

PRESENTATION BY THE RECTOR MAJOR

My dear confreres,

Four months have passed since the closure of the 28th General Chapter. It concluded three weeks earlier than planned due to the pandemic that made our continued stay at Valdocco impossible. Today I am offering you this presentation with sentiments of profound joy for what we experienced at Valdocco and with satisfaction for what was – I believe – a fruitful work carried out by all of us Chapter members and then completed by the General Council. This is because the Chapter Assembly entrusted the Rector Major and his Council with the task of finishing what had remained unfinished at the time of the early closure.

The document that now reaches all confreres through this publication is subtitled “Post-Chapter reflection” and not “Chapter documents”, as has customarily been the case in the past. This is because the Chapter Assembly did not arrive at the point of final approval of the text by vote. Only a few Chapter deliberations, especially those of a legal nature, saw the light of day during the first four weeks of our work.

As I have said on other occasions, because of the circumstances we had to live through GC28 was a “special” Chapter. Nevertheless, it was not a Chapter without its guidelines and policy directions. In fact, the document I am presenting to you contains a first part that both I and the confreres on the General Council consider to be very important for the animation, government and life of the Congregation over the coming six years.

These are the *programmatic guidelines that the Rector Major offers the Congregation for the six-year period from 2020-2026*. In this wide-ranging proposal you will find, dear confreres, the reflection that followed on from the General Chapter, a fruit of the Chapter itself and a synthesis of the journey taken within our Congregation over the previous six years. It is a rich and wide-ranging reflection that first of all captures the spirit of what is contained in the Message that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, sent to the General Chapter; it also brings

together those elements that the Pope pointed to as essential and that were already part of the reflection developed by the Chapter Assembly on the first two thematic nuclei. The third nucleus – as you know – was drawn up by the General Council.

These programmatic guidelines should certainly be motive for study, analysis and further exploration both by the Provinces and by each confrere, especially by the Rectors for their service of animation and governance of the local communities. I assume that it will be the object of study by the Provincial and his Council.

I maintain that the whole Congregation must follow this path, even if at different tempos linked to the particular nature of each province. It is to do with our identity, is charismatic and offers guidelines and lines of action for our time.

This programmatic text for the six-year period is followed by the *Message of the Holy Father*, which without doubt will touch the heart of every Salesian and above all will be motive for meditation, study, in-depth consideration and personal engagement.

The *three nuclei* proposed as themes for the work of the Chapter were extensively developed, even though they did not go through all the stages of study and development initially intended. The texts offer a wealth of reflections, precise and timely proposals for the life of the provinces and all our presences around the world.

Finally, the *Chapter deliberations* are contained in this document. And as with all General Chapters, there are a number of messages and addresses *appended*.

I consider that the document that you now have in your hands will allow a deeper appreciation of the ecclesial, charismatic and identity-giving motivations that will help us pursue the journey of fidelity that we wish to continue as a Congregation and personally. Our world, the Church and the young along with their families, need us today as they did yesterday, in order to continue on their journey of fidelity to the Lord Jesus. They need us as *significant and courageously prophetic* individuals. May the Lord grant us this gift. Mediocrity and fears would allow us to offer little to the young, and this little would not be able to transform their life and fill it with meaning.

I am also convinced that we all want to belong to a Congregation that feels very much alive, and in which each confrere renews his dedication of himself daily: not just any old how, but by feeling that it is well worth the effort.

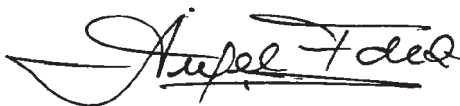
I deeply desire that this “special” GC28 will help each confrere to rekindle the apostolic passion that characterised our Father Don Bosco, so that we can be other Don Boscos today, everywhere in the world, in every culture and every situation.

Let me add a request. As I hand over this document, from a perspective of faith and with great confidence, I ask each one of you, dear confreres, to make it an impetus for prayer, an object of patient study, of careful and meditative reading so that it may touch your heart. I am asking you to internalise the spirituality you will find in these Chapter reflections, and to enter into dialogue with the proposals that seek to be *significant and prophetic in our way of taking them on and translating them into our life*. I believe that a significant time of study, getting to know and internalise them, and of heart-to-heart dialogue before the Lord, must be the principal task entrusted to each confrere, each Province and Vice-Province, each Region and Inter-provincial Conference.

My dear confreres, the promulgation of this *Post-Chapter reflection* takes place on 16 August 2020, two hundred and five years after Don Bosco’s birth and a hundred and sixty-two years since our Congregation began. Until today, the journey of our Congregation and the Salesian Family has been a very beautiful one. If our response continues to be one that is faithful to the Lord, there is no doubt that there is much more that will be written for the good of the young through our daily self-dedication wherever there is a young person in need of Salesians who are capable of being friends, brothers and fathers.

May our Mother the Help of Christians accompany us on this journey and, as she did with Don Bosco, may She continue to do everything. Let us learn from Her what it means to listen attentively to the voice of the Holy Spirit and to be docile to Him; let us learn from Her to cultivate a life deeply immersed in God and simple and convinced dedication every day. This will increasingly make us authentic signs and bearers of God’s Love for young people.

Let us entrust ourselves to our Mother the Help of Christians “that we may become witnesses to the young of Her Son’s boundless love” (C. 8).

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ángel Fernández Artime". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'A' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime
Rector Major

Rome, 16 August 2020
Anniversary of Don Bosco's birth

THE RECTOR MAJOR'S GUIDELINES FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION AFTER GENERAL CHAPTER 28

My dear Salesian confreres throughout the world,

I address you all with great pleasure after the General Chapter and following the conclusion of the first plenary session of the new General Council. With this letter, which I have shared with all the General Council, it is my intention to offer you all, dear confreres, a true “road map” for the next six years, given that the interruption of the General Chapter, right in the middle of its proceedings, did not allow us to have the Chapter documents that would have been the norm and guide for the next six years.

Faced with the painful reality of the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus which has impacted and still continues to afflict the world, we experienced something unique: the interruption of a General Chapter. This is the first time that a similar event has happened in the history of our Congregation – if we exclude the tragic event of the First World War which made it impossible to hold the 12th General Chapter during Fr Paul Albera’s term as Rector Major; that Chapter had to wait almost twelve years.

Nevertheless, in our case the interruption to the work of the Chapter does not in any way imply that the 28th General Chapter was meaningless and did not produce a wealth of content. And in addition, all Chapter members returned to their provinces (some after waiting several months at Valdocco) enriched by the experience they had accumulated and by a Salesian sense of being nourished and strengthened by the “sources of Valdocco”, the sources of our charismatic birth.

Despite the threat of the pandemic and the risk of the assembly being suspended, the Chapter was able to elect the Rector Major and all members of the General Council during the final week, as well as entrusting us with the task of continuing the reflection on the points that had not been tackled.

This letter of mine and everything contained in the work entitled “*Post-Chapter reflection*” seeks to be a faithful response to the mandate received from the Chapter Assembly.

To that we need to add the sense of deep gratitude to the Lord for what we experienced; especially for having experienced it at Valdocco. Our GC28, indeed, was marked in a special way by the fact that it took place at Valdocco, cradle of our charism, the holy place where our Father Don Bosco “responded to the life of the young with a face and a history”¹. So then, we lived the time of our General Chapter at Valdocco with the clear understanding that this *is everyone’s home*.

This is what the Holy Father, Pope Francis, reminded us of. He wanted to give Don Bosco, in the person of his sons gathered in the Chapter Assembly, the beautiful gift of coming to visit us.

The Pope had disclosed to me some months earlier his personal desire to come to Valdocco. At the beginning of the General Chapter, conversations with those in charge of the Pope’s visit had confirmed the visit scheduled for the 6th and 7th of March. Everything was ready. We expected him to arrive on Friday the 6th of March at midday. He would have been with us at Valdocco until the morning of the 7th and then would have made a visit to his family. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic and restrictions imposed throughout the Italian State made this visit impossible – it would have been a unique event in our history, at least for the length of time the Holy Father would have been present and for his direct participation in the General Chapter, as he had wanted.

By telephone, the Pope left us with a greeting that I shared with the entire Chapter Assembly; and the following day we were able to have a copy in hand of the Message he addressed to GC28 that you will find as part of this publication.

¹ FRANCIS, *Message to the members of GC28*, Rome 4 March 2020. I will take advantage of this first note to tell you that my letter will be enriched by quotes from the text of the message that Pope Francis gave thought to for us as a Congregation and as a Chapter Assembly, and that he sent us at the most fitting moment of our reflections and work. Given the importance that the Holy Father’s words have, I have decided not to offer them as footnotes but in the body of this document. It is enough to see the text between inverted commas to recognise that it is the Pope’s words.

From the very beginning of GC28 we were living with a strong awareness that led us to place ourselves in an attitude for “the Spirit to rekindle the charismatic gift of [our] founder”. This is what the Holy Father wanted, inviting us not to close the windows to the noise and clamour coming up from the courtyard at Valdocco, evoking the first Oratory. This “background noise” must accompany us, making us restless and intrepid in our discernment.

This is what we will be busy with over the next six years, for the good of young people throughout the world; young people who had an actual, visible face in the splendid group who spent a few days with us in the General Chapter. They challenged us, they spoke from the heart and mind and we were moved by it.

And since everything at Valdocco speaks to us about Don Bosco and his young people, and because today’s young people are calling on us, speaking to us and waiting for us, we are proposing some goals as a Congregation that will put us in a position to give an answer to the reality today, and that will get us out of our fears and our comfort zones, wherever they are and whatever they are.

These guidelines, dear confreres, have the objective of becoming an action programme for the next six years, in absolute continuity with the path previously travelled by the Congregation and which, for this reason too, gives us strength and courage.

There are a number of challenges we have to face up to over the next six years. I am offering them to you as the fruit of reflection carried out during the General Chapter and following on from it. I am offering them to the entire Congregation, having come to a detailed knowledge over the past six years of the real circumstances we are experiencing and, ultimately, of the Church’s journey. I am offering them to all the provinces after having shared them with members of the General Council, because these challenges ***must be the mirror before which every province around the world is called to compare itself. They need to become the criteria defining the aims, objectives, processes and concrete actions for the next six years in all the places where the charism of the sons of Don Bosco has taken root.***

The challenges that we need to give a response to and the objectives to be pursued are as follows:

- 1. SALESIAN OF DON BOSCO FOREVER. Six years for growth in Salesian identity**
- 2. In a Congregation where we are invited by the “DA MIHI ANIMAS, COETERA TOLLE”**
- 3. To live the “SALESIAN SACRAMENT OF PRESENCE”**
- 4. Formation for being SALESIAN PASTORS TODAY**
- 5. ABSOLUTE PRIORITY for the young, the poorest, the most abandoned and defenceless**
- 6. TOGETHER WITH LAY PEOPLE IN THE MISSION AND IN FORMATION. The charismatic strength that the laity and the Salesian Family offer us**
- 7. IT IS TIME FOR GREATER GENEROSITY IN THE CONGREGATION. A universal and missionary Congregation**
- 8. Accompanying the young towards a SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

1. SALESIAN OF DON BOSCO FOREVER: “Monk or no monk, I am staying with Don Bosco” (Cagliero). SIX YEARS FOR GROWTH IN SALESIAN IDENTITY

“The Lord has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher. We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace. He was deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth; and he was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and living ‘as seeing him who is invisible’” (C. 21).

In my last intervention in the Chapter hall during the GC28 closing address, I made reference to a conversation I had with a confrere the day before. He asked to speak with me and said: “Do not leave us alone. We need help to be truly Salesians, so we do not lose our identity”.

I had a profound sense that right at that moment the Lord was also speaking to us through this confrere of ours, and that he was making us understand the importance and urgency of giving growth to and strengthening *charismatic identity* in our Congregation.

The essential and fundamental point of departure is our circumstance as consecrated individuals. The future of consecrated life, and of Salesian life for us consecrated members, has its *raison d’être* in its foundation, **Jesus Christ**. As people who are consecrated, the *sequela Christi*, the following of Christ, shapes our identity, integrating our pastoral formation within it. As consecrated individuals, as Salesians of Don Bosco, God makes of us “a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting”². And the vocational challenge for all of consecrated life and for us in particular as Salesians of Don Bosco, is that of “always returning to Jesus”, renouncing everything that is not Him or that distances us from Him.

With much humility and clarity of vision we need to recognise that the way out of the crises of religious life, of Salesian life, of the difficulties of each province, will not be found in new projects, nor in

² *Vita Consecrata*, 22.

strategic plans, nor in a “planning 3.0”. Most of the time, in the face of disillusionment, existential fatigue, lack of motivation... it is a case of returning to Christ, to religious life, to Salesian consecrated life. Because, we can live by wrongly believing that everything makes sense when we are doing things. No, dear confreres: without Jesus Christ at the centre of our thinking, feeling, living, dreaming, working... there is no future, and we cannot offer anything that is significant. In the words of Pope Francis: “The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence”³.

Let us not forget that the Salesian mission and the Congregation itself came into being from God, raised up by his Spirit: “With a feeling of humble gratitude we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture, but by the initiative of God” (C. 1); and that each one of us Salesians of Don Bosco, is sent to the young by God himself who sends us (C. 15).

After this “special” General Chapter 28, I believe that 162 years after the beginning of our Congregation, we Salesians are expected to be ready and agile in listening to the breath of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. That we are expected to continue to have Jesus Christ the Lord as our foundation and the centre of our life so that we will *renew the prophecy that must characterise our life*, and continue to grow in our humanity. And this until we become those “experts in humanity” who know, to the point of being moved by it, how to see and contemplate the pain and needs of our brothers and sisters (beginning with those in our communities), of the young, of boys and girls and their families. We must seriously take up our prophetic service. Our specific contribution is to be an icon of Jesus’ lifestyle, totally consecrated to the Father and his Plan for humanity: The Kingdom. Therefore, we are expected to be signs and witnesses of God’s fatherly presence – a gentle presence capable of a tender gaze and with arms thrown wide open especially to the poorest, to our young people – making our brotherliness a reality, making it attractive, alluring, and living with simplicity and moderation.

³ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Rome 19 March 2018, 1.

The Risen Lord invited his disciples to return to Galilee to meet him there and see him once again. This invitation is extremely relevant for us, and expressing myself in Salesian terms, I would like to say that our Galilee for encountering the Lord today, as Salesians of Don Bosco, passes through Valdocco, the beginnings of Valdocco, fragile as they were, but with the strength and passion of the “monk or no monk, I am staying with Don Bosco”, that the young John Cagliero expressed with such ardour and youthful enthusiasm. Valdocco is indeed the spiritual and apostolic atmosphere in which each of us breathes the air of the Spirit, where we nurture and strengthen our charismatic identity. And it is the place of “transfiguration” for every Salesian who, by taking care of all the elements of our spirituality, can contribute to making each of our houses an authentic Valdocco, where it is possible to meet our Lord Jesus Christ face to face in daily life.

Jesus passes by, looks at us with love and calls us to follow him. And in the mystery of this call, in the gaze that does not judge but looks at and searches us from within, in the adventure of walking in his footsteps, everyone can discover the plan that God has designed for each of us in an original form. Today, many of those who decide to abandon the Congregation suffer from the same thing: they have not come into contact with the Lord Jesus and have not had the same passion as the young Cagliero for staying with Don Bosco in order to follow Jesus. That is why sometimes any other pastoral offering that has glimmers of autonomy, self-reliance, independence, management of oneself and one’s own economic resources, exerts in some confreres sufficient fascination to push them to ask to go elsewhere. At times, also the gift of ministerial priesthood is not fully understood and is manipulated and experienced as “power”. This obscures the covenant that God has established with us through the gift of religious consecration that is at the centre of our personal and community life.

PROPOSAL

This six-year period will need to be distinguished by a profound effort in the Congregation to grow in charismatic depth, in Salesian identity in all phases of life, through a serious commitment in every province and every Salesian community to arrive at saying,

as Don Bosco did: “I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys”⁴.

Therefore:

- ⇒ At every stage of formation, with the depth that corresponds to it, we will take care of the elements that give every Salesian his charismatic identity and that will see us fall in love with Don Bosco and the young with the heart of Jesus the Good Shepherd.
- ⇒ We will give priority to the traits of our charismatic identity as consecrated individuals that make us prophetic signs: a happy life with its roots in the Gospel, a strong faith anchored in God; a communion that makes our community life attractive, a prophetic attitude in the face of injustice and evil, and an outlook of hope along with the desire for conversion.
- ⇒ In the Provinces there must be a careful discernment regarding the obediences given to the confreres, so as not to risk losing the authentic sense and passion of the Salesian heart and not to fall into forms of charismatic genericism or a leaning towards diocesan pastoral situations that lead to separation from the Congregation.
- ⇒ We will continue to pay great attention so that as a Congregation we are not infected by the “virus of clericalism and career-seeking”⁵.
- ⇒ In the reflection and sharing within each community we will value the first part of the document “*Animating and governing the community. The Ministry of the Salesian Rector*”, that presents us with “The Salesian Consecrated Identity”.

⁴ *MB XVIII*, 258, also cited in the Constitutions, art.1.

⁵ Cf. FRANCIS, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit*, Rome 25 March 2019, 98. The exhortation has this quote: “Clericalism is a constant temptation on the part of priests who see ‘the ministry they have received as a *power* to be exercised, rather than a free and generous *service* to be offered. It makes us think that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or has anything to learn””, Francis, *Address at the Opening of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (3 October 2018): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 5 October 2018, 8.

2. In a Congregation where the “DA MIHI ANIMAS, COETERA TOLLE” is URGENT

“With a feeling of humble gratitude, we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture, but by the initiative of God. Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth, “that part of human society which is so exposed yet so rich in promise.

The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving: ‘I have promised God that I would give for my poor boys’” (C. 1).

Testimonies from the early times of our congregational history, and the reflection it has developed over the course of the years, highlight something very significant: the saying that best expresses the zeal and pastoral charity of the Salesians of Don Bosco is “Da mihi animas, coetera tolle”.

Dominic Savio, the young lad in the presence of the 34-year-old priest Don Bosco, and who saw those words written over the entrance to his office, understood them perfectly: “I understand; here you do business not with money but with souls”⁶. Looking at Don Bosco, we learn of his profound spirituality and those special qualities as an educator that marked his way of relating to teenagers and older youth. In Don Bosco and his history we encounter the basis of his educative and pastoral activity that is characterised by a very concrete proposal of Christian life; by the attention shown to each young person, along with a commitment to offering concrete responses to their needs; and by his trust in God’s presence.

Our task, above all in accompanying the young, must be characterised by the creative pedagogical and spiritual capacity typical of our Father Don Bosco, by means of which we are able to overcome our remoteness from the sensitivity of the new generations, offering them

⁶ G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane: I. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1040 (or *Salesian Sources*, Kristu Jyoti, Bangalore, p. 1180).

a loving ear and compassionate understanding, prompting the great questions about the mystery of life and helping them to seek the Lord to meet with him.

It was precisely the 26th General Chapter that tackled all this by reflecting on Don Bosco's motto: "Da mihi animas, coetera tolle". So then, with today's insight and with the understanding of our reality, I think I can say that for us it is necessary and **urgent** that our Congregation live, breathe and continue on its path, endeavouring to make the "Da mihi animas, coetera tolle" a reality through proclamation of the Gospel on behalf of our young people and for our own good.

Our mission very often places us on the frontier where we habitually come into contact with Christians of other confessions, members of other religions, with non-believers or lapsed believers: we would like to carry the mission forward with and for them as well. Every time and every place are suited to the Gospel.

My dear confreres, at this time after GC28

- ⇒ **It is urgent that we give absolute priority to the commitment to evangelise the young with conscious, intentional and explicit proposals. We are invited to introduce them to Jesus and the Good News of the Gospel for their lives.**
- ⇒ **It is urgent that we help the young (and their families) to discover the presence of Christ in their lives as the key to happiness and the meaning of their existence.**
- ⇒ **It is urgent that we accompany children, teenagers and older youth in their process of education to the faith, so that they may personally embrace the person of Christ.**
- ⇒ **It is urgent that we be "true educators" who accompany the young from personal experience in dialogue with God in prayer and in the celebration of the sacraments.**

Without this, dear confreres, other titanic efforts of the Congregation will tend towards the goodness of human development and social welfare – that are always very necessary and belong to our charismatic identity – but they will not lead us to the primary reason for which the Holy Spirit raised up the Salesian charism in Don Bosco: "Faith-

ful to the commitments Don Bosco has passed on to us, we are evangelizers of the young” (C. 6). The first purpose of our youth ministry is the conversion of the individual to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

With all the nuances of historical sensitivity that we need to bear in mind and the linguistic understanding of the era that we consider to be necessary, we cannot ignore the essential and constituent element that characterised Don Bosco’s educative and pastoral activity, which the Rector Major, Fr Vecchi, expressed this way: “The pedagogy of Don Bosco is a pedagogy of the soul, of grace, of the supernatural. Once this energy has been activated, the more profitable work of education begins. The remainder, though valid in itself, is preliminary and contributory to this which transcends it”⁷.

The “coetera tolle” makes us ready to leave behind everything that hinders us from going out to those most in need of us. It is the asceticism that emanates from the previous choice, renouncing much (personal tastes, preferences, and even legitimate actions and services) of what does not allow us to devote all the energies of our pastoral heart to what we have given priority to.

PROPOSAL

Therefore, **I am proposing to our Congregation that for the next six years we be demanding of ourselves in responding to the “URGENCY OF OFFERING INITIAL PROCLAMATION WITH MORE CONVICTION**, because ‘Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation’ (*Christus Vivit*, no. 214)⁸.

Therefore:

⇒ The Rector Major and his Council, and every Province, will be committed over these six years to taking appropriate decisions to *qualify the Salesian presence in evangelisation and education to*

⁷ J.E. VECCHI, *Indications for a process of growth in Salesian spirituality*, AGC 354, 1995, p. 26.

⁸ GC28, *Priority of the Salesian mission among today’s young people*. First nucleus, no. 4.

the faith. This is a genuine pastoral, personal and community conversion to which we are called.

- ⇒ We will promote a youth ministry that accompanies the young with a view to their personal maturity, growth in faith and that has the vocational dimension as its unifying principle (DF 140, ChV 254)⁹.
- ⇒ We will continue to be committed at all levels of the Congregation to bringing about “a *change of mentality in the face of the mission that must be carried out*” (Pope Francis to GC28)¹⁰.
- ⇒ We will make known and esteemed what was essential for Don Bosco and for so many generations of Salesians as a fundamental pillar of our work of evangelisation and education: the beautiful presence of our Mother the Help of Christians in our educational proposals and in our prayer with the young.

⁹ *Final Document of the Synod on Youth*, henceforth DF. ChV is *Christus Vivit*.

¹⁰ Pope Francis told us: “The ‘Valdocco option’ of your 28th General Chapter is a good opportunity to compare yourselves with the sources and to ask the Lord: ‘*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*’. *Tolle* especially anything that has been accumulated along the journey and that remains, and that in other times might have been an appropriate response, but today hinders you from configuring and shaping the Salesian presence in a meaningful evangelical way in the different situations of the mission. This requires that we overcome the fears and apprehensions that may arise from believing that the charism was reduced to or identified with certain works or structures; it implies a *change of mentality* in the face of the mission that must be carried out”.

3. LIVING THE “SALESIAN SACRAMENT” OF PRESENCE

“Our vocation is graced by a special gift of God: predilection for the young: ‘That you are young is enough for me to love you very much.’ This love is an expression of pastoral charity and gives meaning to our whole life.

For their welfare we give generously of our time, talents and health: ‘For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life’ (C. 14).

In his Message to the Chapter, Pope Francis spoke to us of the “Valdocco option and the charism of presence”, the charism I freely allow myself to define as the “*Salesian sacrament of presence*”. *The Pope writes that* “Even before things that need to be done, the Salesian is a living reminder of a presence in which availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential features which give rise to processes. The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any kind of technical and functional reductionism. The first call is to be a joyful and gratuitous presence among young people”. Our being disciples of the Lord, our profound and authentic way of being apostles of the young first of all passes through our being among the people and, in a special way, among the kids, among the young.

What has been said in colloquial terms cannot be better expressed. Dear confreres, we are talking about recovering the first love of our vocation, the love we experienced when we felt that the Lord was calling us to be a joyful and free presence among the young. I venture to say that there is not a single Salesian who has not felt this love in his heart one way or another.

We reflected on this during GC28. We realised that many young people live in a real situation of orphanhood even though they have parents. The young people themselves told us this in their message to GC28: “we are afraid, confused, frustrated and need to be loved... ours is a hard struggle... We believe that our society is individualistic and that we, too, are often individualistic... We want to... [return] to the first love that is Christ, to be his friends. We want to journey to-

wards spiritual and personal growth and we want to do it with you Salesians”¹¹.

We do not doubt this truth of the young people themselves, a truth we recognised at the same time in the Chapter hall: “They ask us for time and we give them space; they ask us for relationships and we provide them with services; they ask us for fraternal life and we offer them structures; they ask us for friendship and we provide activities for them. All this commits us to rediscovering the riches and potential of the ‘family spirit’”¹².

The young people who accompanied us during the General Chapter addressed a strong appeal to us to be a significant presence for them. They told us explicitly: “Our search for spiritual and personal fulfilment worries us. We want to journey towards spiritual and personal growth and we want to do it with you Salesians... We would like you to guide us, in our situation, with love... Salesians, do not forget us young people because we have not forgotten you and the charism you have taught us! We want to express this with all our hearts. Being here, we have fulfilled a dream – in this special place in Valdocco, where the Salesian mission began, bringing together Salesians and young people for the Salesian mission with our desire to be saints together. You have our heart in your hands. You must take care of your precious treasure. Please do not forget us and continue to listen to us”¹³.

Dear confreres, it is a great privilege to hear the heartbeat of young people’s hearts! I have no doubt that throughout the Congregation there are so many confreres who are true Don Boscós today for the young. But I am not satisfied with this. We must all be like this. We must continue on the way of conversion. This commitment demands from us a change of mentality and rhythms of life, openness of mind and heart, overcoming habits that have struck root and become crystallised. Young people say that they love us, that they need us, that they are waiting for us. Don Bosco’s expression “*studia di farti amare*”, strive to make yourself loved, is fully relevant today. Pres-

¹¹ Cf. *Young people’s letter to GC28*.

¹² GC28, *Priority of the Salesian mission among today’s young people. First nucleus*, no. 5

¹³ *Young people’s letter to GC28*.

ence does not only consist in spending time with young people as a group, but in meeting them individually in a personal way, establishing a relationship that allows us to get to know and listen to their desires, their difficulties and struggles and, at times, their fears and qualms. It is a relationship that seeks to go beyond superficial knowledge, offering friendship characterised by mutual confidence and sharing. Loving kindness or goodness has thus become a substantial form of Don Bosco's charity. He is asking us today, as he did in the Letter from Rome in 1884, for the capacity of encounter, readiness to accept, familiarity. Like Don Bosco, we still have to cultivate the art of taking the first step... eliminating distance and barriers and giving birth to the joy and the desire to see each other again, to be friends... This art also consists in creating, with patience and dedication, an atmosphere rich in humanity, a family atmosphere where young people feel very free and able to express and be themselves, joyfully assimilating the values that are proposed to them. This pedagogy of family spirit is also a school of faith for young people. We offer love and unconditional acceptance so that they may discover, progressively and from an option of personal freedom, trust and dialogue, as well as the celebration and community experience of faith.

And let us not forget that Salesian presence is a special presence, meaning that the Salesian treats young people with deep respect, meets them at their level of freedom, and treats them as active and responsible members of the educative and pastoral community. This is why the Salesian learns a style of listening, dialogue and personal and community discernment. And this applies not only to ministry among the young but also to our houses of formation, where "we learn to be Salesians".

But this mode of presence is not possible if one is distant from young people: far from them physically and far from their psychology and cultural world. This is the danger. The right alternative is to live as Salesians, as sons of Don Bosco, with the same experience of fatherliness as he lived with his youngsters, one that translates into a real love and at the same time real "authoritativeness" in their regard. Starting from the great value that presence among the young has for us. In the Pope's Message to GC28 we read: "Your consecration is,

above all, a sign of the gratuitous love of the Lord, and for the Lord in his young people, which is not defined primarily by a particular ministry, function or service, but by a **presence**. Even before things that need to be done, the Salesian is a living reminder of a presence in which availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential features which give rise to processes. The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any kind of technical and functional reductionism. The first call is to be a joyful and gratuitous presence among young people”.

Allow me to remind you that presence today also touches on the digital world, a new real areopagus for us, a habitat for today’s young people. Here too we need to be present with a clear Salesian identity, with the desire to bring the proclamation of the good news, and simply with the joy and simplicity of disciples of the Lord ¹⁴.

PROPOSAL

I propose for this six-year period, as an expression of our CONVERSION, what was already requested by GC26, and that is:

“Let each Salesian find the time to be present with the young as a friend, educator and witness to God, whatever his role in the community may be”¹⁵.

Despite the fact that it seems strange that I have to ask a Salesian to find the time to be with young people, I consider it extremely necessary.

Therefore, the proposal is to:

⇒ Foster an **effective and affective presence among and with the young**, in communion of life and action. And to enhance and relaunch the good experience and the renewed role of the assistant, not only for the practical trainee but for the entire life of the Salesian of Don Bosco.

¹⁴ “The digital revolution asks us to understand the profound transformations that are taking place not only in the field of communication, but above all in the way we set up and manage our human relationships” (Nucleus 1 as drawn up by GC28).

¹⁵ GC26, “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*”, no. 14.

- ⇒ Ensure the style of the **oratory setting** in every presence: climate of familiarity, welcome and acceptance, spirituality and the dimension of profound joy.
- ⇒ Accompany the energy young people have by fostering their **active role and leadership** in every house and in the Salesian mission that is carried out there.
- ⇒ Ensure the presence of formators in the formation communities where the Salesian spirit is communicated in the first instance through example: being among them, strongly helping the young confreres to be primarily responsible for their own formation.
- ⇒ Engage the Social Communication Department, at various levels, in offering resources and stimuli for a constant process of verification, updating, inculturation of the Salesian mission in the digital habitat where young people live, involving our universities in a network with other centres and agencies that more closely follow and study the transformations that the digital world is bringing among the new generations.

4. FORMATION FOR BEING SALESIAN PASTORS TODAY

“Enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel, lived according to Don Bosco’s spirit, the Salesians commits himself to a formation process which will last all his life and will keep pace with his maturing in other ways. He learns by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation at the various moments of his life and accepts the ascetical demands it makes on him.

With the help of Mary, his Mother and Teacher, he gradually becomes a pastor and educator of the young in the lay or priestly state which he has embraced” (C. 98).

Formation is truly a precious gift from the Lord that brings to maturity in us, as Salesians of Don Bosco, the inestimable gift of the Father’s call to the Christian and consecrated vocation. Despite the fact that the situation regarding vocation numbers is not uniform throughout the world, every year the Congregation is blessed with the admission of around 450 novices. We thank God because, as our Constitutions say, every call is an indication of how much the Lord loves the Church and our Congregation (cf. C. 22).

Nevertheless, the Chapter Assembly also recognised some of our weaknesses and expressed them thus: “We note, in fact, that at times the Salesian consecrated identity seems weak and not deeply rooted: the primacy of God in personal and community life does not always emerge clearly; forms of clericalism and secularism risk bringing ‘spiritual worldliness’ into the Congregation; the promotion of the lay Salesian in some regions is scant; the lack of trained personnel in the area of Salesianity, despite the abundant material available, is a sign of insufficient attention to the deepening of the charism”¹⁶. In point of fact this emerged very strongly during the work of our 28th General Chapter.

I would dare to say that if this happens in all religious congregations and also in the formation of diocesan seminarians, *the abyssal gap that we perceive between formation and the Salesian mission is,*

¹⁶ GC28, *Profile of the Salesian today. Second nucleus*, no. 1.

without doubt, *a huge challenge for us*. Perhaps this gap is due to the great distance that exists between the situation of initial formation houses and life in the apostolic communities (the ordinary communities in all the provinces); perhaps the phenomenon also depends on the fact that formation does not always succeed in touching the heart of the young Salesian in formation; perhaps understandings and information are passed on in the formation curriculum that do not touch on Salesian life and mission. Growth is a slow process of the individual developing as a whole, an interrelationship of life experiences, existential needs, understandings, mission, relationships, vocation, project of life... In this process of holistic development, we form ourselves to be educators and pastors in a new world and in a renewed mission. Whatever may be the reasons for the limits in formation that we have noticed, we find ourselves faced with a huge challenge that the Congregation has highlighted and that we must tackle decisively over the next six years.

On the other hand, we cannot deny that there is a dangerous belief: that formation ends after completing the initial phases; and, in the case of candidates to the priesthood, finishes once they gain access to the ministry. This misconception does a lot of harm to us and leads us to paying a heavy price in pastoral ministry. It is therefore a matter of understanding formation as a lifelong process of personal transformation, even if it is characterised by particular intensity and specific attention in the early stages. Ultimately, formation is a necessary path for building and safeguarding our vocation.

Often, we do not know how to transform daily pastoral life into an ongoing opportunity for our formation and therefore “both the religious and educative and pastoral community are unable to become the natural and ordinary environment in which one is formed”¹⁷. We are aware of some of the likely kinds of pastoral fragility: superficiality, improvisation, activism. No less important is the danger of individualism. All of this requires humility, lucidity, authenticity and a new impetus in the community understanding of our life and our mission.

¹⁷ *Idem*, no. 3.

As was said at the General Chapter, initial formation is a multifaceted, positive and promising reality. Faced with this situation, the formation of the formators, meaning the formation of confreres who accompany the formation of young Salesians with a “particular vocation within their vocation”, and the setting up of good teams of individuals who can accompany the stages of formation, are a real urgency and priority given that **the community is the first place of formation.**

Perhaps we need to be speaking of adopting a new style of formation? In his Message to the General Chapter, Pope Francis speaks to us of the notion that: “Reflecting on the profile of the Salesian for the young people of today implies accepting that we are immersed in a time of change”¹⁸. There is a need, then, to renew our style of formation, something that needs to be thought of more and more in personalising, holistic, relational, contextual and intercultural terms¹⁹. We will have to continue to make progress in order to set up and really experience formation within the context of vocation and therefore far from being understood, as has been the tendency sometimes, as just a duty that lasts a few years and is necessarily superseded in order to arrive at “real life”, concrete life, the life we were looking for. What a dangerous notion of formation it is when we contrast real life with the formation of the Salesian educator and pastor!

In short, formation is a real work of handicraft, both on the part of the one accompanying the confreres and on the part of each individual in his own process of formation. In this field today there is no more room for “mass-production”. The craftsperson speaks about unique works of art, art that is handmade, one-to-one. And speaking of this handicraft, today we cannot ignore the role of women in our Salesian educative settings. “The presence of the woman in our works is an accepted fact, as regards both those for whom we work and those who share with us the responsibility for education”²⁰. To this effect, Pope Francis addressed a strong appeal to us in his Message, saying: “What would have become of Valdocco without the presence of Mamma

¹⁸ *Idem*, no. 5.

¹⁹ *Idem*, no. 5.

²⁰ *GC24*, no. 166.

Margaret? Would your houses have been possible without this woman of faith?... Without a real, effective and affective presence of women, your works would lack the courage and the ability to transform presence into hospitality, into a home. Faced with the rigour that excludes, we must learn to generate the new life of the Gospel. I invite you to implement approaches in which the female voice, her outlook and her actions – appreciated for her individuality – finds an echo in making decisions; not simply as a helper but as someone fully involved in your presences”.

A renewed style and model of formation, including with the strong emphasis that Pope Francis makes, will not be possible if we forget the unique and most important protagonist, who is neither the formator nor the one being formed, but the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God to whom each of us needs to be docile. This is why our Constitutions remind us that “each Salesian accepts responsibility for his own formation” (C. 99). Allow me to add that each confrere must act in such a way that the Holy Spirit transforms his heart throughout his life and at its different moments.

A formative journey lived in this way will allow us to consolidate in the Congregation what I have stated in the previous pages: the “*Da mihi animas*” must be the driving force of our educative and evangelising passion, and also the “energy” of the entire formation process.

In fact, the apostolic nature of our charism is a determining factor in our formation. As Pope Francis reminds us in his Message, “It is important to say that we are not formed *for* the mission, but that we are formed *in* the mission. Our whole life revolves around it, with its choices and priorities. Initial and ongoing formation cannot be a prior, parallel or separate instance of the identity and sensitivity of the disciple”.

It is clear that we have before us one of the essential nuclei of the Congregation’s journey for the next six years: to care for the vocation of each confrere in particular, and of the young confreres in formation, in such a way that we all manage to be the Salesians of Don Bosco that our young people and their families need today.

PROPOSAL

That we commit ourselves to overcoming the gap between formation and mission by encouraging in the Congregation a renewed culture of formation in the mission today throughout the Salesian world, with measures and decisions of great significance.

Therefore:

- ⇒ We will promote a renewed commitment to the formative accompaniment of the confreres, one that can touch the heart and make us available for a radical gift of ourselves. To this end we value the aid entitled “*Young Salesians and accompaniment. Orientations and Guidelines*”, which insists that our formation model can only be the Preventive System.
- ⇒ The initial formation communities should preserve a simple lifestyle, one characterised by spiritual depth and a great capacity for service and work, that avoids a tendency to being comfortable and well-off and forms to the needs of the mission. Pastoral accompaniment should be guaranteed as a fundamental strategy for formation for and in the mission.
- ⇒ We will invest energy in being on the lookout for and forming the formators and we will courageously tackle the rethinking of institutional references and formative structures.
- ⇒ The Formation Sector will carry out a serious and demanding work of updating the *Ratio*, strengthening the aspects that favour integration between formation and mission and prevent a gap from forming between the two dimensions. The Sector will guarantee processes of true growth to maturity and personalisation, and accompaniment.

5. ABSOLUTE PRIORITY FOR THE YOUNG, THE POOREST AND MOST ABANDONED AND DEFENCELESS

“The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer.

We are called to the same mission and are aware of its supreme importance: young people are at the age when they must make basic life-choices which affect the future of society and the of the Church.

With Don Bosco we reaffirm our preference for the young, who are ‘poor, abandoned and in danger’, those who have greater need of love and evangelization, and we work especially in areas of greatest poverty” (C. 26).

I would like to begin developing this priority by starting from the few lines I was able to dedicate to this topic in my last intervention in the Chapter hall, before the early conclusion of our GC28. I can assure you, dear confreres, that the words were few but the conviction was a strong and great one.

I said: “I dream that today, saying ‘**Salesians of Don Bosco**’ means consecrated ‘crazies’, that is, Salesians who love with a true Salesian heart, who are perhaps even ‘a little crazy’, oriented towards the poorest”.

Dear confreres, it would be the death-knell of our Congregation if we were to distance ourselves from the poorest. Don Bosco told us this when he spoke of our poverty and the danger of wealth. Allow me to be even more frank: *if one day we were to leave behind the youngsters, older youth and, among the poorest*, our Congregation would begin to die, a Congregation that today, thanks be to God, is in good health despite our weaknesses!

So, let us pay attention to what I consider to be an authentic “Chapter deliberation”, although not in the proper sense of the term, given that its content is already found in our Constitutions. It is a question of *asking us for a radical, preferential, personal, institutional and structural option for the most needy, poor and excluded young people*, an

option that must show up in a special way, in the *defence of boys, girls and young people who have been exploited and are victims of any kind of abuse*: from sexual abuse to any other kind of exploitation; from abuse caused by any kind of violence; from the abuse of manifest and clear injustice to any kind of abuse of power. I believe that this challenge is a great commitment that every Salesian must carry in his heart. A period of six years guided by this light will give us much life.

I am convinced that assuming this perspective as an indispensable one will be very significant throughout the Congregation and in all contexts, cultures and continents. Today there are many youth poverties that demand urgent attention from the whole human family, and no doubt from us Salesians in a particular way. In fact, the history of our Congregation is characterised by calls to go out to the poorest young people. “As sons of Don Bosco, we have taken on an historical commitment to serve poor young people”²¹.

Our Father Don Bosco already told us: “Everyone will look on us and welcome us sympathetically, as long as our concern and our requests are for the children of the poor, those most at risk in society. This must be our greatest satisfaction that no one can take from us”²².

Many years ago, GC19 declared: “Don Bosco and the Church send us by preference to the poor, the under-privileged, the ordinary people, especially so nowadays”²³. GC20 also spoke of the absolute priority of the “young” and among these, of the “poor and abandoned” when it asked who were the actual beneficiaries of our mission²⁴.

We ourselves said in our recent Chapter that we are consecrated to God for the poorest young people. Like Don Bosco, we too promised in our religious profession to offer ourselves to God pledging our forces to the service of the young, especially the poorest of them and this is why we must “[listen] together to God’s call coming to us through forms of youth poverty. It also requires spiritual depth, so as

²¹ GC20, no. 580.

²² Cf. MB XVII, 272; MB XVII, 207.

²³ GC19, ACS 244, p. 94 (p. 81 English edition).

²⁴ GC20, no. 45.

not to fall into activism or a corporate mentality; cultural preparation, to understand the phenomena in which we are immersed and the new forms of youth poverty; a willingness to work together, abandoning all pastoral individualism; flexibility in rethinking our lifestyle and our Works, especially when they no longer express the missionary energy of the charism and respond primarily to the logic of maintenance”²⁵.

In short, the appeal I make to everyone is to really look at the faces of our youngsters, our young people, until we get to know their life stories which are often marked by real tragedies. If this happens it is **because we truly love young people and we feel their suffering and pain**. Speaking of the Valdocco option and the gift of the young, Pope Francis has something very precious to tell us, and it has moved me. He writes: “The Salesian Oratory and everything that arose from it, as the *Memoirs of the Oratory* tell us, came about as a response to the life of the young with a face and a history. This moved a young priest to action who was incapable of remaining neutral or unmoved by what he saw happening before him. It was much more than a gesture of good will... I think of it as an act of ongoing conversion and response to the Lord who, ‘tired of knocking’ on our doors, waits for us to go and look for him and meet him... or let him out when he knocks from within. It was a conversion that involved (and complicated) his entire life and that of those around him. Don Bosco not only did not choose to separate himself from the world to seek holiness, but he let himself be challenged by it and **chose how and which world to live in**”²⁶.

PROPOSAL

Over the six years, let the Congregation in all its provinces make the radical, preferential, personal and institutional option – meaning on the part of every Salesian, on behalf of the most in need, boys, girls and poor and excluded youth, giving particular atten-

²⁵ GC28, *Priority of the Salesian mission among today’s young people*. First nucleus, no. 8.

²⁶ FRANCIS, *Message to GC28*.

tion to the defence of those who are exploited and victims of whatever abuse and violence (“the abuse of power, the abuse of conscience, sexual and financial abuse”²⁷).

Therefore:

- ⇒ In every Salesian presence in the world and in every province, the necessary decisions must be taken so that the poorest children and young people in the places where we are present *are never excluded from any Salesian house*, whatever the effort to be made. Thinking, deciding, creating ways to make this choice possible (as our Father Don Bosco always did).
- ⇒ In every Salesian Province and Salesian house there will be a code of ethics for the care, prevention and defence of the minors entrusted to us, with the commitment to protect them from any kind of abuse, wherever it comes from. For us, boys, girls, young people are **sacred in the name of God**.
- ⇒ At the world, provincial and local level, we will commit ourselves to promoting the various networks, activities and best practices concerning our work and presence among the poorest boys, girls and older youth, especially among refugees and migrants. Salesian organisations like DBnetwork, DBGA and RASS must contribute to guaranteeing the protection of minors and to work in ever greater communion with the Congregation’s Youth Ministry Department (Sector).

²⁷ *ChV*, 98.

6. TOGETHER WITH LAY PEOPLE IN THE MISSION AND IN FORMATION

“We bring about in our works the educative and pastoral community which involves young people and parents, parents and educators in a family atmosphere, so that it can become a living experience of Church and a revelation of God’s plan for us.

In this community lay people associated with our work make a contribution all their own, because of their experience and pattern of life.

We welcome and encourage their collaboration, and we give them the opportunity to get a deeper knowledge of the Salesian spirit and the practice of the preventive system.

We foster the spiritual growth of each of them, and to those who may be so inclined we suggest a closer of our mission in the Salesian Family” (C. 47).

This article of our Constitutions contains the most essential elements of our mission shared with lay people. We must examine ourselves in the light of this perspective and verify the extent the journey of the Congregation, of every Province and of every confrere is moving in this direction that expresses our charismatic identity so well. We are involved in the formation of the lay people who share the mission with us, supporting their personal growth, their journey of faith and their vital identification with the Salesian spirit. We must also offer them the means that allows them to carry out the tasks entrusted to them. The (re)discovery of the vocation and mission of the laity is one of the great frontiers of renewal proposed by Vatican Council II and reflected in the Magisterium that follows²⁸. Our GC24 was certainly a charismatic response to Vatican II’s ecclesiology of communion. We know well that Don Bosco, from the outset of his mission at Valdocco, involved many lay people, friends and collaborators in such a way that they could be part of his mission among young people. He immediately “fostered participation and the sharing of responsibility by ecclesiastics and laity, men and

²⁸ Cf. GC28, *Together with lay people in the mission and in formation* Nucleus 3, recognising, no. 1.

women”²⁹. It is therefore, in spite of our resistance, a point of no return, because, in addition to corresponding to Don Bosco’s actions, the model of the mission shared with the laity proposed by GC24 is in fact “the only practicable model in present conditions”³⁰.

Twenty-four years after that General Chapter, we need to recognise that the reception and implementation of what was decided to have been very different. In some regions, the presence of lay people in the Salesian mission has become more evident. In other regions of the Congregation the progress has been much slower. In other cases, the experience of communion is still in its beginnings – a path newly embarked upon – and sometimes we even find real phenomena of resistance.

Certainly, over these years progress has been made, even in the most diverse cultural situations. Often the relationships between Salesians and lay people are characterised by warmth, mutual appreciation, respect, collaboration and, when there is a clear identity, the reality of educative and pastoral communities is very rich – even if the value of the vocation and mission of the laity is not always perceived. We tend, in fact, to more easily recognise what they do rather than their lay identity.

It is true that there is great variety among the lay people in Salesian presences in the 134 countries we find ourselves in: many works on a contractual basis while many others, especially the youngest ones, as volunteers. There are lay people with a strong Christian and charismatic identity, and others who are far from this. There are Catholics, there are Christians of other confessions, or lay people who profess other religions, and even people who are indifferent to religion.

Similarly, the ways in which communities and works relate to each other are different depending on the existing circumstances, contexts, etc... In the General Council’s reflection, we became aware of this great diversity, as reflected in our contribution to nucleus 3 of the Chapter that had not been developed by the Chapter Assembly due to COVID-19³¹.

²⁹ GC24, no. 71.

³⁰ GC24, no. 39.

³¹ *Idem*, nos. 12-17.

As I have said previously, “from the beginning our Founder was concerned with involving the greatest number of collaborators possible in his operational plan: from Mamma Margaret to work providers, from helpful members of the public to theologians, from aristocrats to the politicians of the era. We were born and raised historically in communion with the laity and they with us. In particular, we must stress the importance that the young had in the development of the Salesian charism and mission: Don Bosco found his first collaborators in the young who thus became, in a certain sense, co-founders of the Congregation”.

So many times I myself – and certainly other Rectors Major – have strongly expressed the belief that the involvement of lay people in the Salesian charism and mission is not a concession on our part, a grace we offer them, and nor is it a means of survival – as many confreres have so very often thought. It is a right bound up with their specific vocation. Of course, here the difference between being a simple worker in a Salesian house and being part, at the same time, of a job, a mission and a vocation is evident. It is a radically different relationship. This demands from us in many cases a decisive change of perspective. As consecrated persons we are a specific incarnation of the Salesian charism, but we are not the only repositories of it.

An absolute priority derives from this: “The sharing of the Salesian spirit and growth in shared responsibility require the sharing of certain formation paths and experiences oriented towards spirituality and mission, obviously without neglecting specific formation paths for Salesian consecrated persons and lay people. Joint formation in shared mission is an absolute priority and should be directed above all to the members of the animating nucleus”³².

Lay people are companions on the journey, not substitutes or surrogates for the religious: they and we have specific identities and mission-related tasks. Therefore, our lay collaborators need to know and experience Don Bosco close at hand, and that is what is lived in Salesian houses where they are found. Such understanding and formation

³² Post-Chapter reflection 42, and cf. also *Animating and governing the community*, 106 and 122.

are not received merely through academic courses, but in another special way, by reflecting, verifying and planning what is experienced together in a presence. It is essential to take further steps in common and joint formation, especially in those aspects that relate to knowing and living our shared charism. Indeed, we know that “the first and best mode of self-formation to participation and shared responsibility is the correct functioning of the EPC”³³.

It remains for me to emphasise in a particular and firm way that the shared mission with lay people reaches its most complete and full development when they are members of one of the 32 groups of the Salesian Family of whom, as we know, twelve are lay groups. In the case of members belonging to the Salesian Family the degree of charismatic identity is often very high, and together we live out a true vocation in the charism. It is one more reason for giving *priority to having members of the Salesian Family in our presences, including as workers, when their professionalism meets the same conditions as others.*

Finally, we must not forget that the future of this charismatic element – shared mission and formation with lay people – passes through the formation of the future Salesians. I do not hide from you, dear confreres, that I am concerned about the tendency of some of our young confreres who yearn, I would almost dare say vehemently, to finish their formative stages in order to see themselves with authority, positions and responsibilities before the laity. It is a tendency that runs totally contrary to the path we wish to undertake as a Congregation. Hence, “Formation in and for the shared mission must also touch on the initial formation of the Salesians not only as a topic for study but also through weekly and summer pastoral experiences. The experience of working with and under the direction of lay people during practical training, as well as taking part in the Educative Pastoral Community Council, are precious moments of formation, especially if well accompanied by the members of the animating nucleus, both lay and Salesian”³⁴.

³³ GC24, 43.

³⁴ GC28, Third Nucleus, *Together with lay people in the mission and in formation*, no. 43.

PROPOSAL

- ⇒ Let the Congregation and all Provinces around the world take “further steps” in witnessing to the shared mission and common formation, improving the situation and functioning of the EPC in all of the Congregation’s presences. One can be further forward or further behind in living the mission and formation in and of the EPC, yet one cannot but go in this direction. What I asked for in GC27 continues to be a priority and urgency: “The shared mission between SDB and lay people is no longer optional – in case anyone still thinks so”³⁵.
- ⇒ Let us go about including lay people in the formation teams in our initial formation communities.
- ⇒ During these six years, in every Salesian province and presence a process of discernment will be carried out jointly between Salesians and those who share the mission and are part of the animating nucleus, so as to:
 - ◆ realistically observe the situation of shared mission and formation (recognising)
 - ◆ be aligned with the path that the Church and the Congregation are taking (interpreting)
 - ◆ draw up and implement processes of growth and transformation in synergy with other provincial, regional and congregational realities (choosing).

Therefore:

- ⇒ Lay people with a strong charismatic identity will be gradually included within province teams, also taking on roles of responsibility, coordination and leadership.
- ⇒ Formation will be carried out in the provinces according to the operational model of animation and governance of the houses already decided on by GC24.
- ⇒ In Salesian Provinces and Salesian presences we will make the evident and strong witness of the Salesian Family within the EPC significant.

³⁵ GC27, *Witnesses to the radical approach of the Gospel. Chapter Documents*: Rector Major’s address at the closing of GC27, no. 3.7, Rome 2014.

- ⇒ With the support of the Youth Ministry and Formation Departments, regional ongoing formation centres will prepare aids suited to the different regional contexts and will encourage this process at provincial and local level. Hence, they will become receivers and disseminators of best practices and materials that will serve as an example and stimulus for other Salesian realities.
- ⇒ At the level of local EPCs, value will be given to the third part of *Animating and governing the community – the Ministry of the Salesian Rector*, dedicated to “The educative and pastoral community” as a pathway for ongoing formation.
- ⇒ This process will be one of the fields to which prior attention will be given in Provincial visitations, Provincial Chapters halfway through the six-year period, Extraordinary Visitations and Team Visits.

7. IT IS THE TIME FOR GENEROSITY IN THE CONGREGATION. In a Congregation that is always missionary

“Each one of us is called by God to form part of the Salesian Society. Because of this God gives him personal gifts and by faithful correspondence he finds his way to complete fulfilment in Christ.

The Society recognizes his vocation and helps him to develop it; and he, as a responsible member, puts himself and his gifts at the service of the community and of its common tasks.

Every call is an indication that the Lord loves the Congregation, wants to see it vibrant for the good of the Church and never ceases to enrich it with new apostolic energy” (C.22).

In the concluding session of GC28 I said that, in my opinion, this **“is the time for generosity in the Congregation”**. I have no doubt that we have a history of 162 years characterised by great generosity that already began with Don Bosco. Nevertheless, it seems to me that today this generosity is more necessary than ever.

Let me try to explain myself clearly.

Today, no less than in the past, the reality speaks to us of the need for evangelisation, pastoral needs and human development that we come to know of in our contact with various contexts. We receive frequent appeals, calls, inquiries because we take on one or other service in many parts of the world. We see boys, girls, young people and families in difficulty in every continent.

- ⇒ God continues to call us throughout the world to be “signs and witnesses” of his saving Love for the poorest young people.
- ⇒ There is a need for our help as evangelisers and educators of the young and adults belonging to the popular classes, in the most diverse of cultural and religious contexts.
- ⇒ There is also an urgent need for education and action on our part to witness to and promote justice in the world.
- ⇒ Poverty and poverties continue to be a cry for us, more often than not a silent, voiceless one: young people with their material and

emotional poverties; true orphans, even though they have parents and families, cultural poverties (without access to school, education), spiritual poverties (without any understanding of transcendent values nor of God).

The hope to be able to work (and at time also to study) more easily continues to result in mass migration to the big cities (and also to other countries) with the natural consequences of maladjustment and social marginalisation. To this is added the chilling reality of the refugees and the camps in which they live; in many of them our confreres share life with the refugees themselves. (Kakuma-Kenya, Juba-Sud Sudan, Palabek-Uganda).

I could extend the list of this set of situations.

Dear confreres, we all belong to God and to our unique Congregation, of which we are joyfully members. We are all Salesians of Don Bosco in the world. Our affection will always be addressed to our confreres in our province of origin where we are “vocationally born”; but our truest and deepest membership is in the Congregation, and it begins with our religious profession.

For this reason, over the next six years the opening of horizons must become even more effective and real, thanks to the availability of the confreres and the generous response of the provinces that have a greater chance of offering help to other confreres. Sometimes with agreements between the Provincials themselves, at other times with the mediation of the Rector Major and his Council when it comes to new foundations, new missionary challenges, new presences in other nations or new missionary frontiers.

Fortunately, the provinces that are poorest in economic terms are the richest in vocations, and the formation of all these confreres is made possible by the generosity of the whole Congregation. Once again this demonstrates that generosity makes all dreams possible.

We live in times when we have to face reality with a renewed mentality which allows us to “cross borders”. In a world where borders are more and more “a defence against others”, the prophecy of our life as Salesians of Don Bosco also consists in this: *in showing that for us there are no borders. The only reality we respond to is: God, the*

Gospel and the mission that has been entrusted to us. It is precisely for this that our international and intercultural communities have great prophetic value today, without hiding the fact that building fraternity in different situations requires a vision of faith and personal engagement.

The missionary reality of our Congregation continues to question us and present us with wonderful challenges, **the missions urge us onwards and make us dream beautiful dreams that come true.**

When, in the '80s of last century, we continued year after year to lose a significant number of confreres, the Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, prophetically launched Project Africa, and today it is a wonderful reality. In 2000, at the time of the new millennium, seeing the tough pastoral reality and the need for a new evangelisation for Europe, Fr Pascual Chávez promoted Project Europe with conviction. *These are not times for being worried about survival, but opportunities for being more significant.*

In his Message to GC28 Pope Francis also invited us to be careful about fears that end up “with us being obsessed by a paralysing inertia that deprives your mission of the *parresia* proper to the Lord’s disciples. Such inertia can also manifest itself in a pessimistic outlook and attitude towards everything around us, not only in relation to the transformations taking place in society but also in relation to our Congregation, our brothers and sisters and the life of the Church. This is an attitude that ends up “boycotting” and preventing any kind of alternative response or process”³⁶.

PROPOSAL

I am proposing to the entire Congregation to make this **time for generosity** concrete by naturally assuming the availability of confreres from all provinces (transfers, exchange, temporary help) for international services, new foundations, new frontiers to we want to reach.

Therefore:

⇒ Provinces will be attentive to and available for appeals from the Rector Major for the needs and challenges we take on.

³⁶ FRANCIS, *Message to GC28*.

- ⇒ The 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's first missionary expedition to Argentina (that will be in 2025) and the first centenary of the missionary presence in North East India (in 2022), will be the opportunity to continue **our Congregation's missionary project**.
- ⇒ We made the missionary appeal concrete by inviting each province to open a missionary project (refugees, immigrants, border crossings, exploited children...) during the previous six years, giving priority to the significance and the real requests for help from today's youth.
- ⇒ The Rector Major and his Council will indicate the appropriate steps for strengthening the section in the Youth Ministry Department (Sector) of the Congregation that deals primarily with the situation of refugees and migrants (especially unaccompanied minors and young people).

8. ACCOMPANYING THE YOUNG TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

We recognise that the focus on a sustainable future is a cultural conversion, not a fashion, and like any conversion needs to be strongly called by its new name.

The Chapter Assembly expressed itself with complete unanimity when it was suggested that a small commission take on the sensitivity, that is in us in the face of this emergency. *Caring for creation is not a fashion*. Humanity's life is at stake, even though many public officials, prisoner to economic interests, look the other way or deny what is undeniable. This sensitivity materialised in a Chapter deliberation approved by the Assembly. Pope Francis insisted that we must avoid a "climate emergency" that risks "perpetrating a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and future generations"³⁷.

Our commitment to an integral human ecology comes from a conviction of faith for which "everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others"³⁸. We cannot separate the care of the environment from the social life of human beings. Therefore, ecology must be integral, human. And, consequently, we are invited to an ecological conversion that concerns not only the economy and politics, but also social life, relationships, affectivity and spirituality.

In recent years we have witnessed disagreements by politicians from various countries in the face of this emergency. The last meeting of the leaders of the countries in Santiago de Chile (but held in Madrid, Spain) had as its only result the agreement to meet again in a year's time. No significant operational agreement.

³⁷ FRANCIS, *To Participants at the meeting promoted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the theme: The Energy Transition and Care for our Common Home* (Rome, 14 June 2019).

³⁸ Cf. FRANCIS, Encyclical *Laudato si'*, Rome 24 May 2015, nos. 71, 137-162. Henceforth *LS*.

At the same time, millions and millions of people, most of them young, have raised a cry worldwide. Pope Francis, sensitive to all this as he has so clearly shown, reminds us that young people themselves are asking for radical change and are asking “how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded”³⁹.

The proposal for a Chapter deliberation was expressed thus: “Together with Pope Francis, we recognise the evidence provided by science that the acceleration of climate change coming from human activity is real. Air pollution, water pollution, improper waste disposal, loss of biodiversity and other environmental issues that have a negative impact on human life are increasing. Unsustainable production and consumption are pushing our world and its ecosystems beyond their limits, undermining their ability to provide resources and actions vital to life, development and regeneration”⁴⁰.

As I am writing these lines, planet Earth and all countries of the world have been impacted to greater or lesser degree by the COVID-19 virus that to date has caused 624,000 deaths and has infected 15,300,000 people. We know well that the life of a single human person is sacred, and that there is so much sorrow due to so many deaths. But it is no less true that planet Earth has been bleeding for decades, and that every year pollution causes many more human deaths than have been the result of COVID-19. *This fact, unfortunately, is not taken so seriously.*

It is no less true that the poorest (it is always the poorest!) suffer the disastrous effects of deforestation and changes in climate, the ruin of their very poor crops, their only resource for survival. This too is not denounced.

I could go on making a list of these situations. It is not necessary. It is enough to stress that as educators and pastors we cannot be indifferent to this reality. We have to do something.

³⁹ LS 13.

⁴⁰ GC28, *Proposal for a Chapter deliberation on the ecology.*

PROPOSAL

Listening to the worldwide cry of so many young people today, WE SALESIANS COMMIT ourselves to BEING CREDIBLE WITNESSES, personally and as a community, of CONVERSION in caring for Creation and Ecological Spirituality⁴¹.

Therefore:

- ⇒ Every province in the world will respond, through the Provincial Delegate for Youth Ministry, to the request to make our schools, education centres, university campuses, oratories, parishes, **educational models of care for the environment and for nature**. As a Salesian option in education we must include action on behalf of creation: care for nature, climate and sustainable development.
- ⇒ As far as possible, let us expand the network of Salesian institutions to be included in the **Don Bosco Green Alliance**, fostering the participation of the young in global campaigns on behalf of the sustainability of environmental and ecological causes for the care of creation and human life.
- ⇒ Let us accept the request made to GC28 by the Salesian Conference on Renewable Energy in November 2019, that the Congregation **undertake to achieve 100% of renewable energy for all provinces around the world before 2032**. Even though the reality of the Congregation is quite disparate across different countries, we accept this challenge in collaboration with the Provinces' PDOs, Salesian NGOs, the DBN.

⁴¹ *LS*, 217.

CONCLUSION

My dear confreres: let me conclude these guidelines by inviting you to accept them not just as a simple letter, but as a message and programme that seeks to be an expression of the beating heart of the Congregation today throughout the world.

I am proposing two important elements as attitudes with which to tackle the wonderful opportunity of the next six years:

- ⇒ The first of these is to do with a virtue: **hope**. Only with hope can we tackle the future, in the confidence that the Lord will bring to completion, with our humble contribution, what we propose here.
- ⇒ The second has to do with our attitude before God himself. I would like to ask our Congregation that over these six years **we allow ourselves to be guided much more by the Holy Spirit**; that it will be He who truly moves our hearts and our human capacities for animating and governing the Congregation and provinces and communities, so that each of us can end up making all the Salesian houses in the world other Valdoccos that offer a response to the youngsters, the youth of today, as Don Bosco did in his time.

With regard to **hope**, I would like to emphasise that, as we well know, it is a virtue that has so much to do with our Christian faith; it is a different way of looking at the future. Christian hope is a way of living, a way of journeying, a way of looking at things.

Hope is the fruit of an encounter with the Lord Jesus and is the fruit of acceptance of His Spirit in us. Hope is not the result of calculations and forecasts. “Neither pessimist nor optimist, the Salesian of the 21st century is someone filled with hope because he knows that his centre is the Lord who can make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5). Only this will save us from living in an attitude of resignation and defensive survival. Only this will make our lives fruitful”⁴².

On the need to allow ourselves to be guided much more by the Holy Spirit of God, He who is the *true inner Teacher*, I make my words

⁴² FRANCIS, *Message to GC28*, quoting his homily on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord for the 21st World Day of Consecrated Life, 2 February 2017.

those of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras I, who met Pope Paul VI (today Saint) in Jerusalem in January 1964. The result of that encounter in the Spirit of God was the abrogation of the mutual excommunications that existed up until that moment and that had deeply wounded the heart of Christ in his Church.

This is the thought:

“Without the Holy Spirit,
God is far away,
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church merely an organisation,
authority power,
the mission propaganda,
liturgy a memorial,
and Christian action a slave morality.

But in the Holy Spirit
the cosmos is mobilised to generate the Kingdom,
the Risen Christ is there,
the Gospel is power and life,
the Church brings about Trinitarian communion,
authority is transformed into service,
the liturgy is memorial and anticipation,
human action is deified”⁴³.

Let us bring this message into our prayer.

My dear Salesian confreres, this is what I felt I had a duty to communicate and ask of you all. I invite you to accept these challenges, this road map for the journey over these six years, with all your heart and with a profound desire to bring it to reality in the provinces and communities. Certainly, with the grace of God and the maternal presence of our Mother the Help of Christians, they will be years of fidelity on the part of the Congregation and of courageous and also prophetic

⁴³ The words are by Patriarch Athenagoras I, even though some attribute the quote to Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim, in 1968.

response to the *signs of the times today*. May our Mother, the Help of Christians, continue to look after our Congregation and to “*do everything*”, as with Don Bosco.

May Her mediation and that of all the Salesian holiness of our Family be for us a blessing in the one important thing of our mission from God: “To be in the Church *signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor*” (C. 2).

I accompany each and every one of you with a memento and prayer.

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, sdb
Rector Major

Rome, 16 August 2020
205th Anniversary of Don Bosco's birth