1. THE RECTOR MAJOR

**LETTER OF CONVOCATION OF GENERAL CHAPTER 29**

Turin, 24 September 2023

My dear confreres,

On the day on which we celebrate the sending of the 154th missionary expedition to Valdocco, as our father Don Bosco did on 11 November 1875 I too feel the joy of being able to share with you the reflection and the decision we have taken in these days, after having carried out a wide-ranging consultation with the Salesian Provinces on our forthcoming 29th General Chapter.

We are all aware that the events of the last few months have thrust us into a congregational dynamic that leads us to the preparation of an important General Chapter after the circumstances of the pandemic that struck the world and prematurely interrupted the work of the 28th General Chapter that we were celebrating in Valdocco at the time.

Together with the General Council, we saw fit to consult the ninety-two provinces around the world, even though we knew that time for reflection and local response was short. But we are very happy to have received a contribution from 70 Provinces.

We perceived great motivation and commitment, and I am personally very grateful as Rector Major, and so are we all in the General Council.

And now is the moment of the announcement and preparation for the forthcoming General Chapter 29 which must be, as on other occasions, “the principal sign of the Congregation’s unity in diversity” (C. 146).

1. **CONVOCATION OF GC29**

At this time, with joy and great hope, from this Salesian holy place that is “our” Valdocco, **and in accordance with Article 150 of our Constitutions, I am convening the 29th General Chapter,** which will have what follows as its theme, developed in three core areas (or parts) of particular importance, and which are real challenges for the Congregation.

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| **“PASSIONATE ABOUT JESUS CHRIST, DEDICATED TO YOUNG PEOPLE”**  *Living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically* |

*“So they came to him... to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message”* (Mk 3,14-15)

Note: Scripture quotations in English from the Revised New Jerusalem Bible

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| Core area 1.  **ANIMATION AND CARE OF THE TRUE LIFE OF EACH SALESIAN** |

*“Rekindle the gift of God that you possess”* (2 Tim 1:6)

* As believers conquered by God we fix our gaze on the Salesian consecrated life centred in Jesus Christ.
* Always taking care of our own vocation and that of others,
* Faithful to God, together as a community, in living a common vocation, a fraternity that is authentic, evangelical and attractive.
* Accompanying fully the different stages of our own life and that of the confreres; taking care of initial and ongoing formation.
* With the commitment to live evangelical fraternity in our religious communities and in openness to those who suffer experiences of exclusion in the world.

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| Core area 2. SALESIANS, SALESIAN FAMILY AND LAY PEOPLE TOGETHER “WITH” AND “FOR” YOUNG PEOPLE |

*“One heart and mind”* (Act 4:32)

* By completing the reflection undertaken by GC28 we seek to grow in *shared mission.*
* With spiritual and apostolic vitality in our commitment to children, adolescents and young adults in situations of the most varied kinds of poverty.
* Because it is not enough to offer educational services, we seek to educate and evangelise by accompanying life and offering new opportunities to those on the edge of survival.
* Looking for new models of presence, preferential options, new expressions of the Salesian charism in God’s name.
* In communion with young people towards an “integral ecology” to which they are so sensitive, and for formation in the “digital culture” where young people live.
* Seeking, together with the laity, financial sustainability of Salesian presences without ever excluding the poor.

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| Core area 3. A COURAGEOUS REVIEW AND RE-PLANNING OF THE CONGREGATION’S GOVERNANCE AT ALL LEVELS |

*“Do not be conformed to this world,*

*but be transformed by renewal of mind,*

*so that you may discern what is the will of God,*

*good, pleasing and perfect”* (Rom 12:2).

* For charismatic fidelity: an animation and governance that looks after people’s lives and the mission to the poorest and knows how to modernise service structures.
* In carrying out an evaluation of leadership in the Congregation: it is time to evaluate the leadership and effectiveness of the animation of the General Council; to look at discernment for elections in the General Chapter; to develop reflection for courageous decisions on Sectors, Secretariats, structuring of the Regions of the Congregation, services of the General Council itself.
* With an evaluation of the governance of the provinces and the animation of their life that responds to the juridical matters already proposed and new ones that will come from the Provincial Chapters.
  1. **REASONS FOR THE CHOICE OF THIS THEME**

The chosen theme is the result of a rich and profound reflection that we have carried out in the General Council on the basis of the answers received from the Provinces and the vision that we have of the Congregation at this time. We were pleasantly surprised by the great convergence and harmony we found in the many contributions from the Provinces, which had a lot to do with the reality we see in the Congregation, with the path of fidelity that exists in many sectors and also with present challenges.

As can be seen from the chosen theme, it refers to the centrality of God (as Trinity) and Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, without ever forgetting young people and our commitment to them. And what is offered as a subtitle captures our priority and concern at this time, both in religious life in general and in our consecrated life in particular. If fidelity and prophecy were lacking in our Congregation, we would be like the light that does not shine and the salt that does not give flavour. We have expressed our concern during many General Council sessions about the lack of charismatic identity that we sometimes perceive. In the letter that will be published in the Acts of the General Council 440, I address this very situation by taking stock of the achievements of these years and the challenges that I perceive are such because we have not been able to overcome certain weaknesses that make us more vulnerable.

With this proposed theme for the 29th General Chapter, our intention is that the Congregation may highlight those challenges, those shortcomings that in a very real way instead of launching us forward on the path of fidelity to the Lord and in the prophetic witness of our lives, slow us down, limit us, make us or may make us incapable of challenging. There are many beautiful things in the lives of the majority of the confreres, Provinces and the Congregation in many countries. But this is not enough and cannot serve as “consolation”, because the cry coming from the world, the great and new kinds of poverty, the daily struggle of so many people – I won't say just poor, but also simple and hard-working people – cry out to us, look to us, ask help from us as they raise their hands. How many times have I stated in these ten years as Rector Major that we cannot remain peacefully in our houses, sometimes as large and solid as castles, when there is so much pain around us. And the General Council is also very sensitive to this situation, as are many Provinces.

In short, with the help of the Provinces through consultation, we believe we have identified the main reasons for concern and the signs of our Congregation’s vitality, always with the cultural traits of each context.

In the Chapter theme we propose to focus on what it means for us ***to truly be Salesians who are passionate about Jesus Christ,*** because without this we will offer good services, we will do good to people, we will help, but we will not leave behind much else worthwhile.

As I told you in the presentation of the Post-Chapter Reflection of GC28, “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 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.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

When we read in the Gospel that Jesus called those he wanted “to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mk 3:14-15), he is telling us that Jesus chooses and calls to himself those he wants, and among them he has called us. The Kingdom of God is made present and those first Twelve are also an example and a model for us and for our communities. These twelve were taken from ordinary people, with strengths and weaknesses: it was not a community of the pure or a group of friends.

And we, from the moment of our profession, have opted for true companionship with Jesus, in a person-to-person relationship that totally involves us. And from this involvement with Jesus, we feel urged in the direction of our young people.

The mission of Jesus continues and is visible in the world today also through us, his envoys. We are consecrated to construct ample places of light for today’s world, to be prophets. We have been consecrated by God to follow his beloved Son Jesus, but to truly live as people *conquered by God*. Therefore, once again, it is all about the Congregation’s fidelity to the Holy Spirit, living, in the spirit of Don Bosco, a *Salesian consecrated life centred in Jesus Christ.* If this is missing – and sometimes it is missing – we can offer services, have schools, and vocational training, have oratories and youth centres, and even homes for welcoming young people..., but without having focused on Him, today we are here and tomorrow no.

And I can say that there are various voices in the Congregation asking us to address this reality and our way of living in the Lord with and for young people, including the poorest. More authenticity is sought and desired. And there is the desire and expectation for a courageous General Chapter where things are said; we do not want to get lost in phrases that may sound good, but do not touch life. In general, the confreres wish to see a Salesian Congregation always faithful to the Lord and with him, faithful to Don Bosco. They would like us all, as Salesians of Don Bosco, to live with this passion for God and for the mission. It hurts when this is not the case; it hurts when there are different speeds in the approach to dedication and the radical nature of the gospel. All this is what is at stake in this GC29, provoked also – dare I say it – by the Spirit of God through many mediations, including, first and foremost, the Holy Father himself with his decisions.

Dear confreres, I still need to emphasise one aspect that I am sure many of you have perceived. I am referring to that sure continuity that can be seen with GC28, since the theme focuses strongly on our Salesian consecrated identity, with a real desire to grow in the fidelity and prophetic value of our life, as well as on the mission shared with the laity and the Salesian Family, but always taking the young and their families, so often poor and distressed, into our hearts. A continuity also in reference to issues concerning the animation and governance of the Congregation that were not addressed previously. I can assure you that almost all the Provincials have asked that we give some time in the Chapter for this – because in the previous one it was impossible – to delve into these essential and vital situations.

* 1. **Other tasks**

Although it is already indicated in Core area 3, I wish to make it explicit because I believe it will reassure the confreres, who in their responses have asked what I will now say: “there is a surprising coincidence in the responses of the Provinces in asking that we also clarify many juridical questions in a definitive way, that require changes to the Regulations (because life has already gone beyond what we have legislated), or that with much rigour and courage we address the evaluation and necessary changes in the government of the Congregation at all levels.”

It is requested that all juridical issues that could not be completed in the previous General Chapter because of COVID be addressed. A response is expected, for example, to the new question regarding the Holy Father, Pope Francis’ authorisation that even in clerical congregations (such as ours) one can have coadjutor brothers as community superiors (directors/rectors). There are also many other issues to be resolved.

* 1. **THE DATES FOR HOLDING THE 29TH GC**

The 29th General Chapter will have almost the same duration as the previous one and will begin on **16 February 2025 and end on 12 April 2025**, on the eve of Holy Week, the same day Don Bosco arrived at Valdocco with his boys, 12 April 1846, adapting the shed to become a chapel.

The opening celebration of the Chapter will be the Eucharist of the Holy Spirit at 5pm in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

* 1. **Place of celebration of General Chapter 29**

After searching several places, we felt that once gain the most suitable place was **Valdocco - Turin (Italy).** In order to offer all of us the best possible facilities for excellent reflection, prayer, work and decision-making, we have already booked sufficient rooms in and around Valdocco itself.

All the facilities will be very well prepared for the event, and certainly the fact that we will be in this beautiful Salesian holy place, where we were all born to a vocation, will be an element that will help us reach the deepest and most charismatic part of the work we want to do.

* 1. **MODERATOR of General Chapter 29**

After reviewing the history of the last General Chapters and their Moderators, taking into account the reality of our Congregation and the cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as the growth of the Congregation, especially now in the Region of Africa and Madagascar, but also in South Asia and in some Provinces of Oceania, I asked the Regional Councillor for Africa and Madagascar, **Fr Alphonse Owoudou**, to be the Chapter Moderator. Fr Alphonse has accepted with great generosity and I am sure that all of us are grateful to him.

1. **METHODOLOGY FOR PROVINCIAL CHAPTERS**

The single theme with its three complementary aspects must be dealt with or handled differently depending on the core area, in the preparation of the Provincial Chapters.

* The first two core areas, on our being consecrated and the shared mission, can be immediately addressed by the Provincial Chapters with a reflection on the points contained, according to the traditional methodology of the work of the Provincial Chapters, seeking to offer the reflection of the Province, best practices and also operational proposals on the various aspects already contained in the proposal that will arrive.
* The third core area which can we refer to as the “institutional” area, must have a different, reverse approach. We are of the opinion that the General Council can take in hand the evaluation of the leadership in the Congregation (the shape of the General Council divided into sectors, regions and secretariats), of the animation of the Regions and their structuring, because over these years we have experienced and known situations that can really enlighten us a lot.

The sole purpose of this methodological choice is to offer a draft of a wholistic proposal that will be sent to the provincial chapters, so that all the provinces of the Congregation can see it and enrich it, or reject, change, delete it; all of which serves to arrive at the GC29 with a pre-considered and balanced opinion and wholistic overview.

* We can say the same for the juridical issues. We believe they must be sent to the Provincial Chapters for initial study. This will allow us not to have a juridical commission in GC29 (opinion stated by many Provinces in their contribution sent for the summer consultation on GC29). For this to happen, a juridical commission will be set up to work on juridical issues in the coming weeks, just as the Council will work on the animation and governance of the Congregation, in order to be able to send everything to the Provincial Chapters in good time.

The methodology of the Chapter assembly to be held in Valdocco, as well as those of the individual Provinces, must be more inductive than on previous occasions, according to the contributions from the individual Provinces.

Such a methodology will also allow us to get to know the best and finest practices that exist in so many Provinces, a very rich heritage that we can and must share.

1. **HOW WORK WILL PROCEED**

We are now therefore called upon to reflect, at the provincial level, on the three proposed core areas with their different aspects. On this basis, a series of questions were developed that have been left open to offer everyone, in the individual Provinces, the opportunity to fully express their reflections.

On the first core area regarding the **ANIMATION AND CARE OF THE REAL LIFE OF EVERY SALESIAN,** we will ask ourselves, including in the Provincial Chapter:

1. How can we revive our dialogue and a living, creative and quality personal relationship with Jesus Christ?
2. What proposals for accompanying the confreres in human and vocational terms in the different stages of their life?
3. How can we strengthen the link between initial and ongoing formation and our specific mission? How can we live the educative and pastoral experience as a source of spirituality and also discover the “spirituality of the courtyard/playground”?
4. How to create formal and informal dynamics of inter-generational and intercultural community life sharing?
5. How can we more strongly value our fraternal life in community, made up of listening, dialogue and caring for one another, helping one another to be faithful to our consecration?
6. What are some practices of fraternal life/community life shared with young people, or with lay people or other groups in the Salesian Family?

On the second core Chapter area SALESIANS, SALESIAN FAMILY AND LAY PEOPLE TOGETHER “WITH” AND “FOR” YOUNG PEOPLE, we ask ourselves:

1. What can be done to grow in and truly arrive at a real *conversion towards shared mission?*  And shared responsibility with the laity? What are the real obstacles to overcome? How do we overcome them?
2. How can we make decisive progress in rediscovering the “new mission territories” to which we are called, especially with children, adolescents and young adults in various situations of poverty? How can we deal with the reality of mission in settings involving other religions or multi-religious settings?
3. What are the best practices of shared responsibility, accompaniment and joint formation with the laity, leading to an increasing integration of the laity and the Salesian family in our Educative and Pastoral Communities?
4. How do we imagine new models of presence so that they are an effective proposal to guarantee our identity as educators and evangelisers in our Works, maintain them and promote new ones?
5. What specific actions do we suggest to pay particular attention to the mentality and practice of vocation promotion and to the improvement of structures where we accept vocations – vocations processes, host communities and qualified accompaniers? How do we involve communities in this mentality and practice of vocational animation?
6. How can we sensitise our young people to carry out concrete actions on integral ecology?
7. How can we live in the “digital culture” with a clear Salesian identity and pastorally accompany young people in this environment?

With reference to the third core area, this has already been indicated above in how to work in the individual provinces (see what is written regarding the methodology for the Provincial Chapters).

1. **The time for GC29 is here**

This expression takes me back to five years ago when I was writing the convocation letter for GC28. Not much time has passed, and yet how many things we have experienced.

I think we can say that we are arriving at GC29 with a similar feeling. We have, by grace and Divine Providence, a wonderful opportunity to prepare our Congregation and each of us Salesians to transmit more light, to be more and more passionate about God and about the Lord Jesus. A wonderful opportunity to truly leave our Congregation in the “hands” of the Holy Spirit who will guide us as he did with Don Bosco.

We have a wonderful opportunity to seek to live more and more in fidelity, simply and authentically, enthusiastically and with commitment, or at the same time, with deep faith and prayer, in a frenetic and utilitarian world, convinced as we are that God accompanies us. A wonderful opportunity to be significant. Some will realise this. Others not, but it doesn’t matter. It will only be important to serve in the name of the Lord, to do everything for Him in love, and to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to those to whom we are sent, their families, and those who have no family, no voice, and no opportunity. So we will be a bit more prophetic (or very prophetic).

*“Here am I, send me”* (Is 6:8) says the Lord. This is why we believe that the new GC29, in which we are already somewhat immersed without expecting it, will be a wonderful opportunity in faith for our Salesian Congregation worldwide.

Dear confreres, I only lack one thing to ask of you: to prepare ourselves over the next sixteen months in a personal, community and provincial journey in an attitude of profound prayer.

Without prayer, without a heart that continually matures in faith, all we can do are sociological things that will be over almost before they begin. Only in faith does God have the power to make all things new.

May our Mother the Help of Christians, Mother of the Church, accompany us as she accompanied Don Bosco throughout his life until the moment when she had him understand that “She had done everything”.

With a huge fraternal embrace,

Ángel Fernández Artime, sdb

Rector Major

1. GC 28, pp. 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)