

SOCIETÀ DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

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*Il Rettor Maggiore*

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To my dear confreres, Salesians of Don Bosco,

To my dear Salesian Family

To the laity committed to the Salesian Mission

To you leaders, educators, catechists

**OUR 28th “SPECIAL” GENERAL CHAPTER**

**Amid the heartache of Coronavirus and the EASTER EXPERIENCE**

My dear brothers, sisters and all our friends: accept my affectionate greetings, together with my sincere and very best wishes for each of you, your religious communities and your families.

Let me begin this letter by expressing the intentions that I carry in my heart today, 4 April 2020, the day on which we should have concluded the 28th General Chapter of the *Salesians of Don Bosco*. And I am doing so at a time when the world, the entire planet, is sorely tried by this terrible pandemic. At the same time, we are on the threshold of Holy Week, the vigil of Palm Sunday, followed by the Paschal Triduum that will reach its climax on the day that is the most important one for us Christians: EASTER, the day of Our Lord’s Resurrection.

With this very informal, family-style letter it is my intention to send you my greetings and the greetings of all the members of GC28; also to tell you how the weeks have been spent in Valdocco and what steps we will take in the future. At the same time it is inevitable that I refer to this period of pandemic in which so many are sick, deceased, and where much of life on the planet is paralyzed. We are called to live this time as Christians and as sons and daughters of Don Bosco and lovers of his charism. Easter time must be a beautiful opportunity for the Lord to continue to “pass through” our lives and to touch our hearts.

**1. COMING TO THE CRADLE OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM**

Sixty-two years after the last Salesian General Chapter was held at Valdocco, we have returned to what is the cradle of our charism. We have chosen this significant place in order to offer everyone the possibility of having an experience of the Congregation that can speak to us from very many perspectives. Indeed, at *Valdocco everything speaks to us of Don Bosco, the Help of Christians and of the charism that the Holy Spirit has woven, through our father.*

This is why the Oratory of Don Bosco at Valdocco has been, is and will continue to be a *lasting criterion*. Article 40 of our Constitutions says: “Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model: it was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves. As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works.”

This is what Valdocco has been for all Chapter members over these four weeks. This is the experience we carry with us as we return to our life and mission throughout the Salesian world. I have to say that today, 4 April, forty-six Chapter members are still in Turin because they have not been able to re-enter their provinces and countries due to restrictions resulting from the pandemic. They are benefiting profoundly from this prolonged and “unexpected” time in Don Bosco’s home, which is everyone’s home.

During the first three weeks we respected the programme that had been laid down.

On Saturday 22 February, there was *the official opening of GC28.* The presence of Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, was a special sign of this opening. The presence of several Salesian cardinals and bishops, as well as that of the superiors and world leaders of sixteen groups of our Salesian Family, was a beautiful sign of fraternity. It was an expression of communion and family that left its mark as a profound and rewarding experience for all.

In the meantime, news of COVID-19 and its effects coming from continental China reached Italy and Spain. And the invisible and inexorable march then commenced from these two countries, today reaching 188 nations around the world,

We continued our Chapter work for three weeks, even though by the third week several decrees had already been promulgated by the Italian State authorities. The time came when it was no longer possible to go in or out of Valdocco. Faced with this situation, the Chapter Assembly decided to bring forward the discernment for the election of the Rector Major and the General Council by one week. This process was brought forward, in agreement with the guide, Father Pier Luigi Nava, to the last week of our eventual stay in Valdocco. We informed the authorities that, since we were already in a sort of ongoing quarantine we would close the Chapter proceedings and dissolve the Assembly on Friday, 13 March. In fact, with the solemn Eucharist on Saturday morning, 14 March, we closed the 28th General Chapter which the confreres had already been calling “special” for many days.

**2. A WORLD, INCLUDING OURSELVES, STRUCK BY CORONAVIRUS**

I think I should add little to the analysis of this Covid-19 or coronavirus pandemic. We have all received a lot of information, perhaps even too much of it.

As I said, this situation forced us to conclude the Chapter Assembly three weeks in advance. The reality of this serious pandemic is affecting the world, the societies of all countries (some more than others at the moment), and us too. Among the provinces of Italy and Spain (especially Lombardy, Piedmont and Madrid) and Austria, already 45 confreres have died: most of them because of this disease; I also have news of similar deaths involving some Daughters of Mary Help of Christians hospitalized in an old people's home.

It seems to me correct to say that we are going through a moment of true *tribulation* (with all the meaning that the word has in the New Testament). As responsible citizens we are scrupulously following the rules that have been given to facilitate the overcoming of this pandemic. We also accept the sacrifices that this entails, as all people do. In many countries we are carrying out initiatives of charity, solidarity and fraternity. Echoes of pain and heartbreak are coming in from thousands of people (including from the Salesian houses and provinces to which I have referred). There is a sense of consternation, being dazed. We pray for the sick and for those who work in the health care world. We pray for the deceased and their families. Let us place before the Lord the efforts of so many scientists and researchers who are working hard to find a vaccine.

We feel as if the world has stopped: public life, journeys, the economy, most of the work in businesses, shows, sports... We experience this as “a necessary evil” in expectation of a greater good.

In this 21st century world of ours, strongly marked by the Promethean temptation (as in the Greek myth), we never thought we would experience anything of the kind. In the history of humanity there is talk of “plagues” and other illnesses that have killed millions of people. But we thought we were very much protected by our “self-made” security, thinking we controlled everything that could come our way...

In the face of this situation, as educators and evangelizers we are invited to ask ourselves *what believing and prayerful word can guide us at this time*...*.* Faced with this situation of tribulation, aware of its complexity, we cannot, as believers, neglect the perspective of belief. The Pope himself has warned us *not to waste these difficult days*.

What person, believing or non-believing, was not impressed at seeing the Pope climbing the stairs of St Peter's Basilica on Friday 27 March, tired, alone, and with the rain as a witness to this moment of sorrow, prayer and faith? It was easy to feel our “hearts touched” when faced with his simplicity and stripping of self, his inner life, sobriety and piety.

Over these days I have tried to accompany my thinking with some theological reflection, and I have seen that there are those who suggest that, faced with what is being experienced in the world, a first step as believers must surely be silence before speaking. A necessary and painful silence, a silence made of solidarity and humility in the face of so much accumulated pain thus far, and which will still affect our future; because not everything has been overcome. And I share the thinking of those who believe that we do not have the “right” to involve God, not without first having made, as far as possible, the silence, tears and pain of so many people our own.

Even if we have not been affected by illness and death, even if we do not lack the necessary food (which is lacking in many very poor families), we cannot consider ourselves “above”, or impervious to this experience of pain that humanity is going through. Only later, once we have made the pain of so many brothers and sisters, men and women our own, will we be, perhaps, entitled to say a word about God.

Everything we have experienced should enlighten our lives today and in the future, because in view of tomorrow what will be important is how we have lived and are living the present moment.

May prayer and the experience of this Easter time help us to be more merciful in our attitudes and more humble.

And hopefully, after this great tribulation, something good will come of it – that we can “reinvent ourselves for the better”, that we can mature more as a society, and ourselves as a Salesian Family and Congregation (as some authors write these days, this pandemic does not hide other more serious pandemics which affect human rights and the path to peace), and that we, as a society, decide that the world and life in our land should be better for everyone. I wish we could decide that. I do not know if we will succeed as a world, as nations, as a society, but in our small Salesian universe I think that we can continue to choose to live in an ever more fraternal way, more in solidarity, always respectful and compassionate, with our brothers and sisters and towards Creation, God's gift, and by being attentive to those who live in greater fragility and need.

**3. A PANDEMIC WITH SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES, INCLUDING ECONOMIC ONES, IN MANY OF OUR HOUSES...**

It seems to me right and proper not to ignore the situation that will soon arise. The vast majority of people believe that after the pain of illness and death caused by this pandemic, the serious economic consequences that are already looming on the horizon will follow. There is great concern for the millions of people who will be out of work in the near future, with economic problems for the survival of their families. I have no doubt that we will have to increase to the maximum our sensitivity and our ability to help those most in need, according to our possibilities, wherever we are. We must think of very concrete charity and solidarity.

At the same time I can already foresee the real difficulties in which many Salesian presences in the world will find themselves, in particular those in which the mission takes place in schools, colleges, professional training centres and university institutions; the same can be said of many social works. It is more than evident that, in general, we will not have the resources to support them; at least not with the same means and the same possibilities that we have used so far in times that we could call “normal”.

We must be clearly aware of this, knowing that it will not be possible to wait for the necessary help to come, in any case, from outside – where by “outside” I mean not only other countries, other institutions, but sometimes the very provinces themselves.

We will have to start thinking and imagining that we will very soon be going through situations of greater difficulty; and without doubt, *greater sobriety* will be necessary in the short term and perhaps in the coming years. I am aware that while reading these words, many of my confreres will tell me that in many places in the world people are already living with great sobriety and also in genuine poverty; they will tell me that many houses do not have what is necessary to provide for all needs. I know the different situations very well. I am very aware of them, dear confreres. I certainly do not ask you for further sacrifices. I simply share with each of you that the prospect we have before us will not be without economic difficulties.

On the other hand, I would like to ask everyone to have the same creativity as our father Don Bosco, so that, even amid the difficulties and inconveniences, the lack of means will never be to the detriment of our youngsters. And this is because the doors of Valdocco will never be closed for them and for others to come. So let us think about how to adapt ourselves, how to be more essential in what requires this, how and where we can seek resources, *but never at the price of leaving our poorest beneficiaries without the care and attention of the Salesian house in which they have always been or which awaits them, especially because now, more than ever, they need us more.*

**4. IN A GENERAL CHAPTER IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE PLAYED A LEADING ROLE.**

During the months of preparation for the General Chapter, young people from all continents and nations made themselves present through many responses, suggestions and messages. Subsequently, during the days of the Chapter, sixteen young people came to Valdocco to participate in the Chapter work. Others who had made plans could not leave their country; the same is true for the laity who were to come the following week.

These young people left us a message bearing the title “Young people’s letter to GC28”, now available to anyone who wants to know it, and that begins with these words: “*To the dear Salesians who to us are fathers, educators and friends*”*:*

“We are writing this letter from the heart. We spent this week of the 28th General Chapter listening, discerning, participating in the ongoing dialogue on ‘What kind of Salesian for the youth of today.’ We know very well that we are not perfect, so it is not our intention to ask you to be perfect. We ask you to accept this letter as that of a son or daughter who writes to their father, to express themselves and tell him how they feel.” And then they share with us their vision and their challenges. I cannot list them all here, but I can highlight some of the things they have told us:

“We are afraid, we feel confused and we have a great need to be loved... We have difficulties in the face of commitment... and too often we also become individualistic...

“As Pope Francis says, we wish we could return to the first love that is Christ, to be his companions and friends of the young. There is in us a strong desire for spiritual and personal fulfilment. We want to walk in the direction of spiritual and personal growth and we want to do it with you, the Salesians.

“We want you to be with us. You have done so with your Salesian style. Being with us, side by side, allowing us to be protagonists. We would like you to guide us in our circumstances, with love. A love that does not tell us what we have to say, a love that does not tell us what we have to do, a love that offers us opportunities that help us to grow in spirituality and to transform our lives....

“Salesians, do not forget us young people because we have not forgotten you and the charism you have taught us! We want to tell you loudly, with all our heart: being here for us has been a dream come true: in this special place that is Valdocco, where the Salesian mission began, Salesians and young people together for the Salesian mission, with our common will to be saints together. You have our hearts in your hands. Take care of this precious treasure of yours. Please, never forget us and continue to listen to us.”

Thus far the words of our young people themselves. Words and a presence that touched our feelings and our hearts very strongly. A presence and a message that will undoubtedly be very much part of our vision and our actions in the coming years. There is no doubt that this will be reflected in the program of animation and governance of our Congregation for the next six years, and that it will be reflected in the publication that will gather the reflections of our General Chapter.

**5. WITH A VERY SIGNIFICANT PRESENCE OF POPE FRANCIS**

This General Chapter will be remembered not only for having been spent, as far as possible, in the midst of a terrible pandemic, but for the very significant presence for us of Pope Francis.

The Holy Father had long expressed to me his desire to be present. Everything was ready, even the organization of his trip. Until the day before, this possibility remained open. But the ultimate declaration of the situation of isolation requested by the civil authorities did not allow it. Faced with this reality, the Holy Father, after a phone call filled with affection for all the Chapter members, immediately sent me his ‘Message of Pope Francis to the General Chapter’. It was published and made known through the Vatican media. The text will be included in the publication of the reflections of the General Chapter and will undoubtedly be part of the lines of reflection and planning for the next six years.

As well as being a manifestation of affection for Don Bosco and for the Salesian Congregation, expressed also by the way the Holy Father made it known to us, his message has become for us a pastoral programme for today’s Salesians. The Pope himself, in fact, answers the question as to how he sees and thinks and dreams of the Salesians of today and tomorrow.

We have thanked the Pope from the bottom of our hearts for this gift and we continue to renew our gratitude to him.

**6. A FAILED GENERAL CHAPTER...?**

To ask this and other questions is reasonable.

Will GC28 be useless, since it could not be completed?

Are you thinking of reconvening it?

This was requested by some confreres and some media a few days after the Chapter closed.

Without a Chapter document approved by the assembly, what is its value?

I can answer all these questions.

As a Chapter assembly we were very aware of what the General Chapter was and has meant for us who lived it, and for our entire Congregation.

This General Chapter was very special in many ways. It was so for its duration and its interruption, certainly. But it was also because of the grace that we experienced every day in Valdocco, the cradle of our charism. To live through the General Chapter where our Father dreamed of us, worked tirelessly, struggled, prayed and also lived the daily joy of being a family with his young people, and the joy of seeing how the Spirit worked wonders of holiness in his young people, marked our entire Chapter assembly in a profound way.

This General Chapter has been a true experience and a breaking in of the Holy Spirit. In the experience of fraternity, in serene reflection, in communion among us, in the atmosphere of profound serenity we experienced every day (a faithful reflection of the serenity existing in the Congregation throughout the world), in the strong desire for fidelity... in all of this and much more, we experienced an historical moment as a Congregation, a moment of God, because He passed among us and the Spirit of God accompanied the celebration of our 28th General Chapter.

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Ex 40:34).

“And I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16-17).

It was a General Chapter in which we strongly perceived the call to be faithful to Don Bosco and to put young people at the centre of our efforts, our concerns, our commitment and our joys. The harmony in this sense was absolute. “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 and 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 of myself to my last breath for my poor boys.’”* (*C*. 1)

In addition to what has been said, I want to reiterate strongly that the 28th General Chapter is in no way a failed Chapter. The fact that we cannot offer the Congregation a document with the title “Chapter Documents”, as on previous occasions, in no way means that we do not have a magisterium at this very moment in our rich congregational history.

The Chapter Assembly, before the early closing, decided that the Rector Major and his Council, elected in the previous days, would take over both the Chapter deliberations already approved and the reflections on the first two nuclei of the Chapter theme.

These texts, together with *the Holy Father's Message* and the further reflection that the General Council will carry out, will constitute the guide for the journey of the Congregation in the coming years.

It will be so. We will certainly not offer a book entitled “Chapter Documents”, but a document entitled *General Chapter 28*. *Reflections*. In addition to what has already been said, there will be a letter setting the agenda for the six year period, from the Rector Major, once he has shared it with the General Council. All this will guide our steps in the coming years, in harmony and continuity with the journey of fidelity that the Congregation is making. For this reason, I would like to reiterate clearly that *it is not a failed General Chapter we are talking about, but rather a “special” Chapter for its duration, its substance and its form.*

**7. THE SPIRIT OF GENERAL CHAPTER 28: THE “VALDOCCO OPTION”, THE SPIRIT OF VALDOCCO**

Let me conclude this reflection, dear brothers and sisters, by making my own the words of my predecessor, Fr Pascual Chávez, in a rich chronicle and reflection that he put together a few days ago. In a telephone call I told him that I intended to end my letter with these words of his: for their richness, because they reflect very well what Valdocco has been during these four weeks, and also as an expression of communion. This communion and serenity to which I have referred on various occasions is a beautiful reality in our Congregation today and gives us great energy to continue to wager strongly on a journey of fidelity to Don Bosco as the Lord expects of us. This communion allows us to concentrate so much pastoral energy in favour of the mission.

It was the Holy Father, Pope Francis, who in his profound, beautiful and agenda-setting message to the General Chapter proposed that we make what he called the “Valdocco option” the sure point of reference for comparing ourselves with our source and origin, and to ask the Lord to grant us, as Don Bosco asked, to make the *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle* a reality. This is why Fr Pascual Chávez’s words can help us look at what Valdocco has been and will be in the present and the future, such that this very “special” General Chapter may well be valued in Salesian history precisely as the Chapter in which “*we returned to Valdocco to start out again from Valdocco.*”

*“After 60 years a General Chapter has once again taken place at Valdocco,* and this is already very significant because it is the cradle of our charism and mission, our charismatic origins are found there and hence our originality in the Church and in the world!

Valdocco brings us back to the ‘*Pinardi shed*’, at Easter 1846 after Don Bosco’s “Good Friday”, when he suffered indescribably at not humanly seeing a future for his boys. We were born that Easter beneath a lowly shed, our first home.

Valdocco brings us back to *Mamma Margaret* who, in order to accompany her son, left the Becchi and all it meant for her, and moved with him to that poor place, and for 10 years until her death on 25 November 1856, worked with a mother’s tireless love to make the Oratory a true ‘home’ for boys without a family.

Valdocco brings us back to *Dominic Savio* who, after arriving in 1854, in just two years under Don Bosco’s wise guidance reached the highest degree of holiness through his purity of life, intense experience of God, apostolic charity, fulfilment of his duties, founding the ‘Immaculate Conception Sodality’ that two years later would become the seed from which the Salesian Congregation would be born.

Valdocco brings us back to the *great friends and collaborators of Don Bosco*, Saint Joseph Cafasso, Marchioness Barolo, Saint Leonard Murialdo, Saint Aloysius Guanella … and to the *first Salesians*, those who made his threefold dream a reality: seeing the wolves become lambs and the lambs become shepherd and the shepherds missionaries!

Valdocco means the *Pinardi church*, the Oratory’s first church, and means the *Church of Saint Francis de Sales*, the one that we can consider the church of Salesian holiness, knowing who prayed there: Don Bosco, Mamma Margaret, Dominic Savio, Don Rua, Bishop Cagliero, Don Rinaldi, the saints named above. It was there, behind the altar, that Dominic Savio was seen in ecstasy.

Valdocco means the *Basilica of Mary Help of Christians*, The Mother's House, from where her glory went out, the monument of Don Bosco's gratitude to her who had done everything among us, from the dream at nine years of age when she was given to him as ‘mother and teacher’ until today. “We believe that Mary is present among us and continues her mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians.”

Valdocco means *the life of the Congregation* spread today across 134 countries of the world, and *of the whole Salesian Family* in its 33 branches officially belonging to it. In the Basilica are found the caskets of Don Bosco, Dominic Savio, Mother Mazzarello, Don Rua, Don Rinaldi, and all Don Bosco’s Successors.

Valdocco represents the *point of departure for all the missionary expeditions*, from the first one in 1875 to the 150th last year, that have made it possible for the Salesian charism to go out to the whole world with thousands of Salesians who, with total generosity to the point of martyrdom, have borne and faithfully planted the charism of Don Bosco, as demonstrated by the vocational frutifulness, growth in presences, holiness of confreres, young people and members of the Salesian Family.

I ask our Mother the Help of Christians, in front of whose altar and in whose house in Valdocco we have prayed so much, that grace and the gift of fidelity may continue to come to us from the Lord, so that what Sacred Scripture says may become a reality in us: “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.And the God of peacewill be with you” (Phil 4:9). May Don Bosco continue to take care, in God, of his Congregation and his Salesian Family. Amen.

With true affection and with the promise of my prayer for all of you, let me greet you all,

**Fr. Ángel Fernández A.,SDB**

Rector Major