

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

A LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS FOR GOD AND THE YOUNG¹

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Rome, 8 December 1998

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

My dear Confreres,

I am writing to you at the beginning of the jubilee year dedicated to God our Father, from whom comes to us every good gift. Among the greatest of these that we have received throughout our time on earth, after that of Baptism and Christian life, is the special grace of consecration on which I invited you to reflect in my previous letter.

"An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state.(...) This is a precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls (cf. Mt 19,11; 1 Cor 7,6,7), whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, through an undivided heart (cf. 1Cor 7,32-33)".² I thought it opportune therefore to continue the reflections by suggesting to you some further points on this aspect of our consecration.

The Constitutions present the particular role this gift has in our charism when they state that it is "a love for God and for the young that has no limits".³ It includes

¹ cf. C 81

² LG 42

³ C 81

complete self-giving and disposes us to face, with greater freedom and readiness, even risks to life on mission frontiers, solidarity with the poor, and situations of conflict.

While I am actually concluding this letter, details have been published with the names of men and women missionaries killed during 1998 in contexts of war, religious fundamentalism and ethnic struggles: thirty-one in all, to be added to the very many who form the martyrology of the twentieth century.

Against the background of this story of brothers and sisters who have not hesitated to sacrifice their lives, I want to set my reflections on that "intensely evangelical way of loving God and our neighbour"⁴ which is realized through the vow of chastity. In this way also I hope to create the awareness of the educative power of religious consecration in daily life,⁵ in line with what is set out in the program for the present six-year period.

1. Chastity for the Kingdom.

What we have professed.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* does not deal separately with each of the evangelical counsels. It unites them in the single grace of the *sequela Christi*, limiting itself here and there to the particular significance, values or demands of each. In this way it emphasizes the character of a personal rapport with the Lord which belongs to profession and the spiritual dimension of the vows. Each counsel implies specific attitudes and commitments, but ultimately includes the other two as well. It is difficult to think of a consistent and luminous chastity detached from the poverty which consists in the total offering of one's personal and material goods, or from the obedience of heart which makes one available for the mission, cost what it may. And vice versa.

Vita Consecrata does not even deal at length with the counsels taken together, but includes various points concerning them when speaking of consecration, mission and fraternal community. The counsels are conditions for a calm and coherent realization of these fundamental aspects of our life and reflect each of them.

The clarity with which it is spoken of in the Gospel, the frequency with which the documents of the Church and the Congregation have returned to the argument, even in recent times, have helped us to acquire a sufficiently clear picture of the meaning of consecrated chastity: it is a gift of the Father and, from our side, a free response of love which leads us to assume the virginal life chosen by Jesus. Clear too are the commitments it implies: celibacy as a state of life and the practice of continence appropriate to such a state, the will for unlimited self-donation to God and to the young. Doctrinally it also implies the asceticism that the practice of chastity requires, nearly always expressed in a series of attitudes which include human and supernatural means.

⁴ C 80

⁵ cf. AGC 358, Supplement, n.34, p.16

Nevertheless the cultural climate in which we are living suggests that we make a personal reflection on this counsel in the present context.⁶

We are in fact well nigh submerged by images, messages, opinions and explanations concerning sexuality, while there is an almost complete silence about chastity.

This leads us to ask ourselves some questions about the present practice of chastity, the necessary conditions for it to become mature and serene, the force of its witness, the pedagogical and spiritual paths that can lead us to its effective realization in a world which does not seem to bother about it.

The cultural climate.

A certain reserve about Christian chastity, even on our part, can arise from a cultural change which makes it more difficult today than it was yesterday to perceive its human significance and to speak, in realistic and delicate terms, about certain problems to which it gives rise: such as lawful expressions of love, the nature of a couple, practices which relate to life, and the culpability or otherwise of certain forms of personal behaviour.

A Catholic reflection is placed under particular pressure by the complexity of the questions and the variety of opinions expressed. It tries to respond to questions by studying more deeply the nature of the person, the role of conscience, the influence of the situation, and life orientation. Snap judgements therefore, even though formally correct yet without a sufficiently deep analysis, end up by not providing any solution to pressing questions which chastity raises.

One of the elements which mark the present evolution is without doubt the proper appraisal of sexuality. It is a complex matter. That it has a decisive influence on the development of personality is an accepted fact. It is considered a richness to be developed rather than an instinct to be eradicated. It has a relationship with many aspects felt by the individual, such as maturity, self realization, ability to form relationships, enjoyment, interior balance which can overcome complexes, feelings of guilt and insecurity. This positive perspective has also been adopted by the thinking of the Church, as is evident from the abundant catechesis of John Paul II and a vast quantity of moral and spiritual literature.

On the other hand the level of social restraint has fallen, sometimes even within the family. There is public tolerance and the right to choose is strongly defended; indeed the press, literature, and spectacles of various kinds frequently exalt transgressions and present deviations as possible options, the consequences of personal conditioning. Any ethical dimension, even of a humanistic nature, is disregarded when not completely ignored, even in widespread diffused official programs. The only concern is to live sexuality in a manner safe from physical and

⁶ This was the opinion of the Group of sixteen Superiors General who in their meeting with the CIVCSVA developed the theme: *Living chastity and celibacy today: problems and our responsibility.*

psychical risks, and detached from anything which acknowledges what is transcendent and appropriate to human dignity.

The body is developed and almost exalted in its various possibilities: health, form, beauty, artistic expression, pleasure. It is at the centre of attention and relevant activities which respond to and encourage new interests: gymnastics, sport, fashion, dancing. Christian thinking emphasizes the fact that the body is called to be ever better integrated in the vocational plan, that man not only has a body, but is a body capable of expressing what the spirit feels and wants to communicate: love and joy, anxiety and anger, concern for other people or simple self-interest.

The overall cultural evolution and the contributions of a balanced feminism have highlighted the unique nature of woman, the richness of her talent and her complementary relationship with man. The interventions of John Paul II in this connection are also the sign of change in the Church's approach. The consequence for us is a closer relationship with women, which is expressed in being together in all kind of environments, in collaboration, and in freer relationships which not infrequently lead to closeness, familiarity and friendship.

Our kinds of society have become allergic to laws and controls which seem to invade what is considered the private sphere, and so moral norms give rise to reactions which make it difficult to express deep human and religious values in civil society. Sexuality, love and (from some aspects) the family have become a private matter. Many forms of personal behaviour and relevant choices are no longer judged from commonly accepted moral principles, but are sometimes evaluated according to the rights of the individual considered in his inviolable dignity, sometimes confused with an arbitrary liberty.

The cultural change now taking place brings with it positive developments and also high prices to be paid. Among the former we may list greater freedom in making decisions, the perception of gaps that need to be filled and which are in fact filled through the reopening of the desire for an authentic love, the search for and offering of what is freely given, i.e. what is spontaneous and gratuitous.

Among the prices to be paid is an exaggerated emphasis on subjectivity in sexual matters; the weakening or even neglect of the marriage bond, and the fear of getting married, with the consequent prolonging of the period of adolescence; and the proliferation of sexual images and coarse and vulgar material, practically available to all and sundry through legitimate or clandestine channels and networks.

All this produces an ambiguity which challenges not only the capability for appraisal, but also the control of desires. On the one hand there is a strong defence of woman's dignity, which is a lot more than that of her body, but at the same time she continues to be presented in advertisements and cinema as an erotic object. Encouragement is given to the free expression of sexuality, but the reaction is severe when this becomes uncontrollable and goes beyond all limits. Emphasis is laid on "emotion", especially in the case of the young, through images and adverts, and yet from them is expected a constancy and fidelity which is the result of ability to think and

plan. Market forces lead the media to concentrate on what is effective in communication if not indeed on mere technical skill, rather than on presenting a true and in depth vision of reality.

The present atmosphere envelops the young who get their first information about sexuality and chastity in a confused and ambiguous manner. But in this religious are not spared, not even those who had earlier assimilated an interior Christian vision. Even for us there can be a falling off in sensitivity which makes us almost indifferent as regards appraisal or behaviour and lessens the specific value of our consecrated option. We may lose the keenness of the vigilance which prevents those who have chosen to place Jesus at the centre of their hearts from being exposed to negative experiences. In pastors and educators uncertainty can be generated in guiding consciences in communion with the Church, and in proposing chastity in a convincing manner as an essential value in forming the person and the Christian.

The risk can become greater when the education we have received, with its inevitable limitations despite its undeniable value, has not provided us sufficiently with the necessary means for assessment, with soundly based attitudes of life, and with a sincere mental approach able to unmask the rationalizing of which evil is frequently so capable.

Vita Consecrata invites us to responds to the challenges of culture with the "joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition".⁷

We Salesians feel the need of an interior personal and communal mobilization, to live with greater joy and more radiant transparency this virtue which forms Christ's members to the complete freedom and capacity for self-giving of their Head.

Only with our gaze fixed on him are we able to appreciate the significance of chastity, especially in that particular and prophetic form which shines forth in the gift of virginity professed for the Kingdom of heaven in religious communities.

The inspiring certainty: a love which proclaims the Risen One and awaits him.

It is impossible to tackle any specific question regarding Christian chastity without seeking its deeper roots in the word of God. And rather than in particular texts, which are certainly not lacking, the foundation of consecrated chastity and its significance are to be sought in the very Person of Jesus, the total and definitive Word of God. He is celibate for the Kingdom, to manifest in a visible way the love of God for each and everyone. Thus he establishes another way of being a person in which, with complete freedom, sexuality attains full attachment to the Father and total self-giving to men.

⁷ VC 88

From the Bible I take only some points which I think particularly adapted to our present theme. They will serve as an invitation to approach the Word in a calm and personal way so as to place our reflections in his presence, full of light and grace.

The Old Testament foreshadows the future revelation of virginity for the Kingdom when Jeremiah, who has placed his celibacy at the service of the prophetic mission,⁸ introduces the image of the *virgin of Israel*⁹. But the usual expectation of the Old Testament is fertility, blessed by God with offspring who descend from one generation to the next, in confirmation of the promises of Yahweh and of the hope of preparing in their own flesh and blood the coming of the Messiah.

The gift of virginity belongs to the New Testament and carries in its heart, as we have said, the memory of Jesus, who lived it with simplicity and expressed its content through his life given to the Father and to the service of his brethren.

It is easy to glean from the New Testament an emphasis on the very personal relationship that bound the disciple to Jesus. It appears particularly strong and positive in John's Gospel. It is developed in the dialogue of Jesus with Nicodemus and with the woman of Samaria, it becomes familiarity in the house of Lazarus, Martha and Mary; it shows itself faithful in the hour of the cross in a web of mutual donation and suffering, in which Jesus, the Virgin Mother, and the beloved disciple are the protagonists.

It is precisely the image of the *disciple whom Jesus loved*¹⁰ which shows the central position of personal love. Discipleship has its origin and expression in a love which is believing and obedient. It is at the basis of the apostolate. And this is the sense of the dialogue with Peter in the 21st chapter of St John's Gospel: in it the personal love for the Master is demanded as an inescapable condition, in view of the conferring of the pastoral ministry: "Do you love me more than these?".¹¹

It was a love marked by close intimacy between Jesus and the beloved disciple, who at the last supper rested his head on the Master's heart. It was a courageous love which remained with him in time of trial. It was an enlightened love which, on the day of the Resurrection, "believed without seeing" and maintained that sharpness of perception which was able to recognize the Risen One on the shore of the lake even in the morning mist. It was a love which would endure "until he comes again".¹²

Today it is maintained that *the disciple that Jesus loved* is also the type of the mature Christian, who has made Christ, the centre, cause and "first love" of his own life. And there is an ancient but still very much alive Christian tradition which sees in the beloved disciple the symbol of virginity and an undivided heart, almost a foreshadowing of consecrated life which makes Christ the one and sovereign love of his own existence,

⁸ cf. Jer 16,1-2

⁹ cf. 18,13; 31,4,21

¹⁰ Jn 20,2

¹¹ Jn 21,15

¹² 1 Cor 11,26

capable of giving vigour and order to all other forms of love. His home is with Mary, in the heart of the Church. His family is the company of brothers and sisters who have received the gift of the same call. His destiny is to continue "until he comes again", writing in an ever-fresh manner the long story of the friends and followers of Jesus.

The understanding of such a novelty was not an easy matter. The change introduced by Jesus in current usage, in homage to the original plan of God -- "from the beginning it was not so"¹³ -- was too radical. For this reason, Jesus himself declared, with respect to the confrontation between matrimonial fidelity and celibacy for the Kingdom, that "not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given by God":¹⁴ "others do not marry, so as to better serve the kingdom of God. Let anyone accept this who can".¹⁵

"What then is this Kingdom of God which enables people even to renounce matrimony? It is the fatherly, motherly and nuptial love of God for man, of which all the Scriptures speak: the gentle dominion of the Father through Christ and in the Spirit, to which one chooses to respond with a filial love of betrothal. The perception of the bursting in of the Kingdom: this is the root of Christian virginity".¹⁶

If Jesus preached the Kingdom, the Apostles preached Christ who embodies its definitive fullness. Virginity is his memorial. He is the Kingdom who, in spirit and truth, gives new life to humanity for the destiny of Grace, prepared by the Father.

The Apocalypse sees in virginity the sign of the spouse "coming down out of heaven from God"¹⁷ and rising towards him from the earth. The meaning therefore is proximity to Christ the Lord, and the joy of accompanying him in festive communities who sing a new song full of beauty and mystery, and with the tension sustained by the hope of a definitive meeting. Through the exhilarating discovery of Christ, the religious state is accurately exemplified and perpetually made present in the Church. It is the form of life which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father, and which he proposed to the disciples who followed him.¹⁸

Our vow is a sign which points to Christ, living, risen from the dead and present in his Church, able to infuse into hearts that "love" of which the Church has sung through the centuries in her history and liturgy.

Through chastity religious make themselves the image and first fruits of the Church completely given over once and for all to her Lord. Their identification with the Church takes place through and is expressed especially through total self-giving.

¹³ Mt 19,8

¹⁴ Mt 19,11

¹⁵ Mt 19,12

¹⁶ AA.VV. *Paola di Dio e spirito salesiano. Ricerca sulla dimensione biblica delle Costituzioni della Famiglia Salesiana*, p.137

¹⁷ cf. Rev 21,2

¹⁸ cf. LG 44

"There is no virginity which is not fruitful and full of significance (...); it acquires its meaning and its fertility solely from total dedication in the Church".¹⁹

Christian virginity stands or falls with the mystery of the cross, with the opening of the wound in the side of Christ and the birth of the Church from it as "Christ's body and spouse". This ecclesial expression is the reason why each vow contains in embryo the other two. "Obedience is the poverty of the spirit through love; and virginity, which is a poverty of the body through love, becomes fertile only where spiritual sacrifice is presupposed".²⁰ Chastity, even from this standpoint, configures us to Christ who "though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor",²¹

The religious -- after the example of Christ who died stripped of his garments on a naked cross -- will find himself when his earthly existence ends like a man without family or fortune, who has built nothing for himself but whose eyes are fixed on God, who alone gives meaning to his existence.

In this way chastity comes to express a mature form of freedom, which is the decision to give oneself without reserve, to achieve personal fulfilment in an unusual way, to give oneself totally to a particular mission without seeking or keeping anything for oneself. This is the witness which large numbers of missionaries of the past and the present -- with many Salesians among them -- have given and are still giving to the Church when, in missionary outposts, they continue to give everything and even life itself in fidelity to those entrusted to their care, even when exposed to great risk of life. And so we find the paschal Mystery at work in the heart of the Congregation and of our incomparable brethren. The history of the Church, especially in missionary countries, and the dramatic events of recent years amply confirm that these are not just so many words, but only an effort to read Gospel facts.

This unconditional and total oblation is the heart of the chastity of Mary who, in saying *Ecce ancilla Domini*, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord",²² combines the loftiest form of chastity with a total self-entrustment to God's plan.

2. Chastity and the salesian charism.

In the wake of a tradition.

There is hardly need to recall Don Bosco's concern for the virtue of purity, which he saw as an essential element for the Christian growth of the young person, a guarantee for the educative atmosphere of a salesian house, and a basis for the Salesian or youngster who wanted to give himself to Christ and to the Church.

¹⁹ Von Balthasar, *Gli stati di vita del cristiano*, (Jaca Books 1995, p.204)

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ cf. 2 Cor 8,9

²² Lk 1,38

Contemporary witnesses are united in speaking of the fascination that the practice of this virtue had in Don Bosco; it became one of the most limpid characteristics of his holiness. It causes no surprise therefore that our holy Founder dreamed of the Salesians as being characterized by chastity, and placed this virtue at the crossroads of educative demands, of processes of personal sanctification in the following of Christ, and of prophetic needs in the service of the young and of the people of God.

Our Father had certainly been given an extraordinary knack of helping youngsters to combine chastity with happiness. In one of his notes Fr John Bonetti, speaking of Don Bosco, wrote: "Several times I heard him speak of this matter from the pulpit, and I must confess that every time I experienced more and more the force of his words, and I felt myself prompted to make any sacrifice for love of so inestimable a treasure".²³

On reading over again the practice of Don Bosco,²⁴ one becomes convinced that the overall quality of the educative setting, the fatherly and loving kindness of Don Bosco himself, the educator and confessor, the continual and serene presentation of supernatural means (Eucharist, Penance, devotion to Mary), the spirit of mortification and avoidance of dangerous occasions, a style of life based on happiness lived and proposed in a positive manner, were the paths our Founder preferred to follow and which he convincingly pointed out to educators as the way to form young people to chastity.

This was not only a trait of his personal holiness, but an element of the charism. Don Bosco began a tradition. On the 20th anniversary of his death, Blessed Michael Rua wrote one of his most sorrowful letters, which he entitled *Vigilance*. His concern was to make known "what we have gradually learned by experience, and what the needs of the present time suggest to us".²⁵ The letter was published soon after that difficult period of trial known in the history of the Congregation as the *facts of Varazze*.²⁶ "An avalanche of calumnies and horrible accusations spread suddenly like mist hiding the sun", wrote Don Rua, and he recalled the words of Don Bosco: *Est Deus in Israel, Let nothing disturb you*. But drawing a lesson from the sad experience, Don Rua added with serene realism: "We cannot deceive ourselves; our thoughts are scrutinized, our actions are taken up and examined". It seems clear that his intention was to instill courage at a time of difficulty, but also to foresee facts which could give rise to criticisms and accusations in so sensitive an area as that of the education of the young.

In the same context it needs to be added that since then and right up to the present day, in many parts of the world the atmosphere has become even more sensitive and demanding.

²³ Don Ricaldone, *Sanctity is purity*, in ASC 69, Jan 1935, p.11

²⁴ cf. the careful analysis of P.Stella in Don Bosco, II (Rome 1981, pp.240-274; the treatise of P.Braido in *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, PAS-Verlag 1964, pp.289-311; F.Desramaut *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris 1967, especially the Chapter "*L'Ascèse indispensable*".

²⁵ cf. Circular Letters of Fr Michael Rua to the Salesians, Turin 1965, pp.461-73

²⁶ cf. Annali della Società salesiana, Vol III, pp.684-702

Fr Paul Albera too, in 1916, thought it opportune to write a letter *On Chastity*;²⁷ it was full of elements deriving from salesian tradition and aimed at fostering the great means of fidelity: the Eucharist and Penance, prayer and devotion to Mary, mortification, humility and prudence. This letter too was written for the context then prevailing. It began by proposing as part of the education of the young more systematic information about sexual matters. There was nothing more natural than to recall the delicacy of Don Bosco, repeat the expressions he had used in the matter and the ways he had indicated for its development.

Fr Albera insisted on chastity as an *oblation*, with reference to the Letter of St Paul to the Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship".²⁸

His second successor, whom Don Bosco held in high regard, had fully grasped the evangelical foundation of chastity which our Founder proclaimed by his style of life, totally dedicated to the young, rather than by his words: the eucharistic offering is prolonged in a life which repeats humbly but firmly: "This is my body which is given for you".²⁹

Fr Peter Ricaldone, with his heart still full of the celebrations of Easter 1934, which included the canonization of Don Bosco, offered his letter *Sanctity is purity*, as a coronation of that unforgettable year. It was a calculated choice and rooted in the certainty of touching on one of the sensitive points of the salesian spirit. Fr Ricaldone said he was convinced that he could do "nothing more pleasing to Don Bosco than exhort all Salesians to reflect incessantly on the fact that our holiness must be expressed especially through a life of candour and virginal purity".³⁰

Fr Luigi Ricceri in 1977, with the letter *Living consecrated chastity at the present day*, "in response to a precise dictate" of his conscience, put forward once again "the characteristic witness of salesian chastity". It is an interesting letter, still very relevant at the present day, which I invite you to read again to complement this one of mine. Its context in fact is the start of the climate in which we are now immersed: a new context with new challenges from the world, and new questions from the Church: a context marked within the Congregation by the painful problem of defections, often though not always linked with interior emptiness, lack of foundations, want of prudence or carelessness in this field.

It may be that all too easily we have attributed the severe words of Don Bosco in terms of chastity, only to the cultural and ascetical context of his own time, which was certainly not without its limitations and even serious ones. Nowadays we understand better that we are called upon to read in them the wisdom of a saint, with a deep knowledge of the human heart, who foresaw with great concern the negative consequences of certain tendencies and attitudes. In the light of present-day events

²⁷ cf. Circular Letters of Fr Paul Albera to the Salesians, *Sulla castità*, Turin 1965, pp.212-229

²⁸ Rom 12,1

²⁹ Lk 22,19

³⁰ Fr Peter Ricaldone, *Sanctity is purity*, in ASC 69 (1935), p.6

which are frequently publicly denounced, the reflections of Don Bosco during the 3rd General Chapter of 1883 are seen to be still relevant: through faults against morality "Before God one's soul is lost; before the world one's honour".³¹ "The Lord", he said on another occasion, "will destroy the Congregation if we fail in chastity".³²

Educational dramas of our time, the abuse of juveniles within and outside the family, the prostitution of youngsters organized and transformed into a new kind of slavery in the context of a depraved tourism, atrocious forms of pedophilia, renewed slave-like treatment of defenceless women, young men and adolescents, confirm us in the belief that this is not only a religious problem, but an urgent ethical matter; it is not a question of private virtue, but a need of public justice; it is not an exclusive problem of the Church, but the responsibility of a civil society concerned about its future and its dignity.

At the service of educative love.

When we look for the serious motives for the insistence which runs through our tradition, there come to mind some expressions with which Don Bosco expressed his love for the young, and which nowadays we may hesitate to repeat: "I love you, my dear boys, and I am ready to give my life for you!" Or those words we have read in the introduction to the Companion of Youth: "You are very dear to me. (...) There are writers better and more learned than I, but it would be difficult to find one who has a greater love for you in Jesus Christ, or a greater desire for your true happiness".³³

"Celibacy... is a *state of love*",³⁴ which makes us "signs and bearers of the love of God for young people".³⁵ To love in an evangelical and educative manner, with greater freedom and efficacy, the vows are made. It is already accepted that chastity cannot be separated from charity. St Francis de Sales puts it with his customary simplicity and elegance: "We know that we have prayed well and that we are making progress if, when we have finished, our countenance radiates charity and our body chastity".³⁶

We know that pastoral charity, which constitutes the heart of the salesian mission in the field of education, is expressed in a form perceptible to the senses: "Seek to make yourself loved", "Let the young people see that they are loved". Therefore it is not only a matter of closeness and professional approach, but also of friendship, a fatherly and motherly affection which encourages, soothes and very often also supplies what the youngsters are lacking. And all this is directed to their good and not to our own satisfaction, without any self-seeking, without ambiguity or weariness in the inevitable trials of lack of correspondence or of misunderstanding. Anyone with this kind of experience well understands the import of Don Bosco's words: "Whoever devotes his

³¹ BM XVI, 331

³² BM XIII, 63.

³³ Don Bosco, *Opere edite* II, p.1886

³⁴ Congregation for Catholic Education: *A Guide to formation in priestly celibacy*.

³⁵ C 2

³⁶ *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, under SFdeSales, 1085

life to the care of destitute youth should certainly strive to enrich himself with every kind of virtue. But the virtue he should especially cultivate is that of chastity".³⁷

In this central area of our educative ministry, we are given a "grace of unity", through which charity gives rise to purity and that delicate relationship which is the best expression of affection.

"The key to salesian chastity", notes Fr Ricceri, "is *salesian charity*".³⁸ The style of salesian charity is deeply influenced by chastity. The latter frees and at the same time expresses, tempers and protects; it gives a unique quality to the love of the pastor and educator.

In the first place it makes him capable of deep and free self-giving. He enjoys seeing each young person grow, and for this purpose he "gives his life" in patient daily accompaniment. He hopes for an appropriate and welcomes it because he sees in it the sign that the youngster has assimilated what the educator is offering; but if he meets with resistance he is also able to wait and provide new opportunities of salvation.

Chastity also inspires a frank and transparent loving-kindness modelled on that of Don Bosco, which made each one feel he was the object of special care, on account of the signs of a love that was made perceptible with never-failing creativity: "a love without the least element of selfish interest",³⁹ untainted and without any suggestion of ambiguity.

This kind of educative love gives rise to the family spirit, the authentic foundation of the salesian house and work.⁴⁰ Charity keeps the fire burning; but chastity increases its light and warmth. It encourages a ready correspondence on the part of the confreres and youngsters, cultivates a taste for the service of the house, opens the heart to deep and uncomplicated friendships⁴¹ and in the meeting of bright and cheerful hearts becomes a shield and support of perseverance and joy in Salesians and pupils. "Those whom God leads to separate themselves from their near relatives because of their love for him", noted John Henry Newman, "find at their side brothers in the spirit.. Those who remain alone for his love have children raised up for them in the spirit".⁴²

Don Bosco "warns us that his method requires us to love young people not only in a holy and supernatural manner, but also in a perceptible way; and this love must have all the fragrance of family life and the holy expansiveness of loving kindness".⁴³ Fr Ricaldone hesitates⁴⁴ to speak of "charity perceivable by the senses", and he is not the only one; but he recognizes that it is in fact the correct way to express the intention of

³⁷ Constitutions 1875, V, 1

³⁸ Circular Letters to the Salesians (Rome 1966), *Living consecrated chastity at the present day*.

³⁹ *ibid.* p.979

⁴⁰ cf. Fr Peter Ricaldone, *Sanctity is purity*, ASC 69, 1935.

⁴¹ cf. C 83

⁴² J.H.Newman, *Parochial and plain Sermons*, V, 280

⁴³ Fr Peter Ricaldone, *op.cit.* pp.59-60.

Don Bosco, who wanted the pupil not only to know of the love of the educator, but to feel it as well".

This aspect is so central that the GC24 deals with it under the heading *Spirituality of the relationship: family spirit*. To free the educative relationship from possible implications of a possessive or manipulative nature, it "must be so filled with charity that it becomes transformed into an expression of authentic relational spirituality. Its fruit and sign is the serene chastity, so dear to Don Bosco, which governs affective balance and oblatinal fidelity".⁴⁵

Serious situations, which put the salesian vocation at risk, can have their origin in the difficulty of combining generous charity with prudent chastity, apostolic courage with community regularity. The rise and fall of certain projects, begun with a sincere desire of service but ending in progressive failure, prompts each one to feel himself responsible for the joyful perseverance of his confrere, by giving him the warmth of friendship, family joy, and the help of fraternal correction.

A sign of complete self-donation.

"For you I am ready to give my life", "he who spends his life for the young..." are expressions of Don Bosco for defining the interior intention which guarantees the practice of the preventive system.

The virginity of Jesus, of his Mother, and of Joseph her husband, is the sign of the unconditional handing over of themselves to the Father's plan for the salvation of mankind. They had no plan of their own or, if they did, they abandoned it in the very act of receiving their special calling. God's plan they made their own. They had no family but the Family of God; no descendants save those included in God's Promise..

Mary, *tota pulchra*, is radically surrendered to God. "Not only does she participate in the form of life which consists in self-dedication, but is implanted in it as its soul".⁴⁶ She is its model, its driving force, its thrust and point of attraction.

The "Totus Tuus", repeated by John Paul II, is the interior attitude of Christ, who came to do the Father's will even unto death, and the death of the cross.

In comparison with these parameters we feel ourselves very small and we become ever more aware of our poverty. For this reason Jesus loves us, and with a love of predilection. The essential point is that in response to his eternal love we give him everything, even though it be only a couple of small coins like the widow in the Gospel,⁴⁷ provided that it be all we are and all we have. It is difficult for us to fully

⁴⁴ *ibid.* pp.58-59 "I confess, my dear sons, that my hand is trembling as I write these words, even though I try to express them as accurately as possible, because in most cases I am doing no more than repeat the thoughts and expressions of our Father. I tremble because we can all see how dangerous can be the practice of charity with the characteristics with which he wanted it adorned".

⁴⁵ GC24, 93

⁴⁶ V.Balthasar, *Gli stati di vita del cristiano*, Jaca Books 1995, p.248

understand the religious vows except within this scenario, within which we make our patient way towards the totality of the donation of ourselves to God in the mission.

The vows constitute three signs of that unique and total attitudes by which we abandon ourselves to the Lord's fidelity, and which gives an evangelical character to all the values in our life.

"Don Bosco lived chastity as a love for God and for the young which had no limits".⁴⁸ By the strength and gift of the Spirit they became his family. He spent all his strength in meeting them, gathering them together and educating them. Every moment was made use of to reach them, wherever they were to be found, in prisons and on the streets, through the "Catholic Readings" and the various series of school books. To clothe them and give them a home he built a house, a school and a family, despite his lack of means.

In the spiritual tradition of the West, the phrase *angelic purity* has a significance which deserves to be rediscovered.⁴⁹ It refers on the one hand to the depth with which the angels contemplate God and, on the other, the readiness with which they become his messengers of salvation in respect of human beings and become guardians of those he loves, accompanying them in the dramatic vicissitudes of the world. It is a missionary element which must be recovered and made explicit, by analogy, by application to the vocation of the Salesians, who are called to be guardians and educators of the young. Chastity renders them completely available: to stay here or hasten elsewhere; to lead a recollected life of study and education, or go bravely to where there is risk to life itself; to give oneself over to religious obedience (the missionary virtue par excellence) as though abandoning oneself into the arms of God's Providence.

The joy expressed by many peoples when missionaries remain with them, even at times of the greatest difficulty, to share and risk everything with them; the enormous reaction which everywhere followed the death of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, are an example to us of the mature fruits of that total dedication to the cause of the Kingdom, of which chastity is a sign.

Anyone looking at Don Bosco or Mother Teresa did not wonder about their life of chastity, but accepted and appreciated it as a fire which gave daily warmth to a life given over completely to others.

During the World Day of Youth at Paris in 1997 two young people were asked what they found fascinating in John Paul II, old and feeble as he was; they replied: "We have come because we realize that he is giving his life for us".

To put one's life totally at the service of others is not a decision made spontaneously. And yet it was not difficult for the better boys of Valdocco (among

⁴⁷ Lk 21,2

⁴⁸ C 81

⁴⁹ cf. 34th *Congregation of the Company of Jesus. Chastity*, n.11 and note 5

whom there were many little rascals) to say: "I want to stay with Don Bosco". They remained not only to "stay with him", but also to "do as he did", which inevitably led in turn to "living as he lived".

I am convinced that for those lads Don Bosco's chastity was not seen as a problem, a difficulty or a sacrifice -- and surely such it must have been, even for the Saint of the young -- but always as a gift of God, a joy of loving, a fullness of life, a happy disposition, which made it possible for him to be everything for them. For this reason they embraced it willingly, even though it was a demanding virtue, together with everything else that made salesian life wonderful, if exacting as well.

"Almost a requirement for education".

The expression comes from Fr Albert Caviglia who used it to define the role of purity in the educative process as Don Bosco saw it.

Our chastity, as we have already said, is fruitful in inspiring a paternal love towards the young and in particular towards those who have greater need of it, and in prompting gestures which can make it immediately understood.

It is equally fruitful in respect of objectives and educational content for a proper view of life, of the person, and of the culture which it presupposes, bears witness to, and communicates.

Sexuality certainly includes a whole constellation of specific manifestations: a right sense of the body, relationships, the image of self and others, the control and direction of pleasure, and values like love, friendship and self-donation. But it matures and is expressed in the context of the whole person and never as a separate function. It interacts with every other aspect of personality. Education of the person as a whole in conformity with a certain vision is therefore indispensable.

It shows us the daily influence which the presence and friendship, the words and actions of educators, can have on the young people who are associated with us.. We educate more by what we are than by what we say.

Nowadays a widespread need is felt for identifying adequate ways for helping young people to integrate sexuality into the project of life to which they feel called. This implies delicate and demanding processes which go against the general trend; and we cannot deceive ourselves that these will mature on their own without enlightenment, aims and effort.

If -- as has been rightly stated -- "*chastity is freedom*" in loving and being loved, we need to identify the successive stages of a "process of liberation", which leads progressively to a guidance of the affective resources of the individual, placing them at the service of friendship and love in a stable life project.

To carry out such a process it is necessary, first of all, to focus on the individual with his multiple possibilities and particularly his destiny in God's sight. This will lead to

a clarification of the proper value of the body and of the virtue, nowadays uncommon, called modesty. With it man and woman recognize that they are very much more than their bodies alone and learn to discover the unknown riches of others.

The presence in many of our environments of boys and girls means that we must take very seriously the matter of *coeducation*, in which each person accepts his/her own sexuality as a vocation, and discovers and appreciates the originality of the other without the latter becoming transformed into an *object of desire*, unable to enter into free and mature dialogues in a dynamic relationship within which can develop a serene and mutually beneficial friendship.

Young people of today automatically find themselves in highly charged situations (the media, friendly groups, discotheques, local culture etc.). These require an *abundance* of commitment for education to chastity of the heart, teaching self-restraint and regularity of life, the control and guidance of desires, ongoing reflection on personal options and affective attitudes, and the strong and serene patience to which every young Christian is called in preparation for vocational and matrimonial commitments.

From the outset we help our young people to understand how the individual reaches self-fulfilment through the *experience of love*, a love which is encounter, joyful offering and selfless gift, a willingness to seek the other's happiness rather than selfishly seek one's own.

Only a *self-sacrificing* love can be the serene outcome of the sexual urge. The young person must understand that the more the mind dwells on sexuality, the more it remains dissatisfied and torments itself looking for variations which will never satisfy the heart's yearnings. Modern society, even without wanting to, provides us with a thousand and one confirmations of the drama which embroils those who do not follow the right path of love. A love which ignores sacrifice, which has no space for the cross of Christ, risks becoming continually transformed into a possessiveness which enslaves and manipulates.

But to learn to love is to learn to live, to begin to be a Christian. Don Bosco knew this and taught it to his boys. For this reason, to an invitation which admitted of no doubts he added wise advice for watching over one's natural inclinations, for strengthening character, and for developing good intentions.

The GC23 considered this education to love as having a particular influence on the perseverance or falling off in faith, and has asked us to take it up again in a decisive and updated manner through certain processes: an educative atmosphere rich in friendship, integral attention to the person, the human quality of boys and girls associating with each other, education to sexuality, the witness of Salesians and lay people who live their self-donation in an unruffled manner, a catechesis which points towards Christ and forms the conscience, and a spiritual life which emphasizes the transforming force of the Sacraments.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ cf. GC23 195-202

Enriching and complementary nature.

The GC24 sanctioned an arrangement which had been developing for some time, but of which the characteristics were not fully defined nor the consequences for our attitudes and possibilities spelled out. One such characteristic is the complementary relationship between educators and parents which becomes expressed in dialogue, collaboration, enlightenment and exchange of experiences. "Collaboration with youngsters' families should be intensified, since parents are the primary educators of their sons and daughters. To this end they should be offered in our works an educative climate rich in family values, and in particular an educational team with a harmonious integration of men and women members".⁵¹

Love between husband and wife, just as it gives origin to life, so also constitutes the first and principal force for education in the family. Married couples, protagonists of the Christian family, and the celibate, protagonists of consecrated life, reflect the gift of Christ to his Church in courageous fidelity and total self-giving to a particular mission. Christian marriage and consecrated chastity manifest in two excellent though different ways the same mystery of totality, expressed in the "pact of love" animated by the same Holy Spirit.⁵² "The 'yes' of the matrimonial promise and the 'yes' of the religious vow correspond to what God awaits from man: the unconditional surrender of himself, just as Christ on the cross offered everything, soul and body, for the Father and for the world".⁵³

In the exchange of gifts between vocations and states of life, the fidelity of married couples encourages the consecrated, and the fruitful virginity of the latter supports the former in their journey through life, which is today much more exposed to pitfalls than it was in the past. They bear reciprocal witness to the strength which comes not from flesh and blood but from the Spirit of Christ, who animates his Church. They are united by a single fidelity to the Lord, which opens them to shared experiences.

In daily encounter and collaboration this dialogue becomes for the young communication of values and example of Christian life. "In this context", says the GC24, "one must emphasize the significance and prophetic force of the Salesian: not only does he play his part in education with his male values but, by living his celibacy with joy and fidelity, he bears witness to a particular quality of love and fatherliness".⁵⁴

In educational circles moreover, we are called upon today to demonstrate the educative richness of the complementary male-female relationship. Religious and educators plan, act and revise together. The development of coeducation is a challenge to all of us, and perhaps to us before it is to the youngsters themselves. Fear, distance, timidity, lack of communication must all be overcome. So too must any irresponsibility, superficiality, and blurring of the pastoral objective and of consecrated witness.

⁵¹ GC24 177

⁵² cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n.11

⁵³ Von Balthasar, op.cit., p.206

⁵⁴ GC24 178

The demands of coeducation affect heart, thoughts and deep attitudes, rather than just ways of doing things.

Our contemplation of Jesus and the person of Mary provide us with the parameters for directing and modelling our thoughts, feelings and attitudes. It is clear that human relationships and educative collaboration, founded on and expressed in line with such parameters, add a touch of human quality and Christian witness to the environment and to every educative project..

The GC24 reminds us of this in many passages. To quote just one of them: "The presence of the woman helps the Salesians not only to interpret the feminine ethos, but to live a more complete educative relationship: in fact the man and the woman help the boy and the girl to discover their own identity, to accept as enriching their own specific nature to be offered as a gift in reciprocity".⁵⁵

Virginal charity combined with conjugal love, male and female characteristics, produce with unprecedented fruitfulness an "educative charity", which is able to bring together in a single process human and Christian growth of both young and adults.

3. The process towards maturity.

A challenging development.⁵⁶

I cannot pass over in silence a painful experience which is proving a sore trial to some local Churches and religious Institutes in different parts of the world. Cases have been met with, here and there, of priests and religious who have been accused of sexual abuse and molestation of juveniles or defenceless women. The devastation, often irreparable, which such traumas can bring to a young life is well known. This explains the severity of many legal provisions with respect to such deplorable episodes and the severity of courts in dealing with those guilty. Sometimes the facts in question go back twenty or thirty years: nevertheless they have been the object of legal actions, with grave damage to the mission of the Church, sad repercussions on the accused and his community, and also with enormous financial losses.

In addition to their objective gravity, these events acquire further importance because of the related problems which create concern in the Church and in religious institutions. Sometimes there is an anomalous extension of the concept of sexual abuse and molestation to include actions which were no more than imprudent. Examples are known to everyone.

The prominence given by the media to lapses on the part of priests and religious is well known; it is usually because of a legitimate accusation or because of lack of the appropriate behaviour expected of such persons, but not infrequently is due to

⁵⁵ GC24 53

⁵⁶ cf. working document of the General Council: *Di fronte alle accuse di abusi e di molestie sessuali*

speculative and defamatory aims regarding the Catholic Church and other Institutions. The whole thing is made worse by the exploitation of the facts with a view to obtaining huge sums of money in damages and costs.

It all serves to reawaken in us the echo of the dramatic words written by Don Bosco from Rome on 5 February 1873: "The public often complain about immoral happenings that have occurred contrary to good behaviour, and about some horrible scandals. This is a great evil, it is an absolute disaster: and I pray the Lord to bring about the closure of all our houses rather than disgraceful happenings of the kind take place in them".⁵⁷

The facts before us compel us to intervene by every possible means in defence of juveniles and against the exploitation of women. And I offer my heartfelt thanks to the confreres who are working on these frontiers.

They prompt us also to recall some elements of the preventive system which Don Bosco had suggested or pointed out, and which in some places may to some extent have been neglected.

We need to bring back some norms of pedagogy and prudence -- part of salesian tradition -- which deserve to be considered again, and which have been brought to the attention of the superiors responsible, from whom I ask (also through these pages) a firm and unflurried collaboration. This is a significant part of that preventive approach which creates environments and habits which will make every human and Christian virtue flourish.

But especially we are urged to understand more deeply, in the light of adequate knowledge and of the Word of God, the path of ongoing growth we are called to follow. Even though it may be the most serious, uncontrolled seeking of satisfaction is not the only manifestation of an immature and repressed sexuality. There is also incapacity for friendship, closure to fraternity, hardness of heart, unreasonable attachment to opinions, objects or personal advantage, and coldness in relationships. We need therefore to maintain our efforts in self-giving and educative competence.

⁵⁷ Fr Peter Ricaldone, *op.cit.* p.62

A course to be followed.

Sexual energy and identity -- to which chastity gives joyful recognition, accepts without hesitation and turns to account in the personal life-project -- builds personality at the deepest levels, from every standpoint: thought, affections, ability for expression and planning, and relationships. It is marked by life's more significant experiences. The prenatal period, the first months and rapport with the mother, the family atmosphere and relationships, the elements of heredity, precociousness or retardation in education and self-education, traumatic experiences difficult to define, and others which exert an influence on the process of the maturing of affectivity and sexuality.

A serene chastity comes at the end of a long process, for the simple reason that the mature personality is itself the point of arrival of a long journey. It is therefore a matter of accepting -- for ourselves and for those entrusted to our educative care -- the steps necessary for attaining the maturity which generates joy and peace and becomes translated into witness.

At the same time we are called upon to note that in this decisive field of human growth, the religious life, and still more a Congregation of educators, is put to the test (so to speak) not only in respect of sexual morality but especially as regards its affective value. "The consecrated life must present to today's world examples of chastity lived by men and women who show balance, self-mastery, an enterprising spirit, and psychological and affective maturity".⁵⁸

The Constitutions alert us to the fact that "chastity is not a conquest made once for all time. It has its moments of peace and moments of trial. It is a gift which because of human weakness demands a daily pledge of fidelity".⁵⁹

"This means", writes Fr Ricceri in a fatherly note, "that we must not be surprised or frightened if in moments of depression, inactivity or isolation, we suffer in the flesh or heart. It is an aspect of the cross we have to carry and sometimes, perhaps, a form of participation in Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane".⁶⁰ Difficulties in relationships, apostolic frustrations, misunderstandings in community, worries about personal health or that of dear ones, times of stress: all these are promptly registered in our affective sphere, with repercussions which must be placed in the balance and overcome with the help of grace and prayer, of the spirit of mortification, of calm determination, and of a welcoming and supportive community. It may be necessary to undertake patient processes for the recovery of motivations and for changing deeply rooted habits. The different stages of life require further processes for a new understanding of the commitment that was assumed.

Some essential points regarding such a course of action should be kept in mind.

⁵⁸ VC 88

⁵⁹ C 84

⁶⁰ Fr Ricceri, op.cit., p.974

Our ministry must be carried out with a spirit of humility and prudence, freeing it from any form of presumption in whatever might wound chastity: "Remember that I am sending you to catch fish, and that you must not be caught yourselves", said Don Bosco to his followers with a touch of humour, and knowing that they would be working in situations of some risk he advised them to "leave your eyes at home".⁶¹ In addition to more direct references, such words reminded his hearers of the care that must always be taken in the matter of friendships and familiarity in our educative and pastoral settings, involving daily contact with women collaborators and young people of both sexes.

The path towards serene maturity is marked by the cross. With the authority of an eye-witness, Fr Albera wrote: "Do not believe that Don Bosco gave little importance to the *spirit of mortification*; study his life carefully and you will find he made of every circumstance an occasion for a lesson on the practice of mortification".⁶² That may seem old-fashioned, but it must be linked with the fruitfulness of the cross. It may be that the most dangerous threat from the bourgeois mentality, not only to religious life but even more to the roots of Christianity, is the tacit, practical and systematic rejection of the cross. *Comfort* is considered a value to be aspired after and a *status* to be attained; painkillers have passed from the world of medicine to that of daily life in order to alleviate all suffering. In this way habits and attitudes are generated which demand immediate satisfaction, and the suppression of risks of physical, moral or spiritual suffering, becomes a way of life. What is lawful, and frequently desirable, in the physical arena tends to become transferred to the moral field, setting aside or reducing the cost of the necessary effort which each one is called upon to make in defence of the values, fidelity and authenticity of Christian life. From the very beginning the latter has been found to involve the cross, persecution and martyrdom. Paul's words to the Christians of Philippi remain fully relevant for us today, immersed as we are at times in an atmosphere lacking moral commitment: "Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ".⁶³

When the discussion was taking place on the motto to be inserted in the coat of arms of the Congregation, there were some who proposed *Work and temperance*. It is known that Don Bosco insisted on the binomial, which encouraged members to spend themselves generously but with due proportion. In this way the two parts are not be considered separate one from the other, but in combined to indicate that work is itself to be regulated by temperance, so that it can continue to manifest charity towards God and neighbour, while avoiding excesses that can lead to stress, burnout and affective vulnerability.

What is needed is a reasonable amount of time for work and time for relaxation, of possibility for activity and for formation, for involvement with people and opportunity for looking into ourselves and the deeper spiritual motivations of our life and work. Exaggerated activism must be overcome as a disorder in life, and our control reestablished over time, our activities and ourselves. For this reason the necessary

⁶¹ BM V, 107

⁶² Fr Paul Albera, op.cit. p.224

⁶³ Phil 3,18

importance must be given to the annual and monthly retreats, to Sundays, to moments for community and for daily prayer (including meditation!). Personal recollection must find a place again in our daily program. "Isolation is negative, but solitude is something quite different: it can be seen as its contrary. It is like the silence which precedes the spoken word, and renders it fruitful".⁶⁴

The most decisive helps, however, come from the grace of the Lord, which in the *sacraments* and in love of Mary Help of Christians has elements which our tradition has always recognized as being most effective.

The Eucharist, which nourishes us with the Body and Blood of Christ, continually renews our awareness of being his members, gives us the strength to live as Christians, avoiding anything contrary to this name.

Daily listening to the Word of God puts in context and annuls the false arguments with which we are tempted to justify possible yielding or giving in to less positive practices.

Love of Mary and the contemplation of her unparalleled way of life keep chaste and lofty the intentions of the heart, and inspire a greater docility to the movements of grace.

Fr Paul Albera emphasized the importance of confidence in a spiritual director when he recommended the "opening of both doors of one's conscience to the confessor".⁶⁵ It is an insistence which is regaining strength. To keep the conscience sensitive and vigilant, able to recognize good and evil from afar, and to defend one's personal spiritual freedom, it helps to submit one's own life to the eyes of one's brethren and to know how to share and evaluate the experiences which the Lord places in our path.

Vocational discernment and initial formation.

The process we have spoken of requires a basic starting-point which is a sign of the call to salesian life and the interiorized assimilation of the attitudes, habits and practices consistent with chastity. When we speak therefore of the progress towards maturity we cannot omit a reference to vocational discernment and initial formation. Our documents already provide charismatic criteria for such discernment and pedagogical options for the follow-up of candidates. There is no need to repeat them here, but nevertheless it may be desirable to recall some points of particular relevance.

Experience, reflection and ecclesial guidelines of recent years have placed particular emphasis on basic affective and sexual maturity as a prior condition for admission to religious vows and the ordained ministry, and as an indispensable element for a serene and mature vocational experience.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Fr Luigi Ricceri, op.cit., p.976

⁶⁵ Fr Paul Albera, op.cit., p.222

⁶⁶ cf. *Pastores dabo vobis* (PDV) and *Potissimum institutioni* (PI)

A specific formation to affectivity, which integrates the human with the more particularly spiritual aspect, is especially necessary in the present context, which is at the same time one of great openness and of continual exposure to various stimuli. "An education for sexuality", says *Pastores dabo vobis*, "becomes more difficult but also more urgent. It should be truly and fully personal and therefore should present chastity in a manner that shows appreciation and love for it as a virtue that develops a person's authentic maturity and makes him or her capable of respecting and fostering the 'nuptial meaning' of the body".⁶⁷

Expressing this in our own context for the period opening ahead of us, the GC24 asks that "particular attention be given to the affective maturity required for collaboration with the lay people and with the world of women",⁶⁸ and that from the time of their first formation "confreres should be helped to develop a serious and mature attitude with regard to the opposite sex".⁶⁹

It is a matter of bringing candidates to the point at which they can make a free and mature decision, based on self-knowledge and the vocational project to which they are called; of ensuring their suitability "thanks to which the consecrated persons love their vocation, and love in line with their vocation".⁷⁰

In the process of discernment and at times of admission the affective and sexual area must be given particular attention, and evaluated against the overall background of the person and his history, in relation to the characteristics of the salesian vocation.

Among the points to be considered and made clear before the novitiate, on the basis of adequate knowledge and prudent evaluation, is the *healthy affective condition, and especially balanced sexuality*. The decree *Perfectae Caritatis* of Vatican II, taken up again by *Potissimum Institutioni*, requires that candidates for the profession of chastity should not embrace this state, nor be admitted to it, except after a sufficient period of trial and after they have reached a suitable *psychological and affective maturity*.⁷¹

Initial discernment or the course of formation may bring to light serious inconsistencies and experiences of life which indicate the need for at least extreme prudence. Art.82 of the Constitutions recalls Don Bosco's words: "Anyone who has not a well-grounded hope of being able, with divine help, to preserve the virtue of chastity in word, in deed and in thought, should not make profession in this Society, for he would often find himself in danger". It is a directive which obliges us to ensure that discernment and admissions are made with great seriousness.

⁶⁷ PDV 44

⁶⁸ GC24 147

⁶⁹ GC24 178

⁷⁰ VFC 37

⁷¹ PC 12; PI 13

There are personalities which from the outset manifest elements that give rise to serious concern: the salesian life is not for them.⁷² The "well-grounded hope", emphasized in the words of Don Bosco, cannot coexist with situations which have deeply marked a person, nor with inclinations which only with great difficulty can be harmonized with the characteristics of the salesian vocation and with the demands of the mission of an educator and pastor, nor with an earlier life gravely compromised.

We are aware of such situations and tendencies; I have in mind, for example, premature relationships; sexual experiences, problems of a homosexual kind, situations of violence, and the like. These are frequently discussed with an abundance of anthropological, pedagogical and moral data. The variety of subjects, the different degrees of incidence of the situations, and the different extents to which the above-named tendencies may appear, advise against snap judgements so as not to deal unjustly with the persons concerned, and not be restricted solely to the fact of acceptance or not. But it is well to know that we have particular criteria of a Congregation of educators expressed in our documents and that they can be further specified in particular cases.

It is not always easy to make discernments and evaluations with delicacy and prudence. It is therefore necessary to have recourse to serious professional help, to assist us in every way that science makes available in this fundamental field of human maturity.

In any case we can never close our eyes to doubtful situations. They must be clarified before the persons concerned can be allowed to make commitments which seriously involve the individual and the Congregation. The formation guide must be able to avoid misleading or being misled about the soundness of a candidate.⁷³

Certain cases of leaving religious life after many years, often the result of imprudent admissions, and other painful situations (ambiguity of life, permanent and inexplicable dissatisfaction, unlawful compensations) urge us to be vigilant in our discernment.

Having emphasized the attention that must be given to the affective and sexual dimension and underlined the need for a basic attitude of "salesian" chastity, it must be remembered that this calls for a *mental, moral, spiritual and ascetical formation*, if we want it to lead to the formation of individuals who are mature and joyful. This is therefore a point which must be faced in an open and direct way.

Adequate knowledge in real terms of sexuality in its various aspects, implications and realizations is nowadays necessary, without neglecting information on facts and tendencies present in our culture. This is the sense in which should be approached the problem of sexual abuse and molestation, and its implications of a civil, ecclesial and vocational implications. The aspect of justice towards those who have suffered is

⁷² cf. *Criteria and norms*, 46-49

⁷³ cf. *Directives on the preparation of educators in seminaries*, 57

important, as is the cultivation of a solicitous pastoral concern for both the victim and the guilty person.

At the same time it will be necessary to present celibacy and chastity for the Kingdom in a positive way, helping others to assume it as a good thing even from a human point of view, with the freedom which "expresses itself in convinced and heartfelt obedience to the truth of one's own being, to the meaning of one's own existence".⁷⁴ The vision offered, based always on the Word of God and characterized by realism, will indicate criteria and parameters for self-evaluation which the subject can apply to himself without either anxiety or illusions.

It is in this perspective that the *demand* for spiritual vigilance, prudence and sacrifice should be harmoniously placed, without either hairsplitting or naiveté, and the reminder of the need for asceticism and discipline of life, and for the indispensable and continuous effort to master and integrate sexual impulses.

Sincerity and openness in spiritual dialogue (*spiritual direction*) and the frequent use of the sacrament of reconciliation, human and community relationships of serene friendship and brotherhood, the sense of the mission and personal love for Jesus Christ *sustain* a journey of fidelity which is not without its temptations.

Formation to consecrated chastity is a challenge and a duty for all who are involved in any way in the vocational process. And in some contexts it can include difficulties stemming from the cultural background. In this sense, special attention must be given to the initial preparation of candidates and to their ongoing formation, to pedagogical renewal and to unity of criteria throughout the whole formative process.

The teaching of Don Bosco and the experience of the Congregation help us to combine educative trust with its demands, pedagogical sensitivity with charismatic responsibility.

The role of the community.

What we have said may give rise to the impression that chastity is concerned exclusively with the sphere of the individual. That would be like accepting the insistent insinuation of today's culture which relegates certain aspects of behaviour to the unassailable "private" domain, to the individual conscience alone.

It is true that in this area, as in the whole of the vocational process, each one of us bears a responsibility which is unique and cannot be transferred, but nevertheless the community too has a role which is far from secondary.

Each one is called personally to be part of the community in a mature way and to be ready to share his talents and experiences with his brothers. The community, on the other hand, creates a climate, supports, encourages and sustains. The quality of our witness to chastity is bound up with the quality of our being and building community, of

⁷⁴ PDV 44

our living and working together. We can set out some reasons for this interdependence.

In the community, say the Constitutions, "we find a response to the deep aspirations of the heart",⁷⁵ i.e. to the need to love and be loved. In the giving and exchange of affection we become aware of our value as persons and express the deepest capacities of our being. The community is our family. In tranquil communication and adult friendship our capacity for donation grows and is made manifest, and we form effective collaborative relationships. The stronger and more sincere the way we live together, so much the more will our sense of chastity (even as regards its sense of renunciation) invigorate our need for human love, and give credibility to our testimony that the love of God fills all our existence. It then becomes evident, especially to the young and outsiders living alongside us, that the virginity we profess is the choice of an authentic love, which is sincere, rich in humanity and open to all. Brotherly love certainly anticipates, offsets, moderates and reorders in good time any eventual affective frailty. Community disintegration on the other hand, manifested in coldness, flight towards external things, or apostolic individualism, is an enticement towards evasions and alternative satisfactions.

A second reason for the strict linkage between personal responsibility and community experience is connected with our mission as educators. Community life is a school and a gymnasium. Educative communication is effective if it is realized through a rapport which is appropriate and sincere, able to transmit valid experiences and view of life. Community sharing, the ability and willingness to integrate and achieve mutual fulfilment provide an acid test for our ability to behave in a balanced and efficacious manner also when dealing with young people. It may be that behind many community tensions is hidden an inability to discuss with others, the abandonment of efforts to become integrated in the mission, obstinacy in doing our own thing despite anything to the contrary. Weakness in our community relationships has negative repercussions on the effectiveness of our presence among young people who can become the object of our anger and tensions. An experience of tranquil community life becomes educative in itself, especially in the realms of love, friendship and affectivity, to which young people are particularly sensitive.

Finally, the community guides and supports us in our pilgrimage of fidelity, providing us with a human space for interrelationships, occasions, events and contacts which make us feel fulfilled at a human level, and positively involved in society and the world. A well integrated community imparts strength and energy to each of its members, giving him a further motive for living his particular calling, sustaining him in moments of difficulty, providing him with space for working through difficult situations, and times of crisis and confusion. The friendly, discreet and close presence of confreres is a support for those living through the tensions of youth, the crises of maturity, and the worries of sickness and old age.

The community therefore has a delicate task to fulfil; to *assist* and to *discern*. *Assistance* in the salesian sense means foreseeing, promptly perceiving the signs of a

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certain state of mind or dissatisfaction, saying a fraternal word to ward off impending ambiguities or risks, giving light and encouragement to those who may have need of it.

Discernment means resolving unacceptable situations with fraternal respect but equally with firmness and in good time. This is a task of the superior, but not his alone. The witness of each one has its effect on the whole community and hence is part of it. The community should feel that it has the duty of safeguarding such witness. We are reminded of this by our religious commitment and, from certain standpoints, also by civil law.

Conclusion: The force of a prophecy.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* emphasizes the fact that religious "while they seek holiness for themselves, propose -- so to speak -- a spiritual 'therapy' for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God".⁷⁶

Urs Von Balthasar, taking up an expression of Nietzsche, writes: "The most common-sense phrase I have ever heard is: 'In true love the soul enfolds the body'", or in other words: "The irradiation of the body through the purity of the soul is the perfection of chastity".⁷⁷ Shaped by Baptism through the gift of chastity, man assumes his bodily nature in grace, to make of it a sign not of dominion, nor of mere pleasure, nor of fine or aesthetic physique, but of a life given unconditionally to God and neighbour.

We are aware that cold logical reasoning about chastity is not enough. Don Bosco has taught us to 'radiate' it: "Education to purity takes place fundamentally through its reflection in the educators".⁷⁸

Nor can one speak of salesian chastity separate from the climate in which it is generated and expressed. In that experience of the Holy Spirit, Jesus in the Eucharist nourished the life of educators and young people in making them Christians; he inflamed their souls with the fire of charity and gave to their presence and actions the capacity for communicating grace. In this way he created a school of spirituality which in every part of the world continues to produce fruits of apostolic and educative holiness. Its sign is that joy in which Don Bosco saw the salesian version of the "good news" of the Gospel. Salesian chastity, as Fr Luigi Ricceri pointed out, "is habitually lived in joy and tranquility, with a youthful ardour and freshness of spirit, with unclouded eyes, with an invincible confidence in life, and with the perception of the hidden presence of God".⁷⁹

Today's celebration of the Immaculate Conception is full of reminders of the environment which is always a source of inspiration to us. Under Our Lady's solicitous

⁷⁶ VC 87

⁷⁷ Quoted by Von Balthasar, op.cit. p.86

⁷⁸ P.Braido in *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, PAS-Verlag 1964, p.292

⁷⁹ Fr Luigi Ricceri, op.cit., p.984

gaze and the fascination of her virginal motherhood was born and grew the group of young people who were to be the future pillars of the Salesian Congregation, the sodality of Mary Immaculate. The loving kindness of Don Bosco had aroused in them the desire for total consecration.

May she also help us to mature in love and guide our young people towards an effective desire for holiness.

With my best wishes for a New Year enriched with the grace of our Father, to whom we turn with the love of sons⁸⁰ on the eve of the third millennium.

Fr Juan Vecchi

⁸⁰ cf. Strenna 1999