**The Past Pupils of Don Bosco and the Salesian Family**

Address to the first meeting of SDB Past Pupil Delegates for the EAO Region

17 September 2021

Good day to you all.

The first thing I would like to do is to offer you, my Salesian confreres, a warm greeting. In this East Asia and Oceania Region you are the ones who share the task of animating and accompanying the Past Pupils Association. I greet you in the name of the Rector Major and the Salesian Family Secretariat.

Along with this, I thank you for the attention and energy you have given to the Association in your Provinces. This is your way of showing love for our past pupils, and of working with the Church for a better world.

The World Delegate, Bro. Dominic, has asked me to reflect on the "Past Pupils of Don Bosco and the Salesian Family". I am happy to be with you. I have prepared this reflection with great enthusiasm and trust it will be useful for you.

1. **The Salesian Family today**

Let me begin with the Salesian Family. The Salesian Family, which the Past Pupils are also a part of, is a living reality. The term *family* here means *the charismatic and spiritual community today made up of thirty-two officially recognised groups, linked together by ties of spiritual relationship and apostolic affinity* (C. 4). These groups know and experience Don Bosco as Founder, and are dedicated as he was to the cause of education, evangelisation and missionary activity for the young and for people in general.

We have been reminded of the vitality of the family quite palpably in three recent instances: a) publication of the book "*The Salesian Family of Don Bosco*"; b) the impressive range of initiatives developed during the time of the pandemic on behalf of those most in need; c) the online Spirituality Days last January: 8,000 people enrolled, and more than 40,000 participants at certain times, showing a degree of satisfaction that had not been thought possible when preparations began (3.8 out of 4).

In his Report to the General Chapter on the state of the Congregation, the Rector Major was clear and to the point: "The Salesian Family is an ever-growing reality, in continuity with the reflection and practice of the previous six years... A precious journey of unity and communion that has led to the reality we enjoy today."

Naturally, the Salesian Family has its shadows too. This is precisely why, in the first stages of the new six-year period, it is worth the effort to reflect on the situation, discover its challenges and be committed to revitalising animation and accompaniment of the Family, each in your own setting. One of these challenges is growth in the sense of belonging. This is a challenge for us Salesians. It is also a challenge for the Past Pupils of Don Bosco.

**Two references that we cannot ignore**

Any reflection on the Salesian Family must have, among others, two very clear basic reference points, either implicitly or explicitly:

* Don Bosco’s thinking as founder, not only of two religious congregations, the SDB and the FMA, but of an entire family (a vast movement);
* and the process of an ever deeper understanding of who and what they are after Vatican II and the Special General Chapter.

Here are two texts that will help bring this to mind and, as far as is possible, rekindle it. It is only from living memory that life can emerge.

***An echo from Don Bosco’s words to the first GC*** (1877)

*"The first great effort I made when thinking of the Cooperators was precisely that of finding a way to keep them united with the Superior, such that the Superior would be able to ensure that they all knew what his thinking was. Right now we have no idea of the extent to which this Work will spread and the moral influence it will have when it has spread. .... So it is essential for every Rector to understand the Cooperators Association well and to speak of its true meaning... which is none other than doing the greatest amount of spiritual and temporal good possible for the poorest and most abandoned young people...* (Extract from Don Bosco’s address to the first GC, 07/09/1877). Today we can interpret these words as dictates for the other Salesian Family Groups as well, *mutatis mutandis*.

Don Bosco had undoubtedly grasped the universal import of the work that the Lord had inspired him to do and that Mary had helped him to accomplish. And he had grasped, as few had, how powerful it was to bring together men and women of good will on behalf of impoverished youth: young people and adults, rich and poor, priests and bishops, religious and lay people... Among them young people who had grown up and been educated in his houses, so many of whom had discovered their vocation as committed lay people, Salesians, diocesan priests, professional people... (or in other words, "upright citizens and good Christians" as he had asked them to be). These were all ways in which each of them, in accordance with who he was and his abilities, contributed to a better world and to a more lively and committed Church.

The Salesian Family, and within it the Past Pupils Association, came from this profound belief of Don Bosco’s, from his passion for the education and good of the young, a field where everyone could cooperate. Indeed, we need to recognise that many members of Salesian Family Groups were Past Pupils. And probably many of you are too.

**The Congregation’s process of reflection after Vatican II**

Everyone knows about the depth of the Congregation’s reflection following Vatican II. Among its many aspects, it strongly emphasised the identity and importance of the Salesian Family which, already at that time (1972), had a good number of Groups. This was one of the tasks of the Special General Chapter:

*“It was Don Bosco’s wish that the binding influence, stabilising factor, and driving force in the family should be the Salesians themselves. To encourage this, and in a spirit of service, fraternal exchanges must be arranged wherever and whenever possible according to local circumstances. This will ensure reciprocal enrichment, greater collaboration and a more fruitful apostolate”* (SGC, 189).

This reflection process continued under the leadership of Frs Viganò, Vecchi, Chávez, culminating in the promulgation of the *Charter of Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family* (2012).

Don Bosco’s thinking and action on the one hand, and the Charter of Charismatic Identity as the culmination of this long process of life and reflection are, and must increasingly be, our two great reference points for the animation and accompaniment of the Salesian Family as a whole, and for each of the Groups, including the Group known as the Past Pupils of Don Bosco. Obviously, each Group has its own particular features.

**Three aspects of the Salesian Family found at GC28**

We are now in the time of application of GC28 in the Congregation. In my view, it is not difficult to see in the recent GC, directly or indirectly, how these references were borne in mind. In my opinion, Chapter members took certain claims for granted, three of which I would like to emphasise:

1. *The Salesian Family is the fruit of an intense history of initiatives and reflections resulting from the rhythm of Church and social life.*

Its origin is charismatic. It is the Holy Spirit who planted it in Don Bosco's heart and, through him, helped it to develop in the Church, enriching it with new branches.

The Special General Chapter’s reflection following the Council and subsequent teaching of the Rectors Major, the experience of the Groups themselves and the style of animation received, have all been fundamental in this process of arriving at an understanding of the Salesian Family and experiencing it as "*a charismatic and spiritual community comprising different groups, officially established and recognised, linked together by ties of spiritual relationship and apostolic affinity, whose common father and centre of unity is the Successor of Don Bosco.”* (Charter of Identity, 4).

Together with this process of reflection, the pastoral and missionary passion of the SDBs, FMAs, ASCs, PPDBs, and the evangelisation promoted by YM, as well as the serious accompaniment of individuals, has strengthened the existing Groups and resulted in new ones in what today we call the "Salesian Movement".

1. *A constant call to respond to the situations and needs of those most impoverished in our world.*

We can ask ourselves: what has lain behind so much initiative and reflection? The details are explained by the people involved. But basically, looking at all the results, everything can be summed up in serious spiritual and apostolic effort that has moved so many individuals to ask themselves in Salesian terms: what is the Lord asking of us here and now? It is moving to note the common denominator in most of the decisions: attention to the needs of the poor in our world. We are right when we describe the Salesian Family mission as being *to the young, working classes and the missions* (Charted of Identity, 16).

1. *An interesting experience of spirit and mission shared between religious and lay people*

A third very significant aspect. The best and keenest experiences of the Salesian Family, the origin of most of its Groups, the personal stories of those who make it up, have had a rich experience of life and mission shared between religious and lay: SDBs and FMAs with the ASCs, ADMA and PPs; or with young people in the SYM; or with catechists; or with married couples; or with so many teachers and other educators who have identified with the Salesian spirit...

In following Don Bosco, we have been especially enriched by the collaboration and complementary nature of men and women of good will who are involved in the education and evangelisation of the young. Don Bosco today, in order to do good, has continued and will continue to need "everyone always".

The valuable tradition of the Salesian Family whose charismatic origin goes back to the time of Don Bosco; the constant call to respond to the needs of the poor, that has found response in the different Groups today belonging to the Salesian Family; and the wonderful experience of sharing between religious and lay people at the basis of the origin of all of these Groups… Should not these three things, and so many others, awaken a renewed animating and accompanying passion in us on behalf of the multitude of young people who leave our houses year after year? Would we, like Don Bosco, know how to open up perspectives, create spaces, instil enthusiasm, and facilitate conditions for young people to take the lead so that they can be builders of a better world, as they asked in their message to the GC28 Chapter members? The challenges for the Past Pupils Association are not trivial. But let us not forget that our responsibility is a charismatic one.

**Past Pupils of the Salesian Family**

At this point it seems to me that there is no doubt that the Past Pupils have had (had and have) a fundamental role in the development of the Salesian Family. The same can be said for the FMA Past Pupils and for Past Pupils of the other Groups officially belonging to the Salesian Family. All the Groups have within them an extraordinary power to awaken new energies and vocations so as to continue giving life to the task of working on behalf of the young and promoting new initiatives for responding to the new needs of our world.

But life goes on. And Don Bosco is alive in us and in them. The Introduction to the Statutes of the World Confederation is a valuable summary of the process the Association has gone through until today. Reading over it once again, meditating on it and sharing your reflections should help you to appropriately plan your service and give rise to new perspectives among the Past Pupils. The Delegate’s Handbook, too, that you are reflecting on now, offers many things that will help you to carry out your mission of animation and accompaniment. In other words, working for the renewal of Centres, Provincial Federations, the Association in general. And, for sure, inventing other forms of coming together more in keeping with the young people of our day. In the spirit of Don Bosco, the Association must be a youthful association of spirit and energy for the young. And everyone, young or adult, “oriented towards the young” (Statutes, 4).

**A challenge**

The challenge is an obvious one. I write it based on Pope Francis’ call to be a "Church going forth" (an outgoing Church). We can ask ourselves: is it enough to know how to *manage* the Salesian Family (or the PP Association) or restrict ourselves to *passing it on* as it is now, even though recognising that it is something good? *Will* t*he Holy Spirit, who shaped in Don Bosco a heart filled with love of God and for the poorest of young people, allow us to enter into an attitude of preservation and maintenance of our achievements, or at best to simply export the charism we so love, or simply wait for those who want to know about us?*

And even if we find ourselves just a bit comfortable in what we do, with little drive or even complaining about our problems..., should we not see this as *an opportunity to make room for the call of the Spirit, let Him warm our hearts and become increasingly the Church "going forth", an open Family, a mission that fits into the new cultural, social and ecclesial contexts that are opening up before our eyes, and in which young people are the key players?*

Pope Francis is launching the Church "outwards" (an outgoing Church!). Outgoing..., this is what most founders have done throughout history, moved by their apostolic passion. It is what Don Bosco did. And we are Don Bosco today!

With more than 160 years of the Salesian Family behind us, as the Rector Major has reminded us, it is a matter of once again tackling the charism as it was born and asking ourselves: where does the Spirit want to lead us today, what does he ask of us? And then to reply, as Don Bosco did, from the heart, enthusiastically, passionately, in a spirit of faith, counting on everyone.

**Conclusion**

This is what the Congregation is working on after GC28 in light of the Pope's message to the Chapter members. The Secretariat team is trying to do this. All of us who directly or indirectly have responsibilities in the animation of the Salesian Family need to be involved.

And it is worthwhile for all of us to help each other in an exercise of mutual animation and accompaniment. The Salesian charism, the Salesian Family are such beautiful things, and we are so in love with them that we cannot but dedicate our soul, life and heart to them, thinking of the young people most in need for whom the Spirit has given origin to this charism in the Church. So let us help each other. Many thanks.

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