**2.1. Consistency of the Salesian community in number and quality**

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A careful look at our recent General Chapters highlights the extent to which the Salesian community is regarded today with hope, but also with concern. It is the focus of most of the guidelines of the last Chapters. This is only natural since the local community is the place where the confreres live and grow in their vocation; it is the subject of the Salesian mission in the area; and it involves laypeople, accompanies the young in the process of education to the faith, and animates the Salesian Family. That is why a lot is expected of the community.

GC19 asked for a re-dimensioning of our works, a simplification of very large communities and a closure of very small works.[[1]](#footnote-1) It remarked that “too many works were opened in the past with personnel that was insufficient in number and inadequately prepared, and that this lack of number and quality of personnel is a serious deficiency that can lead the Congregation to the risk of seeing its own inner strength greatly diminished and consequently its real effectiveness lessened in carrying out the mission”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore it called for a period of “an internal and external strengthening of communities” as a “condition of apostolic life and efficacy”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

From then on the issue of the numerical and qualitative consistency of our communities has continued to resonate in General Chapters and letters of the Rector Majors under different names: re-dimensioning, reinvigorating, reframing, relocation and restructuring. And so we come to GC27 that asked the Provinces to ensure “consistency in number and quality of communities *by wisely and courageously reshaping*”[[4]](#footnote-4) them. For this reason, the present Rector Major and the General Council have asked the Provinces to take as a fundamental topic of their Provincial Chapters the "reshaping of our presences: determining where to stay, and therefore where to concentrate our energies, and how to strengthen our Salesian communities.”

The fact that the issue of the consistency of our communities has been returning repeatedly over the last fifty years is an indication that it is a fundamental problem.[[5]](#footnote-5) GC20 asked for a restructuring of our presences for pastoral purposes, while GC21 sought a new Salesian presence in all our works, both recent ones and those existing over a period of time. GC22 appealed for a return to the young and their many forms of poverty with the help of a renewed educational presence. GC23 reminded us that to educate young people to the faith, the community must become “a sign and a school of faith” and a “centre of communion”. GC24 invited us to involve laypeople in our works and called us to take care of the consistency of our communities. GC25, whose theme was the Salesian community today, focused on how to strengthen it, while GC26 called for a return to Don Bosco by each community returning to the young.

Today GC27, in asking us to give a radical witness to the Gospel, invites communities to go to the existential and geographical “peripheries” of young people. To achieve this end, the Rector Major indicates a way forward that is “indispensable and of prior concern”; he asks us “to undertake a real study and practical effort to look after and consolidate our communities, ensuring a robust human quality and also number of confreres, even at the price of there not being a religious community in some presences, and making progress in giving new meaning to and ‘reshaping’ Houses and Provinces… We certainly have to overcome great resistance that comes from attachments, from having spent so many years in a house, from the pressure of the educative community itself, of the suburb or citizens’ associations, right up to local and regional government…, however, the foreseeable difficulties should not impair either our clearsightedness or our capacity to act in prudent freedom”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There are several causes of the poor consistency existing in our communities: the aging of confreres, the decline in the number of vocations, the maintenance of all our works without changing the form of management, the desire to reach out to an increasing number of poor young people, the allocation of responsibility to laypeople, and the emergence of new priorities for our mission without taking decisions about our already existing works. However, it would appear that the root of the problem lies in a weak conviction about the need and importance of community. Although all are in agreement about community being a constitutive element of our life and action, the fact is that, when the time comes for taking decisions, practical difficulties and pressures inside and outside the Province take over.

**1. Reasons for establishing communities that are numerically and qualitatively consistent**

We sometimes wonder why we should “waste” Salesian personnel by sending so many confreres to a house when instead, by distributing them in small communities of two or three members, we could reach new frontiers in our mission to the young today. And so, we are led to ask about the contribution made to the Salesian vocation and mission by a community consisting of an adequate number of Salesians prepared for the job. The answer, although well known and widespread in the Congregation for some time now,[[7]](#footnote-7) assumes greater import in the changed circumstances of the present day: a community’s numerical and qualitative consistency is a necessary condition for its being significant, even if this alone is not enough. So, let us focus attention on some points, knowing full well that the consistency we are talking about is not only a matter of numbers but also of quality.

In the first place, a Salesian community is significant when it accompanies the spiritual and pastoral life of ***each confrere***. The community is responsible for the initial and continuing formation of its members; to this end, it makes use of conferences, good nights, readings, the community day and updating. Today, we come across some communities that have a very small number of confreres who are often burdened with work, tired and sometimes discouraged by the very many responsibilities heaped upon them. In addition, when the community is very small, it is not easy to animate the prayers well and see to the spiritual growth of the confreres, despite the fact that they need well-animated prayer together. Again, it often happens that the laypeople who share responsibility with us in the mission are well-prepared, and this constitutes a challenge for the confreres to qualify themselves as well; unfortunately, because of the limited number of confreres in the community, it is not possible to find the time for updating, even short periods, and this damages the quality of their work.

A second element of significance is ***the pastoral quality of the community***. This depends mainly on the quantitative and qualitative consistency of the community, on its apostolic awareness, on the qualification of its confreres, and on pastoral discernment carried out as a team. Pastoral quality is based on the witness of the community and on its vitality and presence among the young. It comprises processes of faith education, spiritual direction and initiatives offered to young people concerning various aspects such as vocation, prayer, community life, social and missionary commitment. If accompanied by trust in God’s grace, it results in pastoral efficacy.

The pastoral quality of the community is ensured in the first place by its *witness*. Witness is “the ability to convey a message that touches the heart, to remind people that there are still more important things in life, to challenge the lifestyle or the values ​​proposed by the world, to present an alternative and better way of living, to show how to live a fully human life”.[[8]](#footnote-8) But, a small community can hardly be seen. To today’s young people who live in societies marked by conflict, a not-too-small community gives a witness of unity, brotherhood and love; it educates them for communication and an important dialogue among people of different cultures, religions and social backgrounds; it helps them to overcome individualistic behaviour and to learn to care for others. Particularly significant is the witness it gives when it is an international community. Significant too in the community is the presence of elderly confreres: if the mission is not identified exclusively with efficiency and discharging responsibilities but also with brotherhood, pastoral relations, apostolic prayer, closeness and a serene acceptance of one’s fragile health, then they too contribute to the visibility and witness of the community; we must take pains in our communities to avoid the “throw-away culture” mentioned by Pope Francis.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Together with witness, the pastoral quality of the community flows from its *vitality*. We recognize today that pastoral work is never a purely individual activity and that a pastoral plan is a guarantee of apostolic effectiveness. Teamwork benefits from ​​the contribution of each one’s ideas and experiences, fosters joint planning, ensures a sharing of responsibility by everyone and creates a unified path towards a common goal. A community ensures continuity in its work through its community plan and the educative and pastoral plan. In this context an important role is played by the Rector as the spiritual the pastoral guide of the confreres. It happens, however, that the many tasks entrusted to the Rector, especially in a small community, affect negatively the quality of his service; to respond to the various needs, he tends to act as a manager of the work, and in this way he empties his role. In particular, this often deprives the confreres of personal accompaniment through the friendly talk. Experience also shows that the multiplication of small communities increases the difficulty of finding directive personnel; a province that has many small communities is not always in a position to prepare future Rectors.

The pastoral quality also comes from our *presence among the young*. One cannot think of a community without a presence among and interaction with young people; when the Salesians are few in number and concentrate on organizational and administrative matters, they find themselves in the position of working for young people, but not with young people. From this there follows, among other things, the scarcity of vocations to Salesian life because the Salesians do not have time to be with young people and accompany them; if young people do not know the Salesians and do not have a friendly relationship with them, if they are not accompanied by them, it will be very difficult for them to choose the Salesian vocation, and especially the vocation of the Salesian brother. Our Constitutions remind us that “the family atmosphere of welcome and of faith, created by the witness of a community which gives of itself with joy, is the most efficacious setting for the discovery and guidance of vocations”,[[10]](#footnote-10) and for their perseverance.

A further element of the significance of the Salesian community lies in its ***ability to******assemble many forces*** and involve them in its mission. Experience shows that, with the amount of work to be carried out by a small number of confreres, it becomes difficult to engage in any work involving the educative and pastoral community, like organizing specific activities for the young, for families, for laypeople and also for the Salesian Family. The consistency of a community makes its animating role in the educative and pastoral community more effective, and more easily ensures the Salesian identity of the project. This becomes more difficult when only a few Salesians are involved in roles of animation and, still less, when the community is virtually absent. GC24 had already presented the formation of laypeople as the “principal investment” of the Salesians. What sometimes happens is that, due to the weak consistency of a community, there is little opportunity to form the many laypeople involved in our works in the richness of our Salesian charism and spirituality; the same thing can happen with regard to our responsibility for animating the Salesian Family.

Finally, there is another factor that makes for a community that is significant: it is its ***openness to the area*** in which it is situated, both from the social and the ecclesial point of view. For this reason, the community must go to the “peripheries”; it must work with the local Church and with civil society. The community has to find ways of meeting the young people of the area and seeing to their needs so as to make the Salesian house a radiating centre of the charism in the area. It must therefore also go outside of its works and structures. In this effort it must be able to mobilize public opinion, network with the local Church, involve people, families, organizations and government agencies, and ensure that they share the responsibility for young people. This calls for a work involving formation, animation and support. Obviously, it is difficult, not to say impossible, to embark on such a task in a small community and accomplish it well.

**2. An apostolic model of a Salesian presence**

Our General Regulations provide the normal criterion for the numerical consistency of a community.[[11]](#footnote-11) On this point, when Fr. Juan Vecchi was the Vicar of the Rector Major, he remarked: “There is in the first place a certain numerical consistency below which the sign and community life as envisaged by the Constitutions seems impossible of realization. Art. 150 of the Regulations offers a criterion for evaluating this limit when it prescribes that ‘the number of confreres in a house shall normally be not less than six’. And art. 20 of the same Regulations provides a safeguard for emergency situations when it lays down that even in missionary presences the number should not fall below three confreres”.[[12]](#footnote-12)

For a better understanding of this indication, the Vicar of the Rector Major, Fr. Luc Van Looy explained to GC25: “In places of development such as Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, it is understood that a new presence can be ‘started’ even with less than six confreres, but the Rector Major has always insisted that there be a plan to complete the number within a few years. In particular, he has insisted on the responsibility of the house council and on the presence of the confreres in the council of the work”.[[13]](#footnote-13) This guideline about a community of three confreres being in a state of emergency and about that number needing to be increased is still valid. It implies that in the case of a community made up of three confreres there must be a plan to overcome the situation.

It seems reasonable for a Salesian work to include two or three kinds of activities for young people, such as a school, a parish and an oratory, a service for poor children, a non-formal training centre, but without it turning into a complex institution. The diversity of activities in a community shows everyone the manifold richness of Don Bosco’s charism and its ability to meet the priority needs of the young people of the place, even if not all of them. The community must also form laypeople, animate the Salesian Family, be present in the area....; this is why it has to reach a level of consistency that enables it to realize the model of a Salesian presence that the Province has chosen. The consistency of a community needs to be connected with the model of an apostolic presence that a Province intends to implement.

It is therefore important for a Province to choose the model of apostolic presence it intends to have in its territory; in this way it will be able to achieve it gradually. The model of apostolic presence is not something random and improvised, but one that is deliberately chosen and followed.

**3. Particular situations**

I shall now present some special situations, making reference to “Juridical Elements and Administrative Praxis in the Government of the Province” where are indicated the documentation and procedures necessary to do these operations.

**3.1. Opening of a community**

When a decision is made to start a new work, it is necessary to include in the request to the Rector Major and the General Council the reasons for the decision and the manner of its implementation;[[14]](#footnote-14) mention must be made as well of the beneficiaries of the work. Together with the decision to start a new work, consideration must also be given to the composition of a community. Since at the beginning the needs of the area are not yet known, it is possible to begin with a reduced number of confreres who will study the needs of the young. In this case a community is opened temporarily and is not canonically erected; it has a confrere in charge. The Rector Major and the General Council consider it appropriate for this community not to be dependent on a nearby community, but to be accompanied by the Provincial and his Council; since it is still in the process of defining its mission, the accompaniment must be undertaken by the one responsible for the government of the Province. In addition, in the yearbook of the Congregation the communities that are not canonically erected must be shown as independent entities and not linked to another community.

The Rector Major and the General Council have further decided to authorize the canonical establishment of a community when it has at least four confreres[[15]](#footnote-15); in this case, therefore, the Provincial will have to appoint a Rector and a local council. This also applies to the canonical erection of a missionary residence.[[16]](#footnote-16) All these four confreres must be perpetually professed; the temporarily professed cannot be counted among them; the intention is to ensure in this way that, should there be confreres in initial formation in the community, the community will be able to accompany them. For the same reason, and even more so, temporarily professed confreres should not be sent to communities that are not canonically erected and in which there is no Rector and a house council.

**3.2. Closure of a community**

In the General Council we have also agreed upon the following criterion. In the case of the canonical closure of a community, one must consider what happens to the work. If the work too is closed, then the situation is clear: there is no longer a community and no longer a work; it will only be a matter of determining how the property is to be used. However, before closing a work that serves a useful purpose, some thought ought to be given to another possibility, viz. entrusting the work to lay management, under the responsibility and accompaniment of the Province. These works under lay management will be placed in the yearbook of the Congregation in the list of works dependent on the community of the provincial house.

Should the work remain open, some confreres can be left temporarily in it with someone in charge so as to form a community that is not canonically erected. This community will remain open for a short period until the work is closed or entrusted to lay management. Should the work remain open after all the confreres of the community have been withdrawn, and should it be near another community, the work can then be entrusted to the responsibility of the nearby community, on condition however that the confreres live in same accommodation and that the Rector and the local council exercise responsibility over all the works entrusted to the community. Sometimes it may not be expedient to burden a community with the addition of yet another work; in this case too, if the work deserves to continue, it would be a good thing to consider handing it over to lay management.

**3.3. Accompanying the processes in each community**

Between the opening and closing of a community, there is a wide range of community situations that need to be accompanied. Each community lives its own processes that need to be monitored. In particular, after the annual provincial visitation, it is advisable that the Provincial read to his Council the conclusions of the visitation, study the various circumstances, and then decide on the necessary steps to be taken.

One may encounter situations of fatigue and discouragement; there can be situations of deterioration and debilitation. One may come across inadequacies in the performance of certain tasks which can be remedied with the help of more suitable confreres. There can be situations of poor health, of premature aging, and of conflict. All these situations call for different interventions, and therefore acts of government, which have to be identified and require accompaniment. If these situations are not addressed in time, they may become irreversible.

**4. Directions for the Province**

As I conclude these reflections with which the Rector Major and the General Council concur, I invite each Provincial and Provincial Council to draw up a plan that makes for a consistent number and quality of confreres in the communities of their Province. This is a matter of a multi-faceted action regarding the consolidation of communities, and it comprises: the works, the canonical erection of communities not yet canonically erected, re-dimensioning, the entrusting of works to lay management, and a careful discernment before opening new works in case the above-mentioned priorities have not been implemented.

To ensure a true exercise of government and concerted progress throughout the Congregation, I shall, after the approval of the Provincial Chapters, request the Provinces to send me this concrete plan specifying these communities, the steps to be taken, and the time framework for executing them. If this operation is not done, other needs, emergencies and pressures will cause it to be set aside, as has been the case till now.

The commitment to make our communities consistent must be thought out and realized through an action of government calling for decisions that are practical and clearly defined. Since the Provincial Chapter has helped to “reframe the presences”, the Province now is aware of the fronts on which to concentrate its Salesian personnel. It is now time to get to work; it will not be long before we reap the benefits.

1. Cfr. GC19 p. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. GC19 p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. GC19 p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. GC27 69.6. A reflection on this topic can already be found in: J. VECCHI, *Redesigning our presences: criteria, perspectives, restructuring*, LIV General Assembly of the Union of Superiors General, November 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Looking at the *Yearbook of the Congregation for 2015*, we find that, out of a total of 1685 communities, 14.2% are made up of 3 or less than 3 confreres; 14.2% are made up of 4 confreres; 13,8% have 5 confreres; 11.6%, 6 confreres; and 46.2% are made up of 7 or more than 7 confreres. There are four Regions that have 20-22% of their communities made up of 3 or less than 3 confreres, and one Region instead that has only 3.2% of such communities. It is obvious that, at the level of the Congregation, we cannot go into a qualitative analysis of the configuration of our communities; this is something that needs to be done at the level of each Province.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. GC27, *Address of the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime at the closing of the GC27*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. J. VECCHI, *Significance of Salesian presence*, in “Acts of the General Council” 340, 1992, pp. 35-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. CVCSVA, *Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life,* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cfr. J. VECCHI, *Sickness and old age in the Salesian experience*, in AGC 377, Rome 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Const. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Reg. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. J. VECCHI, *The local Salesian community,* in Acts of the General Council” 335, 1991, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CG25, *Report of the Vicar General Fr Luc Van Looy to CG25*, p. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to can. 610 of the Code of Canon Law, consideration must be given at one and the same time to the advantage of the local Church and of the Institute; there have to be the necessary conditions to ensure for the members the possibility of conducting a regular religious life according to the purpose and spirit of the Institute; and there must be a prudent certainty of being able to provide suitably for the spiritual, financial and other needs of the members. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. To be able to constitute a juridical person in the Church, can. 115 § 2 requires the presence of at least three members; the same also applies to a religious community. Article 150 of our Regulations states that *ordinarily* the number of confreres in a community should not be less than six. While keeping in mind art. 150 of the General Regulations, the Rector Major also authorizes, for adequate reasons, the canonical erection of communities with fewer than six confreres, but not less than four perpetually professed confreres. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cfr. Reg. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)