The Salesian CommunityToday

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**GC25 Documents**
**Society of St Francis of Sales**

**N. 378**
**Year LXXXIII**
**May 2002**

**Rome, 24 February - 20 April 2002**

**OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION**

**PRESENTATION**

My dear confreres,

We are beginning a new six-year period which coincides with the first years of the third millennium, and we do so in the conviction that the 25th General Chapter has been for us a grace of God and motivated by his invitation to plunge into the vast ocean of the world of today. The bidding to “launch out into the deep” is a program of action, not a simple slogan without content. This is how it was understood by Fr Vecchi himself in leaving it to us as a legacy in his last Strenna. This is not a time for nostalgic memories, but rather a time of hope for the future – one that calls upon us to face up boldly to the challenges of the education and evangelization of the young. We are not unaware of the dangers hidden in the open sea, but in this venture we are enlivened and encouraged by God’s word, who calls us to “cast our nets” where the catch can be greatest. And so with his Word as food for our journey, we prepare to look ahead and launch out into the deep with spiritual and apostolic zeal renewed.

1. The Acts of the GC25.

I present to you the “Acts” of the GC25. They provide us with valuable material for the renewal of our life and of our educative and pastoral activity. In the first part you will find the introduction, the five practical sections and the conclusion of what was the main theme of the Chapter; the second part contains the evaluation of the structures of animation and central government. These are then followed by the deliberations and guidelines referring to the Constitutions and Regulations and to the Government of the Congregation, with the practical interpretation of the texts of our Rule of life. You will also find the Messages sent by the members of the Chapter to the confreres on the vocation of the salesian brother, to the Salesian Family, and to Young People, together with an appeal to save the world’s youngsters.

By way of Appendices have been added the various addresses and messages of greeting, some of which are particularly significant, such as those of the Holy Father at the beginning of the Chapter and during the audience, that of the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life, the opening address of the Vicar General, the first “Good-night” of the Rector Major and his concluding address.

All these form a collection of documents that gather together the results of the reflections of the provincial chapters and of the GC25.

2. The capitular text

The Chapter Assembly resolutely took up the task outlined by the Rector Major in his letter convoking the Chapter, in which he asked it not to repeat the already well known doctrine on the community but rather “to find effective ways of giving a new motivation to the communities to manifest in a simple and clear manner the religious elements of the new situations; to identify the essential conditions or criteria which allow, or rather encourage, a joyful and humanly significant way of living the fraternity we have professed as followers of Christ”. Under the guidance of the Presidency and the Moderator, the work of the commissions and of the assembly went smoothly ahead with ever greater clarity towards the elaboration of what was not so much a well organized document as a number of independent schemes of work after the manner of practical handbooks. In this way the literary style of the “capitular text” is already an indication of how it should be received: as something essentially practical. This is not to say that the text is devoid of theological foundation. The latter, in fact, appears in strongly concentrated form at the beginning of each section, while the sections themselves concentrate largely on challenges and practical guidelines.

It may be opportune at this point to emphasize some points that can be of help in the reading, assimilation and application of the capitular text.

2.1 As distinct from the GC23 and GC24 which had spoken of the local community as the centre of animation and the strategic setting for the education of young people to the faith and for the involvement and formation of the laity, the GC25 decided to centre its reflections on the community itself with all its dynamic characteristics. In fact the community model emerging from the GC25 has as its reference point our apostolic consecration as expressed in art. 3 of the Constitutions. It is a matter of a community called to realize, through the grace of unity, the vital synthesis between fraternal life, the radical following of Christ and our dedication to the mission to the young.

And so the community itself is the real subject of this Chapter. Not only because it is its theme, but also as being its primary agent and protagonist. Consequently every community is invited to welcome the capitular text as a valuable treasure to be exploited.

2.2 The scheme of each section is identical throughout. It opens with a text from the Acts of the Apostles which is meant to be a true source of inspiration for every community with which to reproduce the experience of the Jerusalem community in accepting the Holy Spirit as the guide of its own life. Therefore we should avoid thinking of these quotations from Scripture as so much icing on the cake. On the contrary they should prompt us to make use of the lectio divina so as to learn always to begin from the Word of God. This in turn means that we must make our own the attitude of Our Blessed Lady in its regard: listen to it, obey it, make ourselves its disciples, and become believers.

It is the same dynamic Word that prompts the community to interpret social and ecclesiastical history and to recognize in it the call of God and of our Rule of life, the expectations of the young, and the needs of the laity and of the Salesian Family.

Hence the community is led to evaluate its own situation, to discover its strengths and weaknesses, its openness and resistance, its possibilities and limitations. What it amounts to is a revision of community life.

In this way the community learns to discover the fundamental challenges and to face them with hope and courage. It also learns to ask itself the necessary questions and look for suitable replies. This is the purpose of the practical guidelines.

2.3 As far as the fundamental contents are concerned, these refer to fraternal life, evangelical witness and animating presence among the young.

The fraternal life of the community aims at fostering the processes of the human and vocational growth of the confreres, promoting deep interpersonal relationships, strengthening the feeling of belonging and the family spirit, and helping to build up a community vision that is more widely shared. For this purpose may be found useful the personal life-plan, the practice of community discernment, the good use of occasions of meeting together, and the salesian community project.

Evangelical witness calls on us to make outwardly visible the primacy of God in the life of the community, to live the “grace of unity” in its community expressions, to make the following of Christ radical, prophetic and attractive, and to share with each other vocational motivations and the experience of God. The central place given to the Word of God, fostered by the practice of *lectio divina*, the quality of community prayer and the daily Eucharist will help to deepen the spiritual experience and the manifestation of the central place of God in our life. In the same way the following of Christ, lived in total availability to a joyful obedience, through a practical and austere poverty and the splendour of a vigilant and serene chastity, will make the witness of the community more transparent.

Wherever there is a salesian community there is also present an experience of faith, a network of relationships is built up, and many different kinds of service are offered to the young. The community makes visible its salesian presence among the young, animating them and fostering their growth. It is necessary, first of all, to return to the young and be not only a community for the young but also a community with the young. This is why the salesian community builds up a presence of communion and participation involving the laity and the Salesian Family, and takes its place in the neighbourhood and the local Church. In this way it is transformed into a presence that “educates and evangelizes”, creating settings of a strongly spiritual character, fully aware of the situations of poverty of young people and reacting to them with a pastoral mind and heart, and giving effect to projects and processes that help the young to mature. Finally the community promotes a true vocational culture, in which every young person is helped to discover a plan of life; it explicitly proposes the salesian vocation to those more suitable, by inviting them to have a vocational experience, and following up those who accept.

To be a community that lives fraternity, that gives strong and clear evangelical witness and that becomes an animating presence among young people, it must itself be animated, motivated, directed and followed up. Animation of the community takes place mainly through ongoing formation. The community can provide specific moments of spiritual renewal and opportunities for the educative and pastoral updating of the confreres but, without any doubt, the first and most important source of formation is the quality of daily life. The Rector has a fundamental role in the animation of the community, involving all the confreres in shared responsibility. His attention must be directed primarily to charismatic identity, the community mission, and fraternity.

Finally, the GC25 sets out some conditions which make it possible for a salesian community to be effective at the present day. It is a matter of helping each community to work according to a common project, of ensuring that it has the right number of confreres with the proper qualifications, of deepening the relationship between the community and the work, of putting into effect the provincial organic project. Some of these conditions apply at local level, but the greater number demand responsibility and decisions by the provincial community.

The capitular text is evidently directed primarily to the community itself, to which it offers five programs to be studied, examined more deeply and put into effect.

3. The Event of the 25th General Chapter

Clearly the GC25 is not merely a document. Above all it is an intense experience of the Congregation and it is a spirit whose witnesses are the Chapter members who have taken part in this great event. They are the best spokesmen for what they have seen and heard!

Among the features that marked the Chapter there stands out the atmosphere of brotherhood that was created from the very beginning and that everyone greatly appreciated. It was wonderful to experience “the Congregation’s unity in diversity” that article 146 of the Constitutions mentions. This was the result of the desire on the part of the Chapter members to make the Assembly itself an experience of community.

A second aspect was the growing awareness of the worldwide nature of the Congregation, which is reflected in its cultural diversity. The “Good-nights” by the Provincials, the celebrations and ceremonies led by the different Regions, the contributions in the Hall are proof that the charism of Don Bosco our Founder and Father has become ever more inculturated in the most diverse contexts and that the General Chapters themselves have assisted in bringing about a rich synthesis between unity and diversity.

The third extraordinary element was the Beatification – in St Peter’s Square - of three members of the Salesian Family, Brother Artemide Zatti, Sister Maria Romero and Fr Luigi Variara, which highlighted once again that the salesian vocation is really “a way that leads to Love” (C 196), to holiness, and that this ought to be our natural way of living , the best gift we can offer to the young (cf. C 25), our most significant educational project. In a special way the beatification of the first salesian Brother – not a martyr – evoked in the Chapter the desire to re-launch this vocation that was so fundamental for Don Bosco.

The fourth significant aspect was the presence of the Holy Father through his opening Message, and the Audience he granted in which he invited us to take holiness as our primary task.

A fifth interesting element was the full media coverage provided by ANS with the collaboration of the Don Bosco Missions in Turin, of the whole event which made possible the immediate communication to the Salesian Family and all the friends of Don Bosco of what was happening in the Chapter.

Finally there should be mentioned the presence of our confrere Mgr Alois Kothgasser who gave the retreat taking as his theme the Strenna of the Rector Major for 2002 – “Duc in altum!” – and also that of our confreres Cardinals and Bishops who came to visit us during the Chapter underlining the ecclesial character of our vocation and mission.

I pray that the spirit of the GC25 may spread through all the communities of the Congregation and may help us to respond with generosity to the Lord’s will, which is expressed though this Pentecostal event.

4. The task for the six year period

As I said in my closing address, after the preparatory stage and the celebration of the 25th General Chapter there now comes the time to pass from reflection to real life. This presentation has the particular scope of handing over to the Congregation the Chapter Document, with the invitation to each confrere and to each community to study it and put it into practice.

We must make of the community a personal life plan. Let us believe in it and build it up! It is the task of everyone, young and old, sick and healthy. Let us put to one side tiredness and disappointment as did the Apostles who had laboured all night without catching anything. Our future vitality depends on our ability to create communities that are significantly charismatic today. The essential basis for this is a renewed commitment to holiness. At the Word of the Lord we cast our nets, confident that the Lord will see to it that our efforts bear fruit.

Let us ask Mary Help of Christians the Star of the Sea to whom I entrusted the Congregation from the beginning of my period as Rector Major to help us to overcome our fears, to encourage us to “launch into the deep” and to accompany us as we set out on the immense ocean of this world with the enthusiasm and the zeal of Don Bosco, looking on the face of Christ and seeking the salvation of the young.

Fr. Pascual Chávez Villanueva

Rector Major
Rome, 24 May 2002
Feast of Mary Help of Christians