salesian charism has been and should remain the promotion of vocations in the Church. The revival in vocations is not only a proof of the effectiveness of our apostolic work; even more it is the fulfilment of our specific charism.

«Absolutely all of you can become true evangelical labourers »

In transplanting the Salesian life and mission in America, Don Bosco always relied on all the means he could possibly find, whether in his religious family, in the Church or in society. First among them all were the Salesian Brothers, who were never missing from any expedition starting with the first; in fact, among the eight pioneers of the mission in Patagonia, in January 1880, there would also be a Brother, as Don Bosco had promised the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, not only to do catechetical work,⁹³ but also to teach "agriculture with the more usual arts and crafts."⁹⁴

More characteristic of Don Bosco's mind was the numerous presence in very quick time of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The first six Salesian Sisters – three of them were in their teens, while the Superior, Sr. Angela Vallese, was only 24 years of age – joined Don Bosco's missionary project in the third expedition, at the end of 1877.⁹⁵ Their presence was quite a novelty: "it is the first

⁹⁰ JESÚS BORREGO, "Recuerdos de San Juan Bosco a los primeros misioneros. Edición crítica – Posibles fuentes – Breve comentario en la correspondencia de Don Bosco", RSS 4 (1988) p. 203. The 18th piece of advice can be found on p. 208. In the 'Spiritual Testament' he will bring together and amplify these points regarding vocation ministry.

⁹¹ There was to be a delay until 1900 before in the aspirantate in Bernal, Argentina, there were two sons of natives among the 12 coming from the region of Río Negro (LINO CARBAJAL, *Le missioni salesiane nella Patagonia e regioni magallaniche*. Historical-statistical Study, Salesian Press, San Benigno Canavese 1900, p. 104).

⁹² GC26, 53.

⁹³ "Don Bosco gave them the official title of catechists" (CESARE CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina*. Lettere dei missionari salesiani, in *Letture Cattoliche* 286-287 (1876), p. 36.

⁹⁴ Letter to Mons. Aneiros (13.09.1879): RAÚL A. ENTRAIGAS, *Los Salesianos en la Argentina*. III, Plus Ultra, Buenos Aires 1969, p. 85

⁹⁵ BM XIII, pp. 235.241-243.

time there will be Sisters [...] in those remote regions.” But soon it was seen as providential; their proverbial charity contributed “very considerably, without any doubt, to the conversion of the Indians,”⁹⁶ and to the education of poor and abandoned girls. By 1884 they had educated about a hundred girls and brought the same number to an edifying life. In 1900 there were already the first native professed.⁹⁷ Sharing the same missionary practice, Salesians and Salesian Sisters together transplanted the Salesian life and charism in America.

“Co-apostles of Patagonia”, “an instrument in the salvation of thousands of young children,”⁹⁸ were the Cooperators, already present and at work in the old and in the new continent, and seen by Don Bosco as his external face, the moral, spiritual and material support of his apostolic endeavours. When “officially invited to take over the care of Patagonia,” he says that “the time of mercy has come for those indigenous people,” writing to the Cooperators declaring that only “full of trust in God and in your charity I accepted this arduous enterprise.”⁹⁹ Faith in God and confidence in the charity of good souls were the resources which underpinned his apostolic dreams. For this reason he saw the presence of Cooperators “almost as a necessity for every Salesian house so that it can have life and increase.”¹⁰⁰

Always under pressure to respond to the missionaries’ need “for personnel and money”, Don Bosco wanted to increase the group of the Cooperators: young people and adults, priests and laity, bishops and even the Pope¹⁰¹ were invited by him to take up his apostolic project: “all of you here,” he will say in his famous conference at Valdocco on 19 March 1876, “priests, students, artisans and coadjutors, all of you can become true evangelical labourers in the Lord’s vineyard.”¹⁰²

There is no doubt; having seen the unlimited horizons of his missionary project and conscious of his own insufficiency and that of his institutions, Don Bosco sought ever wider forms of collaboration, giving rise in fact and quite intentionally to a movement both ecclesial and civil, “a vast movement of persons who, in different ways work for the salvation of the young” [and who] live in communion with each other, share the same spirit.. continue the mission he began” (C. 5). Making the Salesian Family “a true apostolic movement on behalf of the young”¹⁰³ is for us, not only a way of acting so as to change hearts, minds and structures, but a good way to inculturate the charism. It is an expression of

⁹⁶ “Los verdaderos héroes del desierto”, in *La América del Sur* 4 (1880) 1152.

⁹⁷ Cf LINO CARBAJAL, *Le missioni salesiane nella Patagonia e regione magallaniche*. Historical-statistical Study, Salesian Press, San Benigno Canavese 1900, pp. 63-64.104-105.

⁹⁸ “Three thoughts of Don Bosco to the Cooperators” (28.01.1886), in *Bollettino Salesiano* 3 (1886) p. 32.

⁹⁹ Cf. “Don Bosco ai benemeriti Cooperatori e Cooperatrici”, in *Bollettino Salesiano* 1 (1886) p. 3. In preparing the expedition in 1886 he once again appealed to their charity: “listen with me to the voice of the dear missionaries and to the cry which so many of the poor of those far-off lands raise to us” (*Circolare ai Cooperatori* [15.10.1886]: *Epistolario* IV Ceria, p. 362).

¹⁰⁰ “Monsignor Cagliari nel Chili”, in *Bollettino Salesiano* 9 (1887) 110.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Letter to Don Giovanni Cagliari* (01.08.1876): *Epistolario* III Ceria, p. 81. MB XIII pp. 496, 606

¹⁰² BM XII, p. 459.

¹⁰³ GC26, 31.

fidelity to Don Bosco. It is up to us to make our own what Don Bosco had so much at heart, and to promote it in his way and for the same ends.

«Let the world know that you are poor»

First among the ‘Souvenirs,’ as though it were the basic principle of the evangelising efforts of the missionaries, Don Bosco wrote: “Seek souls and not money.” He was not unfamiliar with the situation in which most of the Italian priests who had come to accompany the thousands of immigrants were living in Argentina. “It pains me deeply to say this,” the archbishop of Buenos Aires wrote “but the majority come to make money and nothing else.”¹⁰⁴

Precisely because the shortage of resources, of personnel and funding was proverbial in Don Bosco’s apostolic undertakings, and since “ours ought to be real poverty ... in our rooms, our clothes, our food, books and journeys, etc.”,¹⁰⁵ the first missionaries lived in straightened circumstances and in the midst of great difficulties; when Fr Tomatis was asked what they usually ate in community, he replied with a smile: “In the morning bread and onions; in the evening onions and bread.”¹⁰⁶

It is not surprising that Don Bosco did not insist too much on this subject in the letters he sent to the missionaries; he seemed to be more concerned, and considerably so, about the debts incurred, the restitution of loans, which was a topic contained in the regular communications to the Cooperators. His was a poverty which was austere, industrious, full of ideas (“in our straightened circumstances we shall make every sacrifice to come to your aid”¹⁰⁷), supported by an unflinching trust in Providence. But precisely for this reason, since the first missionary communities survived “on loans and without any organised cooperation”¹⁰⁸, much more significant is Don Bosco’s advice: “Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the eyes of God and will win the hearts of men.”

For Don Bosco poverty in one’s personal life was an indisputable virtue, but not a lack of means in the works of education.¹⁰⁹ As the fundamental recommendation addressed to all Salesians, he left written in his ‘Spiritual Testament’: “Love poverty [...] Let no one be able to say: these furnishings do not suggest poverty, the poor do not eat or dress or have rooms like this. Whoever gives cause for remarks of this kind brings disaster upon our Congregation, which must be able to pride itself on its vow of poverty. Woe to us if those from whom we seek alms are able to say that we live an easier life than they do.” And

¹⁰⁴ Letter of Mons. Aneiros to Don Bosco (18.12.1875): MB XI, p. 603.

¹⁰⁵ MB IX, p. 701.

¹⁰⁶ *Cronaca di San Nicolás de los Arroyos* (1875-1876) pag. 10: ASC F910.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Don Giovanni Cagliero (06.08.1885): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, p. 328. Cf. Letter to Don Giacomo Costamagna (31.01.1881): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, p. 7; *Circolare ai Cooperatori Salesiani* (15.10.1886): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, pp. 360-363.

¹⁰⁸ JUAN E. BELZA, *Luis Lasagna, el obispo misionero*. Introducción a la historia salesiana del Uruguay, el Brasil y el Paraguay, Editorial Don Bosco, Buenos Aires 1969, p. 169.

¹⁰⁹ An anecdote told by Don Rinaldi about Don Bosco’s thoughts on Salesian poverty can be found in: BM XIV, pp. 435.

he linked the future of the Congregation to the poverty of life of its members: “Divine Providence has prepared a happy future for our Congregation [...] When the desire for ease and comfort grows up among us our pious Society will have run its course.”

As Jesus sent his first apostles as poor men ordering them not to take anything for the journey, since they had the gospel (cf. *Mk* 6,8), Don Bosco wanted his Salesians to be poor so as to have their treasure in poor youth: “all our concern is for the under-developed peoples, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth which no one will envy and no one will take from us.”¹¹⁰

Those for whom we work in the first place, the young people most in need are the reason for our ‘espousing’ apostolic poverty, our witness of it “helps the young to overcome their selfish possessive instinct and opens them to the Christian sense of sharing” (C. 73). Proclaiming with our life that God is our only treasure, detaches us from everything that makes us insensitive to God while it opens us up and makes us available to the needs of the young. Truly living evangelical poverty wherever we have been sent, in addition to realising the true meaning of *cetera tolle*, helps us to incarnate the Salesian charism: it is in fact a sure criterion which guides its implantation and provides a means of assessment wherever and whenever it is implemented.

«With the gentleness of Saint Francis of Sales the Salesians will draw to Jesus Christ the peoples of America»

Don Bosco thought of the missionary activity in America as a continuation of what he had done and was considering doing in Turin and in the other foundations in Europe. “The cherished objectives of this mission” he wrote to the Pope were “to make provision for the Italians and to try something in the pampas [...] The first is already in hand [...] With regard to the second, to bring the gospel to the under-developed peoples, it has been determined to open colleges, hostels, centres near those tribes.”¹¹¹ The Salesian preferred option for schools and for the young in the missions was for Don Bosco a well-established conviction; however, evangelising *by educating* or as he put it “drawing close to the great mass of the people through the education of poor youth”, was, in so far as it was a missionary method, a novelty which was not intelligible to everyone. In addition, although already in use it could lead to some failures, since as Don Bosco thought, “those to whom the education of the young is entrusted either do not use a suitable method, or are lacking in the right spirit, or are not capable.”¹¹²

Therefore in the ‘Souvenirs’ for the missionaries, he again draws attention to the Preventive System. In fact there was no real need. In sending his own people

¹¹⁰ Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma ³1997, p. 435. 437-438.

¹¹¹ Official Report to Pius IX (16.06.1876), page 4: ASC A8290109.

¹¹² Don GIULIO BARBERIS, *Cronichetta*, Quaderno 8, pag. 75: ASC A0000108. Cf. MB XII, pp. 279-280.

to mission lands, all he did was to transplant the major options, the pedagogical method and the style of education which he had used at Valdocco, and in which his missionaries had grown up and been educated. Nevertheless he was to insist on apostolic charity (*“Seek souls ...”, “take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and of the poor ...”*) experienced as both fraternal charity (*“Love one another advise one another correct one another, and never be carried away by anger or rancour, let the good of one be the good of all ...”*)¹¹³ and pedagogical charity (*“Charity, patience and gentleness, no humiliating reprimands, no punishments ever. Be kind to everyone you can reach, and do no harm to anybody. This applies to the Salesians whether they are among themselves, the pupils, the boarders or others”*)¹¹⁴.

Although Don Bosco took for granted the practice of his style of education, it was not easy to transplant it in American lands. Not all the Salesian houses, Don Rua writes to Bishop Cagliero, “are directed with gentleness and with the preventive system”; and Don Bosco was to send to Don Costamagna, the Provincial from 1880, after the death of Don Bodrato, a letter which could be considered a short treatise on the Founder’s thinking about education: “The preventive system really is our own; never harsh punishments, never words which humiliate, no severe reproaches in the presence of others ... Use should be made of negative punishments, and always in a way so that those who are warned become our friends more than before, and never go away feeling humiliated by us ... Gentleness in speech, in action, in advising wins over everything and everyone.”¹¹⁵

Today as yesterday, in other continents just as in the past it was in America, there are real challenges to putting the preventive system into practice, due to cultural reasons, or to changes in the world of youth. First of all one notes, here and there, difficulty in understanding it and putting it into practice, and often a attitude towards to the young which is not Salesian is justified on the grounds that, in that part of the world it is for adults to speak and take the lead, and that all the young have to do is obey. In other cases, the educational method is marked by an authoritarian style which leaves no room for reason and much less for loving kindness. Finally, in other parts of the world, it becomes really difficult to know how to interpret and to incarnate the preventive system, especially where cultural changes have brought the young to a high level of self sufficiency, so that they feel that they have all the rights possible without any of the responsibility.

It is absolutely necessary to know the preventive system well if we are to develop its great potential, modernise its applications, re-interpret its great basic ideas (the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; a living faith, a firm hope, theological-pastoral charity; the good Christian and the upright citizen; cheerfulness, study and piety; health, study and holiness; piety, morality, culture; evangelisation and civilisation), the great methodological guidelines

¹¹³ BM XI, pp. 364-365. JESÚS BORREGO, “Recuerdos de San Juan Bosco a los primeros misioneros. Edición crítica –Posibles fuentes – Breve comentario en la correspondencia de Don Bosco”, RSS 4 (1988) pp. 207-208.

¹¹⁴ BM XVII, p. 578

¹¹⁵ Letter to Don Giacomo Costamagna (10.08.1885): *Epistolario* IV Ceria, pp. 332-333.

(making oneself loved before making oneself feared; reason, religion, loving kindness; father, brother, friend; friendliness especially in recreation; winning over the heart; plenty of freedom to jump, run, shout at will). All of this for the formation of new young people capable of changing this world.

I feel I really must say that the preventive system is an essential element of our charism, which needs to be known, updated according to philosophical, anthropological, theological, scientific, historical and pedagogical developments, and that its inculturation in the varied contexts - economic, social, political, cultural and religious in which those we work for are living is indispensable, if we really want to be faithful to Don Bosco and to inculturate his charism. I would dare to say that this is one of the most urgent tasks facing the Congregation.

«Constantly promote devotion to Mary Help of Christians and to the Blessed Sacrament »

An essential element in the Salesian mission is *the presence of Mary*, a typically evangelical conviction (cf. *Jn 2,1.12; Acts 1,14*) and a certainty of faith deeply lived by Don Bosco.¹¹⁶ This active presence of Mary in the life of the Church has been well-described by the title of Help of Christians. Don Bosco's souvenir to the missionaries recommends this "devotion" which needs to be carefully cultivated. "Here not a day shall pass," he said in his farewell address, "without our praying for them [the first missionaries] to Mary Help of Christians, and I believe that Mary who now blesses their departure, will not fail to bless the progress of their mission."¹¹⁷

With the use of the title of "Mary Help of Christians" the Salesian charism is opened up to the missionary dimension, and a feature of Salesian missionary activity is the spreading among the people of devotion to Mary Help of Christians, the celebration of the principal Marian feasts, the publication of booklets and holy pictures, the building of Marian churches in every part of the world, the visible expression of the diffusion of Don Bosco's apostolic and educational charism. "The Holy Virgin Mary" – he wrote in his 'Spiritual Testament' "will continue most certainly to protect our Congregation and Salesian houses, if we persevere in our trust in her and continue promoting her devotion."¹¹⁸

The tradition, uninterrupted since 1875, of consigning the crucifix to departing missionaries in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians expresses that conviction and at the same time becomes the basic condition for the renewal of the Salesian

¹¹⁶ It is Don Bosco's constant wish and prayer for the missionaries: May Mary guide you to win many souls, and to reach heaven: cf. *Letter to Mons. Cagliari* (10.02.1885): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, p. 314; *Letter to Don Costamagna* (10.08.1885): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, p. 333; *Letter to Don Tomatis* (14.08.1885): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, p. 337; *Letter to Don Lasagna* (30.09.1885): *Epistolario IV Ceria*, pp. 340-341.

¹¹⁷ BM XI, p. 361. On the eve of the departure Don Bosco gave Don Cagliari a list of recommendations and errands he had written down, which ended like this: "Do the best you can: God will do what we cannot do. Leave everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians and you will realise what miracles are" (BM XI, p. 369)

¹¹⁸ BM XVII, p. 235. Don Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel sac. Gio. Bosco a' suoi figliuoli salesiani* [Testamento spirituale]. Edizione critica curata da Francesco Motto. Cf. PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Rome ³1997, p. 415.

charism in all times. Mary, as she is represented in the painting by Lorenzone, is Mother of the Church and the Queen of the Apostles, who assists and accompanies Salesian work in the world. The crucifix which is consigned is an expression of the real possibility of being called by God towards horizons of generosity without limit. For so many sons of Don Bosco, courage and fidelity have made them capable of giving their lives in martyrdom.

A typical consequence of this pastoral and educational approach, which gives visible prominence to the presence of Mary Help of Christians through the building of churches and the erection of statues dedicated to her, is the victory over any tendency to take up opposing positions, and to have recourse to violence, by the promotion of a culture of peace and of reconciliation among peoples, groups and families, emphasising her presence as the “Star of Evangelisation” at the birth and expansion of the Church.

Of particular significance for us is the putting of Marian devotion side by side with the sacramental relationship with the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist. This shows that our entrustment to Mary reaches its high point in recognising her as “woman of the eucharist”¹¹⁹: the more Mary makes us eucharistic minded, so much the more she carries out her mission, that of leading us to Jesus, of making us carry Jesus within us, of teaching us to make of our lives a sacrifice pleasing to God, in union with the perfect sacrifice of the Son. In the typical Salesian way of seeing things, the work of education and evangelisation find in the relationship with the Lord Jesus and Mary the “columns,” the support and the expression of a strong faith in God to whom nothing is impossible, and trust in Mary in whom God “has done great things” (*Lk* 1,49).

What should we think, dear confreres, of Salesian foundations, sometimes more than a hundred years old, where we have not succeeded in making our youngsters and co-workers feel the maternal presence of Mary, or even worse, where we have allowed a progressive separation from Christ in the Eucharist to spread? Can we call them ‘Salesian,’ even though they continue to educate and evangelise? I sincerely believe that if we want to remain faithful to our Father’s original project, Mary has to return as the motive and guide of our evangelisation, and the Eucharist as its centre of gravity and its missionary nature.

Conclusion

My dear confreres, as a Congregation we have a splendid history of the inculturation of the Gospel in mission lands. There have been, and there still are Salesians who have fully taken their place among the people, learning their language, rebuilding their world-view, collecting their traditions and customs, writing books of grammar and dictionaries defending their lands and their institutions, setting up federations of native peoples. It is a history of which we cannot but be proud. Our recognition, our esteem and admiration, our gratitude go to them all. None the less, in this letter I wanted rather to deal with the subject of inculturation from the point of view not so much of the gospel as of the charism, so as to indicate that in every continent (Europe, America, Asia, Africa,

¹¹⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical letter on the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church (17.04.2003) 53-58.

Oceania, and *the Digital Continent*), in every kind of context (social, political, cultural and religious) and type of work (formal education, non-formal, informal, primary level, secondary level, university level of evangelisation or mission, of social development) the charism has to be inculturated. This is the reason for pointing out the criteria indicated by Don Bosco himself in his 'Souvenirs' to the first missionaries. In fact, these continue to be our reference point. Neither those to whom we are sent, not the mission, nor the method are optional for us. They have been given to us as an inheritance to be taken up, safeguarded and developed.

I would like to conclude with two passages as eloquent as they are demanding from the post-synod exhortation "Vita Consecrata", which, speaking precisely about the mutual enrichment of inculturation and charism says: "The challenge of inculturation ought to be taken up by consecrated persons as a call to fruitful cooperation with grace in facing cultural diversity. This presupposes serious personal preparation, mature gifts of discernment, faithful adherence to the indispensable criteria of doctrinal orthodoxy, moral integrity and ecclesial communion. Supported by the charism of their founders and foundresses, many consecrated persons have been able to approach cultures other than their own with the attitude of Jesus, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7). With patient and courageous efforts to initiate dialogue, they have been successful in establishing contact with the most diverse peoples, proclaiming to all of them the way of salvation.¹²⁰ And in the following number the exhortation adds: "In turn, a genuine inculturation will help consecrated persons to live the radical nature of the Gospel according to the charism of their Institute and the character of the people with whom they come into contact. This fruitful relationship can give rise to ways of life and pastoral approaches which can bring enrichment to the whole Institute, provided that they are consistent with the founding charism and with the unifying action of the Holy Spirit."¹²¹

With you all I want to start this period of three years in preparation for the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco, which ought to be for us all a real renewal, spiritual, missionary, educational, charismatic. To Mary Help of Christians our mother and teacher I entrust each and every one of you.

Fr Pascual Chávez V., SDB
Rector Major

¹²⁰ VC 79.

¹²¹ VC 80.