

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

“THE FATHER CONSECRATES US AND SENDS US”¹

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Rome, 8 September 1998
Feast of Our Lady’s Birthday

My dear confreres,

I am glad to be able to send you my greetings, together with those of the members of the General Council, at a time when some of you are beginning a new year of pastoral activity and others are gathering the final results of the previous one. I send a special word of nearness and encouragement to communities who are in difficult situations because of war and conflicts of various kinds, especially in Africa. I ask you to remember them in your prayers.

The preceding letter on the animating nucleus has provoked some healthy reflection. It has also given rise to a certain concern, which has been expressed to me by some confreres, and so I take the opportunity to go more deeply into a theme which is becoming of primary importance at the present time: the capacity of the salesian community for animation.

I. A CONSECRATED LIFE

1. A pressing invitation.

A question often raised when dealing with this theme concerns its importance, incidence and influence in our community work of animation, and the direction given to education and pedagogical practice. It is not related primarily to the time that consecration leaves available for dedication, a factor which could be supplied by the greater use of lay resources, nor even to

¹ Cf. C3

competence in group dynamics or in education, easily found nowadays among the laity, but rather to the specific quality that consecrated life brings to communion, to the educative and pastoral plan, and to pedagogical practice.

To these issues the **GC24** gave great attention. Even if it did not develop them in a unified and organic manner, it left us a series of pointers which give us cause for serious thought. Without pretending to be complete, I think they can be summed up in the following points.

A first point: the consecration, lived with joyful authenticity, infuses into the salesian educative community certain sensitivities: the primacy of God in life², the importance of spirituality in the work of education³, attention to the salesian spirit⁴, a vision of human growth in line with a paradigm of new humanity, openness to an experience of God for young people and adults⁵.

A rapid glance at these references leads to a second point that calls for attention: the identity of the consecrated person must be seen as “a specific and dynamic force for the education and animation of the EPC”⁶. It behoves consecrated persons, therefore, to consider their identity more deeply⁷, as the ultimate reason for the roles they have to play and as the possibility of achieving the best results in conformity with the objective proposed by the Congregation.

Such a reflection becomes urgently necessary not less because of the discovery of the vocation of the lay person⁸ and on the insistence on its greatest possible development. It must prompt consecrated persons to cultivate and share the gifts deriving from their particular vocation, aware of “what we have in common with the laity, as well as our differences”, in the knowledge that there is a point where everything comes together: the oratorian heart and style of the Good Shepherd⁹.

A third point: what we have said should lead to the overcoming of a certain confusion on the part of some consecrated persons with regard to their own participation in the educative community and in the light of the interventions open to the laity¹⁰. Their partnership should consist more in the

² cf. GC24, 54

³ cf. *ibid.*

⁴ cf. GC24, 88

⁵ cf. GC24, 152

⁶ GC24, 45

⁷ cf. GC24, 140

⁸ cf. GC24, 45

⁹ cf. GC24, 102

¹⁰ cf. GC24, 45

communication of the spirit¹¹ than in the material performance of daily work. The relationship with the laity should be founded on the sharing of gifts¹².

Furthermore, to succeed in the realization of this project, we must insist on an initial formation¹³ and on a continuing growth which will help the Salesians “to deepen the identity of their consecration and to develop solid convictions about the educative value of consecration itself”¹⁴.

The influence of consecration in community animation and in the orientation of education finds particular development in GC24 nn.149-155, of which the quintessence would seem to be the statement: “Don Bosco wanted consecrated persons at the centre of his work, persons oriented to the young and their holiness. He wanted his religious to be a precise point of reference for his charism”¹⁵.

This desire of his is attributed to divine inspiration; it is therefore decisive for the mission, which consists not only in temporal advancement, but also in leading the boys to holiness: “Don Bosco was led by God to form a community of consecrated persons which would be a leaven for a multiplicity of services, the spiritual animation of those who wanted to dedicate themselves to education, and a guarantee of continuity in the mission to the young”¹⁶.

The charism therefore is not expressed in its completeness and authenticity if it leaves out the laity: but still less if it omits the specific contribution of those who are consecrated.

And so guidelines like this one follow, for the salesian community: “It should frequently verify the incidence of its consecrated and communal life; it should exploit occasions for presenting and explaining to lay people and youngsters the specific aspect of consecrated life in respect of its educative importance”¹⁷.

The same kind of problem arises **from religious communities in general**, and not only from our own. It is true that education, and especially the kind carried out through schools, is an activity useful for evangelization, but more than a few religious wonder what place in it is taken by a radical option for the Kingdom.

¹¹ cf. GC24, 88

¹² cf. GC24, 109-110

¹³ cf. GC24, 167

¹⁴ ibid.

¹⁵ GC24, 150

¹⁶ GC24, 155

¹⁷ GC24, 167

Faced by the delegation of principal tasks to the laity, and by the assigning to them of our own pedagogical tradition, there are some who feel themselves rather perplexed about their own contribution, beyond the possibility of the complete dedication and competence which such dedication calls for. And this even after having established a proper priority among obligations as indicated by the GC24: formation, orientation, educative identity.

From the standpoint of the young, there are many who emphasize how the latter benefit by the professional approach and generosity of our service, but they do not always get a clear idea of the reason and meaning lying behind it.

On the other hand, the fact remains that in some structures the splendour of the consecrated option cannot be made to stand out because of the weight of practical activities: we get bogged down in the means, rather than stressing the ends. So too in the fulfilment of certain organizational or directive roles the unity between professional approach and oratorian heart, which defines the image of the Salesian, is not attained.

With respect to the community itself there are some who bewail not the loss but the weakness of expression, of meaning and of more immediate manifestation of consecration, like brotherly relationships and daily prayer. We recognize that this is due in large measure to the multiplicity of commitments inspired by pastoral charity, it is in fact an impoverishment of the witness of consecration and for those who are younger an obstacle to its joyful living.

The GC24 gave a lot of attention, and the Provincial Chapters will doubtless do likewise, to the relationships to be established with the laity, to the fundamental ways in which religious will be effective in the educative community, to the principal objective of their interventions and the quality of what they do in general. I will not dwell on these points at greater length. I consider them already realized, or at least brought sufficiently to your attention. I dealt with them in a preceding letter: *Experts, witnesses and craftsmen of communion*¹⁸.

The discourse on our consecration leads to the deep significance of such references, taking us back to their more interior and personal source. This is the sense in which we have taken it in our programming for the present six-year period¹⁹.

¹⁸ AGC 363

¹⁹ cf. Supplement to AGC 358, p.16 (Strategies n.32, Interventions n.34)

2. A keyword.

The discussions of recent years have brought to light different positions concerning consecrated life and its place in the Church. There are various keywords which lead us to what could be called the heart of the matter: *charism, sequela Christi, mission*.

The Synod on consecrated life was aware of these differences and tried to smooth them out. It asked the Pope to give a precise answer to certain questions so that discernment could take place amid the looming challenges and develop the lasting values of consecrated life, even by means of new expressions.

Among the questions to be clarified there was the distinctive element: what it is that determines the identity of consecrated life, and hence also its specific contribution to the life of the Christian community and to pastoral work.

It is now well known, because it has already been the object of numerous commentaries, that the Apostolic Exhortation places it in *consecration*. This was already present in the teaching extending all the way from Vatican II to the Synod on Consecrated Life. But it had been impaired by a restricted interpretation of consecration itself, by the new profile of consecrated life in the Church understood as the people of God, and by the progress of secularization, which has led to a change in the significance of what is “sacred”.

The declaration *Essential elements of the teaching of the Church on the religious life* (31 May 1983), declares: “At the foundation of religious life lies consecration. By insisting on this principle, the Church puts the emphasis on the initiative of God and on the new and different relationship with him implied by religious life”²⁰. Two fundamental elements therefore determine the reality of a consecrated life: the initiative of God, felt by the subject as a call or appeal, and a new and singular relationship with him as the basis for the orientation and organization of the subject’s existence.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum* (25 March 1984), which aimed at fostering the fruitful exchange then in progress, said in addressing religious: “The Church thinks of you, above all, as persons who are “consecrated”: consecrated to God in Jesus Christ as his exclusive possession. This consecration determines your place in the vast community

²⁰ *Essential elements of the teaching of the Church on the religious life*, 5

of the Church, the People of God. And at the same time this consecration introduces into the universal mission of this people a special source of spiritual and supernatural energy”²¹.

Consecration has therefore become the keyword summing up the condition and path of holiness of those who dedicate themselves, by public profession, to the radical following of Christ. All projects of existence which are in line with this proposal are called *consecrated life*, even though among them there may be notable differences as regards manner, organization and immediate purpose.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* takes up the argument directly and speaks of it with studied clarity, assigning to consecration other qualifying and distinctive elements of this kind of existence. At n.72, under the heading “Consecrated for mission” it says: “In the image of Jesus, the beloved Son ‘whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world’ (Jn 10:36), those whom God calls to follow him are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission”²².

Of such consecration, which is defined as “new and special”, the sense is clarified and misunderstandings removed. There is continuity with baptismal consecration because the latter is assumed in radical form. At the same time there is an innovation, a ‘leap’, an exodus, an intervention of God, since this kind of existence is not necessarily included in the grace of baptism. It implies a personal call or vocation.

The objective excellence of consecrated life does not exclude other objectives which are excellent in their own way (lay, priestly), nor does it lead to a spiritual hierarchy. But it gives rise to an enriching difference in communion, and so represents a typical contribution in terms of sign, proclamation, witness of Christian life and service to the Church’s mission.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* emphasizes that no other element, apart from or separated from this one, can provide the correct physiognomy or justify the presence of religious life in today’s world: not educative or social commitments, not voluntary work in situations of poverty, not struggles for great causes of humanity; only the fact that one has felt called to witness to the primacy of God and to accept the indispensable centrality of Christ in the orientation and organization of one’s own life. And because they cannot provide the original feature, so other motivations are insufficient for assuming a consecrated way of life. And so the weakness is evident, especially at the present day, of a vocation prompted solely by

²¹ RD, 7

²² VC, 72

enthusiasm for work with the young, the advancement of the poor, and similar purposes. Without more solid and definitive roots such motivations soon fade away.

All this calls for some comment.

Not everyone has understood the implications of this choice and insistence. In various meetings and gatherings I have heard reservations expressed in this regard, and it is useful to look at the underlying motives, because here and there such reservations can be found lurking even in our own environments.

Some may think that we are going back to a way of thinking of religious as persons publicly constituted in a different social situation, an idea abhorrent to the mentality of the present day. This is totally excluded. No prerogatives or status privileges follow from our choice of God in either secular settings or in the Church. And it is worthwhile recalling that our way of life gives us neither protection or defence, but rather leaves us exposed.

Then there are some reservations that follow from a suspicion that consecrated persons consider themselves 'superior' and are thought to be so by others. The "objective excellence" of consecrated life, the "new and special consecration", the word "more" (more radical, more intense, more near to, more conformed) which is repeated so often in describing the commitment of the religious as regards the obligations of every Christian, give rise to suspicion. And there is also the fear that religious may appear to be organized as a separate category, in contrast with the present ecclesial vision of communion to be realized in immediate settings, like the local Churches and parish communities.

Two other difficulties are raised by some people. One of them is of a pastoral kind: that the assertion of a first and almost isolated personal relationship with God once again puts religious at the centre of their own perfection, detaching them from the fact that they are in and for the world. The other is spiritual in nature: that it gives rise to an intimist or dualist vision (sacred-profane, spiritual-corporal, relation with God and action in the world) of Christian experience. These two aspects concern us closely because of the apostolic objective of our Congregation set out in art.6 of the Constitutions and on account of the spiritual activity which inspires pastoral charity.

Neither of the meanings which provoke such suspicions are included in the term consecration, according to the deeper studies made in recent years. Rather the total sense of consecration is highlighted. It comprises at one and the same time all the elements of the project of a life in God: evangelical

counsels, apostolic mission, fraternal communion, spirituality. It is not an organizational element above and different from all these, but the event which is at their foundation. It is the grace and relationship which embraces all of them.

This is familiar to us because we find it in our Constitutions: “Our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements of our consecration which we live in a single movement of love towards God and towards our brothers”²³.

Consecration does not consist in an external way of life but in a grace which transforms from within. Our Rule asserts that we have been consecrated not by a person or human institution, not in virtue of some gesture (even a liturgical one), but with the gift of the Spirit: “The Father consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit and sends us out to be apostles of the young”²⁴.

This is a theme which is taken up continually in our Constitutions in other words which are equivalent: vocation, covenant with God, total donation, love of predilection, radical option. They all indicate the same thing: a very particular relationship of God and with God which marks our personal experience and our work of education.

To express this comprehensive meaning within consecrated life (following of Christ through the vows, life of communion, concrete form of mission), many types or forms exist. Consecration has multiple expressions, not just a single one. People speak of ancient, modern and future forms of religious life. It is well to understand this, so as not to confuse consecration with only its strictly ‘religious’ aspect, creating a kind of dualism regarding pastoral commitments. This is still more true when the latter (as in our case) are carried out in a secular environment and require a professional approach and secular relationships as well.

For our personal unity, for our witness, for the contribution we must make to the educative community, it is to our purpose to look again at some aspects of consecration. Nowadays, rather than as a single ‘moment’, it is seen as a ‘continuum’ which embraces the whole of our life; rather than a ‘state’ in which one becomes established once for all; it is considered a gift, a path to be followed, a relationship to be cultivated. “The entire life dedicated to the service of God establishes a special consecration”²⁵.

²³ C 3

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *Essential elements of the teaching of the Church on the religious life*, III, 4

Consecrated life comprises the personal experience of the call or vocation, the welcoming in faith of God's initiative, the choice of a particular project for being a disciple or follower of Christ, recognition on the part of the Church of the action of God in the individual, and the public insertion of the chosen project in the mission.

I think it will be useful to think over these aspects and passages once again, and to relive them. They are not only of doctrinal value and enlightening, but are a condition for the lively manifestation of consecration in our environments.

3. The joyful experience of having received a gift

“A *call* and the interior *attraction* which accompanies it”, says the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* speaking of consecration²⁶. “Those who are called to the consecrated life have a *special experience of the light* which shines forth from the Incarnate Word”²⁷. “Those who have been given the grace of this special communion of love with Christ feel as it were *caught up in his splendour*”²⁸.

Many oblique references in the Apostolic Exhortation endorse this subjective element, which is the sign and first step of consecration: the appeal of the beauty which attracts, the feeling of having been reached by a particular manifestation of Christ²⁹, being taken up into the horizon of eternity³⁰ or enveloped in the brightness of truth, of having experienced the God of love, the interior happiness of new knowledge, the rapture of wisdom.

Consecration consists in the fact that God makes himself felt in our life in an unusual and even unique way, even to the extent of enveloping it completely and becoming its principal incentive, the One to whom we listen most eagerly and love to look at. And this not for any religious or ethical duty, but as life, sense and joy.

This attraction or falling in love with God is a fact and experience which we can relive from the past. It marks the progress of our vocational decision. We can remember when and why we made our decision for him, just as surely as a husband and wife recall when they met and how their mutual attraction developed.

²⁶ VC, 17

²⁷ VC, 15

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *cf.* VC, 14

³⁰ *cf.* *ibid.*

For some it may have been a sudden flash at a moment of particular spiritual intensity, for example a retreat. For most people it will all have happened gradually: a first taste through contact with religious environments or persons, in which we discerned particular values; then, little by little we came to discover the source from which the values proceeded; we shared in the experience of those who had impressed us, through friendship, collaboration and confidences. We discovered a panorama of life that was new and full of meaning. And finally, we felt ourselves captured, in line with St Paul's expression: "Christ Jesus has made me his own"³¹.

It is the biblical experience of belonging to God and being unable to detach ourselves from him, even though aware of our weakness and infidelity: "LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed (...); within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot"³².

Sometimes we hear personal stories of this kind at youth gatherings when a young religious relates to companions how and why he or she decided to enter religious life.

The accounts vary widely, both as regards anecdotes and circumstances. But underlying all of them there is a common design: first a brief glimpse of the worth of Christ, of God the Father for our own life; reflection led us to choose them as the "love" of our own existence, preferring it to any other possible human experience. That is how it began. The rest of the story we hear from religious, including our own confreres, who have responded joyfully to the call.

Consecration does not consist principally in a signed statement, in an ensemble of external signs, in a social state, in separation from the world; but in the fact that God has entered into the life of a person and has taken the first place there, living in him and making him his confidant and partner.

It is not something exclusive to religious, nor even to Christians. Wherever God intervenes, by creation or salvation, he consecrates with the presence of his love and bestows an inviolable dignity. The first consecration is human existence: it is the first act of love which establishes the inviolable character of the person, his superiority over everything, and even the fundamental traits of our being.

Through faith and baptism, which are God's self-communication through the ministry of the Church, our belonging to him becomes something

³¹ Phil 3,12

³² Jer 20, 7-9

conscious and is transformed into the principle of new personal development. We have ourselves expressed this so many times to the young in speaking of the baptismal consecration which makes us children of God, members of his people, and temples of the Spirit.

The unique thing about the consecrated person in the religious life or in the “world” is that he feels all this as the principal element, an indispensable point for his own self-realization. God reaches him at the point when he is planning his own life and, through the gift of the Spirit, draws him to himself in a radical and exclusive manner: this is the fact which gives rise to the consecration which the Church will discern, make public, and confirm by inserting this gift into its own communion and mission.

The recent congress of young religious, which took place in Rome in October 1997, expressed this first element of the consecration in the motto: *Vidimus Dominum*. We have had an experience of a meeting, an unveiling, a “vision” of the Lord.

The eager enthusiasm of this experience must not grow less as we grow older or acquire deep-rooted habits. It is destined rather to increase and fill the whole of life. If it fell short, religious life would lose its motivation and be drawn into functionalism, i.e. into nothing beyond the correct fulfilment of one’s duties.

What would happen to us would be what takes place in old couples who continue to live together in peace, but do not expect either anything new nor further happiness.

And I want to add that this is something which is indispensable nowadays. We are living in times when the “subjective” is coming to the fore; communication leads to emphasis on “emotionalism”; the young go where their “heart” leads them; precision becomes less and less important, as something having no relevance to life. To the young religious, the Pope said: “This wisdom (of the consecrated life) is the *zest* of the mystery of God, the *flavour* ³³ of divine intimacy; but it is also the beauty of remaining together in his name”

4. Acknowledgement of God’s initiative

In line with this intuition, relish, clear perception of the presence of God and of the attraction of Christ together with our own joyful and welcoming acceptance, there begins to take root in us the conviction of being on the

³³ John Paul II, *Message to Congress VIDIMUS DOMINUM of young religious*, 29.9.97.

receiving end of God's love and attention, not in a general way as an individual in a crowd, but personally: "I have called you by name"³⁴.

"He chose us before the foundation of the world for adoption as his children"³⁵. Scripture is full of such passages describing God's attitude in our regard.

The first step is his. We did not go to him; he came to us and entered into our life. The category of "gift" for interpreting the fact, not only of vocation but of existence itself, is the dominant one and is used continually in the Apostolic Exhortation.

Striking is the use of the verb "consecrate" in the passive voice. Frequently it is said "we have been consecrated". Consecration is not an effort on our part to attain a certain degree of virtue, or to put the thought of God at the centre of our life. It is rather the consequence of a fact which is within us and at the basis of our project. Consecration is a visit, a gift, a coming of God towards us, an inrush of his grace into our life. In the Gospel the initiative is expressed through the glance Jesus bestows on certain people, the call, the invitation, the fascination to which he gives rise, the practical involvement and questioning, his visit to a house.

You see the same kind of thing in the vocations of the prophets. They are sudden and unforeseeable. It is not that the prophet goes in search of God, but that God seizes him and takes possession of him. Amos says he was tending his sheep when he heard God's voice³⁶. Similar sudden calls, albeit in widely differing circumstances, are recounted by the other prophets. Usually this element is placed first for theological reasons of causality.

The initiative is taken by the Father who places us on the way to Christ. "This is the meaning of the call to the consecrated life: it is an initiative coming wholly from the Father (cf. Jn 15:16), who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion"³⁷. The initiative, in history, also belongs to the Son. Jesus calls and invites: "Of some he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. Mt 19:27) in order to live at his side and to follow him wherever he goes"³⁸. The initiative belongs to the Spirit who, from the depth of mind and heart, evokes openness, clear understanding, relish, ideas, tendencies and love for God and his work. "It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he

³⁴ Is 43,1

³⁵ Eph 1,4

³⁶ cf. Amos 1,1

³⁷ VC,17

³⁸ VC,18

who guides the growth of this desire, helping it to mature into a positive response and sustaining it as it is faithfully translated into action”³⁹.

It is a matter of being ready to listen, to respond, to allow oneself to be taken over, to accept willingly. The initiative and possibilities do not lie in us. We need to feel a presence who has made us the object of his predilection and to respond with love. The consecration is founded totally on this relationship. It is not mainly an effort of overcoming ourselves, but a confrontation, a combat with God. In the biblical image of Jacob who struggled with God, the dominant idea is the desire for the closeness and blessing of the Lord, from whom we cannot separate ourselves, even though at times his presence may provoke resistance in us. The image is a vigorous expression of a relationship felt as vital, even though in a life which has its problems.

This initiative of God must not remain a personal “secret”, a theological doctrine, but become an acknowledgement or proclamation which explains to the young why we made our choice of life. We should reawaken it above all in the inevitable moments of trial which we often try to resolve by our own unaided efforts.

5. A project of life in God

From the two facts described above, which existentially are only one (presence of God and welcome, vocation and response, call and following, gift and correspondence with it, revelation and adherence), there follows a third: an orientation and choice of life.

There has matured in us the feeling and conviction that we are his, that “in him we live and move and have our being”⁴⁰, that he is the first and only one of importance, not in abstract or in general for the world or for the human race, but for us.

On him we have concentrated our hopes and expectations. We seek him “at daybreak”⁴¹, i.e. continually, as a source of meaning, as a confidant, as a companion.

From this stems a bond which gradually fills us with light and peace, even psychologically, and characterizes us before the world. The consecrated person is one who has put God and religious values, the faith

³⁹ VC, 19

⁴⁰ Acts 17,28

⁴¹ Ps 62,2

and what it offers, at the centre. “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup”⁴²

This becomes not only a vague desire but a formal intention: the effort to attain and live the mystery of God not as a brief daily or weekly pause, e.g. in the Mass or prayer, but as a permanent relationship able to inspire decisions and way of life.

For this reason we adopt a concrete proposal, a visible way of life, which bears the sign of God. We are incorporated in a community which has already made the same option and has set out a plan for its development.

This kind of community life too is “consecrated”, not by virtue of material separation from the world, by signs and external practices (this would be an alien vision of the Christian faith), but because the communion arises from the ongoing action of the Spirit, life is planned under the inspiration of the gospel, and the Church recognizes it as one of its authentic and visible expressions. Our Constitutions express it in art.50: “God calls us to live in community... (In them) we become one heart and one soul to love and serve God and to help one another”⁴³.

In this project emphasis is laid on the desire to be conformed to Christ, expressed in the evangelical counsels we have taken up by vow. Even though precise in their specific object, they have a meaning which is open towards generosity, and a limitless creativity.

They express the quintessence of the gospel and are a sign of the life to which the gospel gives inspiration. Nowadays they are exposed to more serious questions and to new challenges. And it is quite other than superfluous to reflect on them again in the light of the tendencies, manners and usages of the present day to rediscover their positive force, challenge and prophecy. The challenges in fact give rise to new expressions and bring out new messages. Understanding them in the evangelical sense, choosing them as a way of life, deciding to profess them publicly, being creative in expressing them at the present day, is a gift which proceeds from the Trinity and reflects the mystery of donation.

To imitation must be added two other requirements. In the first place there is the rapport, friendship and intimacy with Christ. The assumption of his preferences and attitudes would not be sufficient. A personal relationship is needed. Jesus is a living person to meet and live with. Between him and the consecrated person a deep rapport is established. This we are taught by

⁴² Ps 16,5

⁴³ C 50

the life of the disciples. Jesus in fact had listeners, admirers, followers, disciples and some who were particularly close to him and on terms of intimacy. He said of them: “You are my friends”⁴⁴. They were moved to share their life with him and to stay together. “Master, where are you staying?”⁴⁵ Once again we should meditate on the fact that consecration grafts us more intimately into the life and paschal mystery of Christ.

Nowadays, when all institutional bonds seem weak and all formal memberships seem transitory and of little consequence, this personal experience becomes a convincing testimony and a guarantee of fidelity.

At this point a comment may be opportune: it is fitting that affective manifestations of friendship with Christ be given, in addition to effective ones. Two extremes need to be avoided: to convert love into a superficial sentiment, a simple movement of sensitivity; and at the other extreme to make our heart arid through forgetfulness or intellectualism. If the will frequently finds itself held back in the love of God, one of the reasons is that our human sensitivity has become atrophied. As long as faith or the thought of God fails to reach our feelings, they remain marginalized and ineffective. There were some saints who showed great tenderness in their love for God. We may recall St Francis of Assisi but, not less though with a different style, St Francis de Sales from whose spirituality we take our inspiration.

In addition to imitation and intimacy there is also active participation in Christ’s cause, i.e. to spend ourselves for those things for which he worked and suffered. We shall deal later with this at greater length, when we focus on the prevalently apostolic character of our consecration.

This process of friendship, imitation, participation, discipleship, is called in the Apostolic Exhortation “conforming one’s whole existence to Christ”⁴⁶. “By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, ‘that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world’ (LG 44)”⁴⁷.

This aspect too of consecration provokes in us some practical and helpful questions. Does the heart of the project, the option for Christ, preserve within us its central position, even to the extent of giving light and colour to all the rest?

⁴⁴ Jn 15,14

⁴⁵ Jn 1,38

⁴⁶ VC,16

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

Do we succeed in getting over to our young people and collaborators that our life is lived under the impulse of a great “love”, which seemed beneficial to us even from a human point of view?

6. Public profession

These three facts: call-response-project, presence-welcome-choice, invitation-correspondence-covenant are expressed by profession. In it the individual “consecrates himself”, in the common expression for offering himself, devoting himself, making himself completely available. As in Baptism, the Lord consecrates the person whom the Spirit has prompted to offer himself and gives him new grace to enable him to walk with Christ in newness of life⁴⁸.

The oldest formulas are trimmed down to the essentials. Those of the present day, on the other hand, tend to be rather long and analytical. But all of them emphasize that the object of the consecration are not things, nor activities, nor moral obligations, but the person; that the ultimate aim is not a task but the love of God who is perceived and the desire to correspond with it; that the principal subjects are the Lord and the one making profession: “God my Father, you consecrated me to yourself”. (...) “I offer myself totally to you”⁴⁹.

“Religious profession is a sign of a loving encounter between the Lord who calls and the disciple who responds by giving himself totally to God and to his brothers and sisters”⁵⁰. The demands of consecration are therefore total, exclusive and perpetual: all, only and for ever. There was a period in which the formula used was “until death”. It was not an indication of time but of intensity: until the holocaust, until the consummation.

Profession is of unique importance in the organization and development of our spiritual life. It is not a passing act, a rite which is performed and done with, leaving obligations to be respected, but the beginning of a relationship which will be prolonged all through life, like that of matrimony. It should foster attitudes and expressions, and give direction to life. Hence it is not only a plan for sanctification, a contract of membership in a community, but especially a source of grace, as is for newly-weds their initial promise of mutual belonging to each other.

⁴⁸ cf. RD, 7

⁴⁹ C 24

⁵⁰ C 23

On the grace received and on the obligation of corresponding to it the whole of life will be built. Its influence on daily life makes all the difference between the authentic Salesian and his halfhearted confrere. Hence it is more than fitting that there be an immediate preparation, especially for perpetual profession, which has by now become common in the Congregation. It should not be reduced in time and content but should emphasize both the deeper meaning and the appreciation of the experience already gained.

Profession is the public recognition on the part of the Church of God's invading presence in the life of a person, and of the will of the individual concerned to live such an event in the Christian community and at the service of the Kingdom, and hence not in an intimist and individual form. The Church recognizes him and incorporates him in the communion and mission of the people of God. It authenticates the gift, and serves as the mediator of the consecration⁵¹. And so the liturgy enhances profession with a special celebration: it invokes on the individuals the gift of the Holy Spirit and associates their oblation to the sacrifice of Christ, while the numerous presence of the community at the act gives to it a charismatic and ecclesial importance.

This action of the Church is to be linked with a point vigorously discussed nowadays in certain circles, especially from a practical point of view: the indispensable nature of consecrated life for the quality of communion and mission in the Church. We read in the Apostolic Exhortation: "The consecrated life, present in the Church from the beginning, can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature"⁵².

"The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament"⁵³

Profession is not a generic promise of love, subjectively conceived and expressed, but the assumption of a real project, raised up by the Spirit, lived by the Founder to a degree of holiness, and recognized by the Church as an efficacious way for the *sequela Christi*. It leads therefore to a "return to the Rule"⁵⁴ which gathers together the spirit, discipline and customs already tried out for the realization of the project.

Interest in spirituality has become a phenomenon of the present day. Some go looking for books which put it forward and explain it. In the

⁵¹ cf. *Essential elements of the teaching of the Church on the religious life*, I, 8

⁵² VC, 29

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ VC, 37

Constitutions it is found already studied by successive generations who have lived it; it is handed on to us in a magnificent manner in particular formulas which reflect this long existence. A rapid reading, or hearing it read in community, do scant justice to the depth and rich nature of the text. A deeper reading, which gives due value to the whole and to individual expressions, which compares the meaning of those expressions with the history of the charisma and with personal life, will help us to understand and appreciate the wisdom of the process offered by profession.

We know that “our living rule is Jesus Christ, the Saviour announced in the Gospel, who is alive today in the Church and in the world, and whom we find present in Don Bosco”⁵⁵. For this very reason “we willingly accept the Constitutions as Don Bosco's will and testament..., we meditate on them with faith and pledge ourselves to put them into practice; they are for us, the Lord's disciples, a way that leads to Love”⁵⁶.

From what we have said so far it is evident that life becomes ever more authentically consecrated through God's call or invitation, the experience of his felt presence, the will to respond, a concrete plan of life which puts Jesus Christ at the centre of life, and the action of the Church which inserts the whole ensemble into its own communion and mission.

Consecration embraces the whole of life and is realized after the manner of a crescendo, a covenant, a pact of love and fidelity, the final communion.

7. Some consequences.

We can now draw some important conclusions for our work among the young and among lay people.

Consecrated persons take up sanctification as the main aim in life. This is common to all forms of consecrated life. In their way of life, of relationships, of work, they want to live and in some way communicate the mystery of the liberating God who is close to us, by “conforming one's whole existence to Christ”⁵⁷ They want to be a living memorial of Christ⁵⁸.

The Constitutions tell us that holiness is the most precious gift we can offer to the young⁵⁹. But it is difficult for them to build their humanity on this

⁵⁵ C 196

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ VC, 16

⁵⁸ *cf.* VC, 22

⁵⁹ *cf.* C 25

alone. Discordant and contradictory messages and suggestions reach them from outside. It is difficult for them to evaluate them, make judgements and especially decide on their path in life. The libertarian atmosphere all around makes it difficult to listen to the voice of conscience and to establish mature moral criteria.

It is not easy for them either, in the secular context, to perceive the transcendence of Christ and believe that he is alive today and not just an edifying story from the past.

Placed in this manner in a strict relationship with the mission, holiness becomes the chief contribution of Salesian religious to education and human advancement. In fact it has a temporal value not only because of works of charity for the benefit of the poor, but also for the outlook, the meaning and the dignity it gives to human social life.

The existence of consecrated persons, therefore, has a primacy without parallel. Their project of community life ensures a right order of priorities: the contemplative element of prayer and interior life, the apostolic element of self-donation for the Kingdom, and the ascetical element of penance and exodus; and all these lived in an intimate rapport and collaboration with Christ under the guidance of the Spirit.

Another consequence, linked with the preceding, is that consecrated persons are seen as experts in the **experience of God**. Such experience is at the origin of their vocation. Their plan of life and what they usually do tends to cultivate this and foster it. All Christians, on the other hand, should want to have a certain experience of God; but they can give their attention to it only at intervals and in less favourable circumstances, and so they run the risk of neglecting it altogether.

Those who are consecrated offer themselves as confidants for all in the world who are in search of God. To those who are already Christians they offer the possibility of having a new religious experience in their company; those who are not believers they join in their process of searching.

Nowadays this kind of service is becoming widespread and much sought after, as is shown by the opening of convents and monasteries to those who want to use them for days and periods of reflection. We, on the other hand, are called to provide a similar service among young people.

There is a law of life which is applicable in all circumstances: no value will survive in society without a group of people who dedicate themselves completely to promoting it. Without medical personnel and the organization

of hospitals good health would not be possible. Without artists and the corresponding institutions the artistic sense of the population would decline. The same kind of thing happens with the sense of God: religious, whether contemplatives or not, form the group of mystics who are able to help those at least who are close to interpreting life in the light of the Absolute and experiencing it.

This applies to all the essential aims of religious life. And so the Founders placed the sense of God above all the features and activities of their institutes. Believers and non-believers alike see mediocrity in consecrated religious as a deformity, and the religious themselves feel an unfillable void if this dimension disappears.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* sees religious life as a privileged setting for dialogue between the great religions⁶⁰, because at its origin is an option which, in general terms, is shared by all deeply religious persons.

The salesian Constitutions recall the same point in art.62: “In a world beguiled by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possession and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, and that his love can fill a life completely”⁶¹.

A demonstration of this professional profile of ours is our personal experience of God, made conscious, sought after, more deeply analyzed and matured as adults; it is shown also by the ability to initiate others, and especially young people, along the same lines. They are looking for some moment of spirituality, even though it be out of curiosity or a passing whim. This is clear from the way they frequent retreat houses. It would be a sad state of affairs if those consecrated were more concerned about the administration of such houses, than about being qualified to guide others towards the spiritual life.

II. OUR APOSTOLIC CONSECRATION ⁶²

1. Unique nature of “salesian” consecration

⁶⁰ cf. VC 101,102

⁶¹ C 62

⁶² cf. C 3

Consecrated life is realized in a unique fashion in the salesian charisma. We have already made a few brief references to the point, to preserve unity among what we were saying. Now we can focus more directly on the point.

Our Constitutions tell us that ours is an apostolic consecration: “Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life”⁶³. God’s call reached us through the experience of the mission to the young; for many this was the spark that began the fire of all that followed.

It is in the mission that the gifts of consecration are made, appear in their charismatic uniqueness and grow in us. There is a single movement of charity which draws us towards God and moves us towards the young, especially the poorer ones among them, which prompts signs of love and correspondence with the Father and urges us to provide the services of which the young are in need.

The two dimensions are in fact related like concentric circles: we contemplate God in his providing presence and in his work of salvation, we discern him in events, we can understand his sentiments and actions in the light of the image of the Good Shepherd who goes in search of his flock and gives his life on the Cross. We live the work of education with the young as an act of worship and possibility of an encounter with God.

If one of these elements were eroded or absent, our joyful educative experience and our plan of spiritual life would lose its zest: in a word, the particular grace of our consecration would fall back to the common level, and our charism would lose its value.

It is true that our spirituality is balanced on the other side by our activity. In fact “as he works for the salvation of the young, the Salesian experiences the fatherhood of God, and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work”⁶⁴.

Da mihi animas, apostolic spirituality, pastoral charity, oratorian heart: these are all phrases which provide a measure of the originality and unity we want to give to our life. Very true of us is what *Vita Consecrata* says of consecrated persons in general: “the task of devoting themselves wholly to ‘mission’ is included in their call”⁶⁵, just as it is true that in the fulfilment of the mission we find the material, motivation and stimulus to live in depth that love

⁶³ C 3

⁶⁴ C 12

⁶⁵ VC, 72

of God who “provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side, and freely gives his life to save them”⁶⁶.

It must be emphasized that our mission is centred in the area of youth, and follows the way of education. Here the charism is manifested and we find once again a secret of our vitality. This gives us ample scope nowadays for creativity regarding the application of our resources, the reformulation of the projects, and the renewal of activities.

Far from us, therefore, should be any dichotomy between interior life and pastoral commitment, between religious spirit and educational work, or the escape to any other forms which are not in line with those three words of Don Bosco: *work, prayer, temperance*.

A clarification is needed nonetheless, but I will not delay on it because I think it is obvious: the mission does not consist in the professional work we accomplish. A religious, man or woman, is an educator like all others, but not in the same way as those others. The mission is not even just the pastoral service one wants to offer. It is a spiritual experience; the feeling of collaborating with God, of being “sent” by him through the experiences in which we see the expression of his will, in the first place religious profession in which we have manifested our intention to follow his call and to be united with him in his work for the benefit of the world and of every individual.

The purpose of the mission goes beyond the results, excellent though they may be, obtainable by professional work. It consists in living, bearing witness to, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God: the possibility of life for all, in particular for the poor, the revelation of God’s love for each one, the meaning of life. The kind of life we take up and the work we do serve as ways and means to this end.

This is the thread of the story Don Bosco tells of his life in the Memoirs of the Oratory starting from his first dream. “The Lord sent me to look after boys. I must therefore cut down on other work and keep myself fit for them”⁶⁷. This was an enduring conviction which became ever more deeply rooted in him as time went on and events became more complicated. “The conviction of being under a unique kind of divine pressure dominated the life of Don Bosco; it was at the root of his most daring decisions and ready to break out in unusual ways. The belief of being the Lord’s instrument for a very particular mission was deep and well founded within him. It produced in him

⁶⁶ C 20

⁶⁷ BM 7, 171

the religious attitude characteristic of the biblical servant, of the prophet who could not fail to fulfil the divine will”⁶⁸.

This “interior and further dimension” distinguishes the one who is sent from the competent and conscientious executive, from the convinced professional satisfied with his particular craft; it is at the heart of the attitudes which shape an apostolic spirituality. It frees us from excessive attachment to success and satisfaction, from desires (sometimes subconscious), from self-affirmation and from individualism. It keeps us awake to the essential dimensions of our work and infuses a sense of serene trust.

2. “Consecrated” uniqueness of our apostolic mission

Many are involved in the apostolate, including the youth apostolate and that of education. Nowadays many of them perform it with the salesian spirit.

The mission of religious however has certain characteristics of its own, which make its service part of ecclesial communion, and different from a similar material service offered in another condition of life.

It is of interest to give some more thought to this statement because it touches us closely: as educators we do all that would be done by any competent Christian educator; as priests we do all that would be done by a diocesan priest, supported if you like by a pastoral practice and by a particular spirituality. But the mission is carried out through life before through work, especially nowadays when the common view is that work is perceived as a means, and not as having to give sense to life.

A characterizing element of the mission of consecrated persons is specifically the choice of life, not only as a source of energy for the work, but as a message and service in itself. “By the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life”⁶⁹.

Before and more than *doing* anything, the mission of consecrated life consists in living in a certain way in the Church and in the world, in the place chosen in it by God. In other words, one does not embrace consecrated life only to do excellent things from a religious or promotional standpoint, which can be done in other ways at the present day, but because one has perceived and wishes to manifest the presence of God in history and in life, in the areas and ways involved in the particular vocation.

⁶⁸ Stella P., *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II, p.32

⁶⁹ VC, 72

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* explains here and there the reasons behind this assertion. By assuming the “form of life in Christ”, consecrated persons become for the Christian community, and for those in the world who are wondering about these things even vaguely, a reference to the fact of Jesus. The religious dimension, which they express in concentrated form, recalls the need for the *reditus ad Deum*, a return at least to the thought of God.

In this sense consecrated persons are already a proclamation, message and a service. They have something to say to man reminding him of the dimension which Scripture calls “heart”: interior life, conscience, spirituality.

In situations in which the tendency is to consider only the material conditions of life, even with the good intention of transforming them, consecrated life keeps alive the need to consider another dimension without which all external progress, albeit necessary and demanding, can become largely insufficient.

Personal and collective existence is ruled by a constellation of values assumed by all: respect for other people, work, health, honesty and sincerity, social responsibility. ‘Constellation’ implies that among them there is a hierarchy which enables them to be seen as a system. Each one focuses on some of his own preference and in harmony with these organizes all the rest.

Consecrated persons place at the centre the religious value and the confession of Christ, and from this they move on to others, maintaining the first as the justification and matrix of all they do. And so they take up education, attend to the sick, and undertake research. Every branch of human activity is open to those who are consecrated, provided their inspiration and motivation are those of persons who have made God their principal choice and option. It is an abnormality when another dimension gains the ascendancy and the religious spirit becomes only marginal.

Religious have a mission to encourage and support all who commit themselves in some way for the benefit of others, even independently of the faith. I have in mind young people, even non-practising ones, who approach us to become involved in our initiatives, drawn by the kind of life they see in us. For those already living the faith, the witness of consecrated persons gives meaning to their dedication to their brothers and sisters, recalling that in the work of salvation everything comes from the divine banquet which is received, lived and freely given.

Finally we emphasize the perspective of the “*going beyond*”; it is a service of vision and hope concerning what lies beyond earthly life. It is a matter of living the yearning of the Church for the fullness of life, the desire for the motherland which fills the Christian heart, the expectation of the coming meeting with the Lord which is the essential content of faith and which opens the windows towards transcendence for all.

“Thus it can be said that consecrated persons are ‘in mission’ by virtue of their very consecration, to which they bear witness in accordance with the ideal of their Institute”⁷⁰. This is its main aspect. The conclusion seems to be that pastoral work, educational or progressive, without the manifestation of the radical choice of life following Christ, cannot delineate the proper mission of the religious. On the other hand, if such work is taken up in the light of consecration, it becomes an efficacious expression and under certain conditions releases extraordinary energies of charity with particularly eloquent messages.

3. Service and prophecy.

“When the founding charism provides for pastoral activities, it is obvious that the witness of life and the witness of works of the apostolate and human development are equally necessary: both mirror Christ who is at one and the same time consecrated to the glory of the Father and sent into the world for the salvation of his brothers and sisters”⁷¹.

We just said that, under certain conditions, educative pastoral work frees up energy and gives out messages.

The first of these conditions is the **prophetic character**. It is of the whole Church and for all ages; but it is urgently needed at the present day and is particularly indicated for religious. They become a sign and suggestion for orientation, rather than a mere solution for a human need; they do not supply for what others ought to be doing, but offer that which is their own: the gospel. Jesus performs cures, but he also “reveals new dimensions of life”. “opens up horizons of God”, says and does things which are “incomprehensible” and “daring”, open to criticism and apparently useless at the time but which lay down new criteria of existence.

⁷⁰ VC, 72

⁷¹ *ibid.*

In the Apostolic Exhortation no less than ten numbers are dedicated to this aspect in the chapter on mission⁷², and they provide us with a criterion for the setting up of our own work or works.

In a world marked by communication, to be able to produce a message would seem to be one of the principal elements of pastoral work. What is important in fact is not only what is realized materially but also that to which it gives rise or stirs up, what it hints at to raise questions, the ideas it inculcates, what it points to, the challenges it launches. It has been said that consecrated life must not only respond to challenges, but itself launch new ones: to the “closed” outlook, to the seeking of instant pleasure. It is interesting to read the signs of the times, but we need to write them anew. We must enter into dialogue with the current mentality, but we must insert in it elements which would not logically be there at all.

The prophetic dimension must not be confused with simple contestation, in particular within the Christian community, with the theatrical gestures so willingly amplified nowadays by the mass media with its flare for the spectacular. But it is true nonetheless that prophecy implies something new, a break with what is taken for granted, the overcoming of immediate and restricted visions so as to go *beyond*: it confirms what is small and hidden but nevertheless true, as Jesus did with regard to the widow’s mite, the radical assumption of what is of daily occurrence, but fertile just the same.

The functions of prophecy and prophets can be seen in the history of God’s people; they are not far removed from our own needs and experience: prophecy brings back to mind, raises questions, indicates an orientation, interprets events, strengthens and supports, infuses hope, and brings people to their senses and to conversion.

It is not an easy job being a prophet; and so those who attempt it lightheartedly and with vanity end up in discouragement or fall back on other positions.

Elijah can serve as a paradigm of prophecy. Of him it is said: “He lived in God’s presence and contemplated his passing by in silence; he interceded for the people and boldly announced God’s will; he defended God’s sovereignty and came to the defence of the poor against the powerful of the world (cf. 1 Kg 18-19)”⁷³.

The problem for religious, including Salesians, is how to give expression to this dimension effectively. It requires fidelity to the message, to

⁷² cf. VC, 84-93

⁷³ VC, 84

the style of life and of initiatives at the present moment in history. The prophets spoke in the context of their own society and events, transcending them but without ignoring or diminishing their import. It means that the proclamation must be authentic and the signs and words intelligible.

One of the main difficulties of consecrated life in the face of today's world is the feeling of being culturally extraneous, and this can weaken prophetic thrust and lead to forms of frustration, resignation, discouragement, withdrawal and even abandonment.

Hence among the many interesting and often original suggestions contained here and elsewhere in the Apostolic Exhortation, attention is called to "a greater cultural commitment". To be prophetic consecrated life must be able to shake up this world which is distancing itself from the gospel. And for this it must be able to read, evaluate, assume, give new meaning to and challenge cultural currents or fashions, in their roots in addition to their manifestations.

Following the three elements of consecration, some prophetic processes can be proposed. The *specific mission* becomes prophetic when it plans and realizes a different and "more" evangelical manner of facing up to the questions typical of the area of its particular commitment; not just provide a stopgap, sop or simple maintenance.

In this sense we have to ask ourselves today what we can put into education and into our presence among young people to produce that impact of novelty in the expression of love that Don Bosco was able to do in his own context.

Prophetic testimony demands not only dedication and competence in one's own work, but also the commitment to think creatively and give cultural motivation to new and more evangelical ways of presence and action, so that the gospel can be leaven in every situation.

The *radical following of Christ* must lead to a discernment of current values and a proposal which represents an alternative kind of education.

It may produce a criticism which calls in question certain orientations or exaggerations of our society. This demands vigilance and evangelical persistence. It implies frank critical action in face of the exaltation of the sexual instinct disconnected from any moral norm, and from the "culture of transgression" which leads to very real aberrations; of the quest for money at all costs (think of the grave instances of exploitation!), which leads to social

insensitivity and the practical abandoning of the poor to their fate by both governments and public opinion; and finally as regards the exaggerated and narcissistic desire for success, of making the grade at any price, of becoming someone of importance, of having power.

But contestation is not sufficient in itself, and is still less so if it appears as wholesale condemnation. With a fulfilled and serene life and commitment to cultural reflection, the consecrated person proposes ideals on which people can base their happiness and which offer the wisdom contained in the gospel. We do this by way of guidance and an educative program assumed in the first place by ourselves.

The following is an interesting note in this connection: “While those who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they 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”⁷⁴. It is a therapy for treating insatiable desires, the state of emptiness, seeking immediate satisfaction, selfishness.

Attention, reflection, interpretative capacity and dialogue, should together give rise to the ability and readiness to enter into communication with and confront secular culture, if it is true that the gospel is an enrichment for mankind, and the closer we get to Christ the more we become men and women.⁷⁵

Fraternal life in common becomes prophetic when it refines a critical conscience in the face of individualism. With it we unite ourselves with those who elaborate a “culture of solidarity”, contributing our own experience and reflection. This is particularly striking when, as we set out in the preceding Letter, it leads to the expansion of communion and the spirit of reconciliation, welcoming the most needy and exchanging the gifts of the charisma in the educative community.

4. The many gifts of our consecrated community

Another original aspect of the contribution our experience as consecrated persons can provide, if it is lived in depth and radiantly expressed in our educative work, stems from the form of our community. In it there are gifts and personal charisms which are assumed and given new significance by consecration. And there are tasks interpreted and lived in the light of the consecration.

⁷⁴ VC, 87

⁷⁵ cf. GS, 41

In particular the salesian community is enriched by the significant and complementary presence of the salesian priest and the salesian brother⁷⁶. Together they provide an unusual complementarity of energy for witnessing and the educative mission.

We may wonder what exactly the figures of the salesian brother and the salesian priest demonstrate in the experience and witness of apostolic consecration; what does the lay character emphasize in 'consecration', and what does 'consecration' give to the lay state, both of them moulded and fused by the salesian spirit. Similarly we may wonder what the ministerial priesthood highlights in salesian consecration and what the latter gives to the ministry.

The original value is not found in external additions of status or category of members, but in the resulting physiognomy of the salesian community itself.

The **salesian brother** "combines in himself the gifts of consecration with those of the lay state"⁷⁷. He lives the lay state not in secular conditions but in the consecrated life; as a salesian religious he lives his vocation as a layman, and as a layman he lives his community vocation of a salesian religious"⁷⁸.

"To his consecrated brethren", declares the GC24, "he recalls the values of the creation and of secular realities; to the laity he recalls the values of total dedication to God for the cause of the Kingdom. To all he offers a particular sensitivity for the world of work, attention to the local environment, and the demands of the professional approach associated with his educative and pastoral activity"⁷⁹.

In him professional techniques, secular fields of work, practical forms of involvement show their basic orientation towards the ultimate good of mankind, especially the young, and towards the Kingdom. "Everything is open to him, even those things which priests cannot do", but everything is placed in the light of the radical love for Christ, polarized in the direction of evangelization and the eternal salvation of the boys.

"The presence of the lay Salesian enriches the apostolic activity of the community. It reminds the priest members of the values inherent in the lay

⁷⁶ cf. GC24 174; C 45

⁷⁷ GC24, 154; cf. 236

⁷⁸ cf. *The Salesian Brother*, Rome 1989, n.119

⁷⁹ GC24, 154

religious vocation and recalls them constantly to an active collaboration with lay people. It also recalls to the salesian priest the vision of an apostolic goal and ideal that is complex in its reality, because it goes beyond priestly and catechetical activity in the strict sense”⁸⁰.

Especially in certain contexts and in face of a certain way of perceiving and conceiving the priest as a sacred or cultist figure, the style of consecration of the salesian brother proclaims in a concrete manner the presence and communication of God in daily life, the importance of becoming disciples before being teachers, the duty of witnessing to a personal experience of faith over and above functional or ministerial commitments.

Certain attitudes, which are taken for granted in the priest, because they are thought to be part of his “job”, are more challenging when they are found in the lay religious too.

The figure of the **salesian priest** combines in itself the gifts of consecration and those of the pastoral ministry. The priesthood has in him a particular expression which stems not only from his specifically priestly identity but also from the fruitful fusion with the salesian apostolic consecration.

Ecclesial reflection has made it clear that the priesthood is not something generic, neither as the exercise of the ministry nor as a grace. Its practice and spirituality are shaped by his specific vocation.

Contributing to the sign have been those who coined for Don Bosco’s biography the title: “A priest educator”, or “A priest for the young”. The charism has given rise to a unique manner of being a priest and of exercising the ministry.

The priest is a sacramental mediation of Christ, to whom the Salesian is conformed in pastoral charity and in the desire to save the souls of the young in an educative context. His word not only reflects the word of Jesus, but shares in it. In the world of education the use of the word takes place in situations and circumstances, themes and forms which are “sui generis”. They range from the homily to personal and friendly conversations, from catechesis to the classroom. He uses the pulpit, the teacher’s desk and the playground. He adopts forms of preaching, of greeting and of giving advice. He brings light to the problems of the young and heals their wounds.

The salesian priest’s activity of coordination and animation is a participation in the pastoral ministry of Jesus and of the Church. He makes

⁸⁰ *The Salesian Brother*, n.133

use of the grace of the latter to unite the community and direct it towards the Father. In the environment and in the educative community such a ministry has requirements, objectives and typical methods.

Nonetheless the service of sanctification has in the field of education, with poor and needy boys and with collaborators, its particular processes which are most significant and fruitful in the sacraments, but are not limited to them. It is all a matter of initiation into the life of Christ.

In the salesian community clerics and laymen build and bear witness to a model brotherhood, eliminating the separation based on roles and ministries through their ability to share different gifts in a single project. This relationship is the source of mutual enrichment and stimulus for a harmonious experience, in which the priesthood does not eclipse the religious identity and the lay characteristic does not conceal the radical nature of the consecration. All this is an antidote to the over-clericalization of the religious priest, which is deplored in some areas of consecrated life, or to the over-secularization of the lay religious.

We shall have to be particularly careful to encourage in priests a sensitivity to the lay dimension in the history of the Church and of salvation, and to foster in brothers an experience which is not generic but nourished by pastoral charity. In this way the grace of unity will be evident in the life of every confrere, in the characteristics of the community, and in the fulfilment of the mission.

In the Congregation there are just over 11,000 priests, all of them raised up by God as educators of the young. What would happen if all of us revived and practised our "typical" priesthood with intensity? And here I am not talking about taking up a ministry outside the setting which has been entrusted to us, but specifically of using all the resources of the priesthood in the youth environment and in the educative community.

Similarly we have a far from indifferent number of consecrated laity: about 2,500 of them. What an influence it could have on the young and on educators if they lived out their lay state to the full in the light of the love of God and their fellowmen! Their significant and credible presence makes clear to the young the values of following Christ and being his disciples, things they frequently identify with the priesthood. "To those who do not feel themselves called to the religious life it offers a more immediate model of the Christian life, of sanctified work, and of the lay apostolate. It provides the

salesian community with a particular apostolic incarnation in the world, and a particular presence in the Church's mission"⁸¹.

5. Some consequences.

What we have been saying has many practical applications in three areas. I refer to them only briefly so as to prompt further reflections.

The first is our **religious community**. The signs of the following of Christ must be evident and recognizable in the primacy we give to the religious spirit and the spiritual life. These are manifested in calm, regular and participated prayer. Nowadays, as we said earlier, convents and monasteries are inviting Catholics and others to an experience of prayer. It was typical of Don Bosco and his Salesians to pray with the young and the ordinary people. It would be interesting if our prayer could be so educative that we could share it, in particular circumstances, with anyone who wanted to join in.

Consecration is also manifested in dedication to a communal work which is well ordered and prepared, and carefully carried out. I was struck when reading the Rule of a religious institute by the following points about work: "It is obedience and a prolongation of the Eucharist and of the Divine Office, and the normal object of our offering; hence it is well prepared, cared for, and carried out with religious zeal"⁸².

Consecration is also shown in evangelical temperance. Today there is a request in many places for a return to daily austerity in the face of the spreading of consumerism, inequality and waste. Temperance embraces all the visible manifestations of the vows. Consecration flourishes especially in unity of spirit and action; it is the sign that Jesus himself recommends to his disciples, the sign that Don Bosco most wanted to see in his communities.

The second area for offering the gifts of consecration is the **educative and pastoral community**, in which it leads to an emphasis on the primacy of spirituality as the principal source of energy for the educator. We frequently say that the preventive system is both spirituality and pedagogy, and that between the two there is so close a connection that it is not possible to give effect to the second unless the first is realized. This conviction corresponds to a statement of Don Bosco: "The practice of this system is wholly based on

⁸¹ *The Salesian Brother*, n.133; cf. GC21, 195

⁸² Little Family of the Annunciation, Document 10/25

the words of St Paul who says: *Love is patient and kind; love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things*⁸³. The preventive system, said the GC24, has a religious soul⁸⁴. It is a pedagogy of the Spirit. The human and professional dimension must be exploited to the full, but all must be leavened by the orientation towards God and the faith.

The third area on which consecration can make itself felt, is the **educative environment**. Here much can be taken up from what we have already said about prophecy. Through word and example young people can see in our life a critique and a pointer: criticism of the excesses of the transgressive mentality, the pursuit of material goods which can impoverish others, purposeless freedom; a proclamation of new and original ways in which the individual can achieve self-realization, the real goods proposed by the Beatitudes, and self-donation as the mainspring of life.

The clearest manifestation of our presence as consecrated persons in educative environments is their pastoral leavening. From the outset the educator aims at revealing the love of God to the young, whatever the starting point and the route to be followed. He does this through an opening up to the faith, preparing the young for a meeting with the living Christ and sustaining a process of growth through catechesis, the sacraments and participation in the Church. A neutral education or one without reference to Christ would have no meaning for us. Our consecration invites us therefore to rethink and realize *evangelizing by educating*.

6. The guide of the consecrated community.

The development of the gifts of consecration and the communication of its riches to the educative community and the young are entrusted to the shared responsibility of the community. The animation of the latter is also shared, but it has in the rector its point of reference and the one bearing the main responsibility. He is at one and the same time the religious Superior, the director of the apostolic work, and the spiritual father of the community.

Much thought has been given to his figure and role, and rightly so, on account of the evolution that has taken place in communities and in the arrangement of activities. Both figure and role matured in Don Bosco himself, who was a rector for a long time and in the most creative phase of his life. Of our Father is remembered in particular his concern for spiritual good, the kindness which inspired his relationships and the wise guidance given to

⁸³ cf. Constitutions SDB (English edtn.) p.248

⁸⁴ cf. GC24, 100 and passim

individuals and groups: three points which characterized his fatherliness. They were expressed in many of his actions and attitudes.

Rightly does our text *The Salesian Rector* note that the first task of the rector is “to stir up in the individual members the awareness of who they are; to bring their abilities and charisms to the fore; to help them to keep alive the spirit of the theological virtues. (...) In other words to create an environment and conditions which will enable every Salesian, in submission to grace, to mature in his vocational identity and reach the fullness of ‘union with God’ so characteristic of Don Bosco. All this presupposes a certain technical ability on the part of the one who must organize and direct the community, but animation is more than this: it is a spirit and even a spiritual art”⁸⁵.

Recent General Chapters have insisted on a “spiritual” animation, able to present once again in contextualized form the motives which are at the basis of our life, in order to foster an ever more conscious and complete response to the Lord. The present situation of our communities, their role in the new operational setup, the need to animate a community of consecrated persons, the insistence on the local community as the place for ongoing formation, all require the Superior to give priority to certain aspects of his service. They are set out well in our Manual, but it is well to read them also in the Synodal text: “The one who presides over the community should be considered, first of all, a master of the spirit who, while exercising a function or ministry of teaching, carries out a true spiritual direction of the community, an authoritative teaching made in the name of Christ, with regard to the Institute’s charisma. He serves God to the extent in which he promotes the authenticity of community life and serves the brethren by helping them to realize their vocation in truth”⁸⁶.

We need to recognize the positive signs there are in the Congregation in this connection, such as the willingness to accept the responsibility of direction often in conditions of scarcity of personnel, the ongoing formation which is going ahead almost everywhere, the new care for the expression of brotherly unity, and interest in understanding possible methods of spiritual direction.

Going back to the points developed in the first part of this letter, I feel it a duty to ask rectors to give animation to consecration, reawakening in the confreres the happy experience of their calling, emphasizing the initiative of God in the life and action of the community, and putting forward the project once again in its various aspects with a deepening of the significance of profession.

⁸⁵ *The Salesian Rector*, Rome 1986, n.105

⁸⁶ Consecrated Life and its mission in the Church and in the world, *Instrumentum laboris*, 59

There are some elements that must be preserved so that no community is without the Word of God, prayer meetings, fellowship in the experience of consecration, and shared responsibility in communal witness and action.

I recall the usefulness of the discernment which leads, in a spirit of sincerity and conversion⁸⁷, to the seeking of the will of God in questions which regard the apostolic project⁸⁸, the life of the community⁸⁹, the gifts and abilities of confreres⁹⁰, vocational clarification⁹¹ and cultural opportunities.

The Constitutions tell us that in line with our traditions, “communities are guided by a member who is a priest, and who by the grace of his priestly ministry and pastoral experience sustains and directs the spirit and activity of his brothers”⁹².

It is not only a juridical requirement, but concerns the substance, ways and means that are associated with the rector’s service of authority. He is asked to dedicate to it all the gifts and energies of his priesthood and to animate specifically as a priest and not just as an expert. For the community and for his educative environment he must be a sacramental mediation of Christ. The religious community and educative environment are the field where the Lord calls him to reap the fruits of his priesthood.

* * *

Every day at the end of meditation we renew our entrustment to Our Blessed Lady, invoking her under two linked titles which sum up salesian history and spirituality: Mary Immaculate and Mary Help of Christians. It is a practice we have continued everywhere with affection and heartfelt devotion.

At the end of these reflections I find myself spontaneously moved to join you in spirit in reciting together this prayer of entrustment.

The Constitutions, following a spiritual tradition, see in this image of Mary the representation of our apostolic consecration: “Mary Immaculate, Help of Christians”, they say, “leads us to the fullness of our offering to the

⁸⁷ cf. C 91

⁸⁸ cf. C 44

⁸⁹ cf. C 66

⁹⁰ cf. C 69

⁹¹ cf. C 107

⁹² C 121

Lord and gives us courage for the service of our brethren”⁹³. The two aspects fuse together in a single movement of charity.

May she teach us to live in these days of ours the unconditional following of Christ and the constant and devoted service of which she is the Mistress and example⁹⁴, and to communicate to the young the joy that is to be found in following Jesus.

⁹³ C 92

⁹⁴ cf. VC, 28