

“MY DEAR SALESIANS, BE SAINTS!”¹

A series of happy coincidences.

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Rome, 14 August 2002

Vigil of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

My dear confreres,

Four months have gone by since the end of the GC25, which was a powerful spiritual and Salesian experience. In your hands you have the Chapter Documents “*The Salesian Community Today*” which – if I may judge from what the confreres who have written to me have said – have been well received by the provinces and are being studied and assimilated with a view to the renewal of our communities. I am now making contact with you through this my first circular letter.

Letter-writing was the form of apostolic practice adopted by St Paul to overcome physical distances and the impossibility of being present among his communities in order to accompany them in their daily lives. With the necessary distinctions, the Rector Major’s letters have the purpose of bringing him closer to the Provinces through communication, and the sharing of what is happening in the Congregation, shedding light on the life and the educative and pastoral practice of the communities. I am writing on the vigil of Mary’s Assumption and two days before the anniversary of the birthday of our Father Don Bosco. I confess that it would give me great pleasure to be with you and to share your present work and dreams for the future; I have particularly at heart the desire to pray for each one of you. May God fill you with his supreme gift, that of the Holy Spirit, to renew you and to sanctify you in the likeness of our Founder, who has been given to us as our model (cf. C 21). May Mary, well versed in matters of the Spirit, teach you how to welcome him and give him room to act, so as to make you fruitful in your apostolic mission and joyful believers in Christ, the Word of the Father.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Address in the audience to the Capitulars*, cf GC25, 170

It is precisely about holiness that I want to speak to you today, following up some of the things I said towards the end of the Chapter, and especially after the audience with the Holy Father and the beatification of Bro. Artemides Zatti, Sister Maria Romero and Fr Luigi Variara. My purpose is not so much to write a brief treatise on holiness, but rather to present it to you as a gift of God and a necessity in the apostolate, and to offer you some reasons and suggest some methods for making its practice easier.

A series of happy coincidences

The fact of being elected at a General Chapter which had as its theme the salesian community, the place for our daily sanctification, and which closed with the “gift of the beatification of three members of the Salesian Family”² – a salesian priest, a salesian brother and a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians – compels me to take up the theme of holiness or, as I said in my closing address to the Chapter, the primacy of God: “God must be our first ‘concern’”.³ The Holy Father, with the call he made to the capitulars during the audience, confirmed by his supreme authority the aim of holiness. He had already reminded us in his message at the opening of the Chapter that “tending to holiness” is the “principal response to the challenges of the contemporary world”, and that “it is a matter not so much of taking up new activities and initiatives as of living and bearing witness to the Gospel without any compromises so as to encourage young people towards holiness”.⁴ And in the audience he summed up his whole message with the strong appeal: “Dear Salesians, be saints! As you well know, holiness is your principal task”.⁵

We have a series of coincidences, which I like to think are not just random events – for a Christian nothing takes place by chance – but part of God’s plan, and hence to be interpreted in a spirit of faith. Why therefore should holiness not become a part of our programme of life and government? This is precisely what I had in mind when I said in my closing address to the Chapter that “holiness is also what the Chapter is handing on when it concludes with the gift of three new *Beati*”.⁶

To be beginning my service in such a clear light is for me an invitation more eloquent than any words of encouragement. It is a reminder of the highest goal to be achieved. It is a message which is certainly demanding, because it points to the “loftiest of objectives” in the absolute sense, while at the same time offering hope and optimism by showing us our many brothers and sisters who have scaled the hill of the Beatitudes. Of them, our blood relatives in the Spirit, we may paraphrase the liturgy and say: “Look not, O Father, on our sins but on the holiness of our family”.

It is because of all these circumstances, so significantly convergent, that I decided to dedicate my first letter to this subject.

1. Holiness, a permanent part of our family heritage

We can never thank God sufficiently for the gift of Saints in our charismatic Family. Ours – the Pope told us – “is a history filled with saints, many of them young people”.⁷ And in the audience he gave, he spoke to us once again of “the numerous Saints and Blessed

² GC25, 137

³ GC25, 191

⁴ GC25, 143

⁵ GC25, 170

⁶ GC25, 196

⁷ GC25, 143

who make up the heavenly host of your protectors”.⁸. This clearly shows that the salesian charism is not only capable of pointing the way to sanctity, but also of attaining the objective if fully lived out, as in fact has already been realized in more than a few of our brothers and sisters.

My predecessors liked to dwell frequently on a panorama of this kind⁹. I too wish to reflect on this our “by no means small band of Saints and Blesseds”,¹⁰ and in remembering them to share with you what I have most at heart.

1.1. Following Don Bosco

Our Saints are certainly the best qualified “witnesses” to our spirituality because they have not only *lived* it but lived it *heroically*. What I find particularly interesting is the fact that in each of them there is embodied a specific aspect of our charism. By emphasizing this they have made the charism more visible, more luminous and more explicit. It became so much a part of them and so profoundly, that they could be described as so many “in depth monographs” of the Founder.

A group of them have even given rise to new religious congregations in the Church, like so many branches of the same tree. In this way they have realized latent potentialities to be found in the same seed. Each of them is therefore outstanding for a particular message.

From the overall picture one can deduce a more authentic and complete view of our spiritual experience. They are different notes that combine to form a harmonious whole. They are notes of great variety: from those better recognized to those less emphasized and hardly noticed; from those, we might say, taken for granted to those considered less common, as though they were foreign to our spirituality. These fresh editions of Don Bosco, officially recognized by the Church, all have every right of citizenship among us. They present him to us for our attention alive and to be cherished. And we, his sons, heirs of such a rich legacy, rejoice in noting in them some particular characteristic which we recognize immediately as a trait of our Father’s.

By way of example I would like to list some original ways of reproducing salesian holiness, the common legacy of the Family:

– *A spirituality that is able to make a synthesis between work and temperance.* Our mind goes to Don Rua, a rare model of self-denial, whose best eulogy was given by Paul VI when he said: “If it be true that Don Rua can be said to be the first one to continue the example and work of Don Bosco, we like to think of him always and venerate him from the ascetic aspect of humility and dependence”.¹¹

– *A spirituality that stems from pastoral charity, that succeeds in making itself loved and manifests the fatherliness of God*.¹² That is how Don Rinaldi is remembered: “Those who approached him – we read in the Acts of the Process – felt that they were in the presence of a true father”.¹³

⁸ GC25, 171

⁹ Cf.: VECCHI JUAN E. *Experts, witnesses and craftsmen of communion*, GC25 363; *The Father consecrates us and sends us*, GC25, 365; *Sanctity and martyrdom at the dawn of the third millennium*, AGC 368; *Towards the 25th General Chapter*, AGC 372; *The beatification of Artemides Zatti*, AGC 376; VIGANÒ EGIDIO *Replanning sanctity together*, ASC 303; *Don Bosco the Saint*, ASC 310; *Don Rinaldi, witness and interpreter of the salesian charism*, AGC 332; RICCIERI LUIGI *Don Rua recalls us to holiness*, ASC 263.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, GC25, 171

¹¹ PAUL VI, Homily at the Beatification, 29.09.1972

¹² Cf. C 10, 11; GC24, 90

¹³ *Summarium*, n. 425

– *A spirituality expressed through humility and hard work* and which becomes an unequivocal sign of the logic of God, so contrary to that of the world.¹⁴ Of this Mary Domenica Mazzarello was the shining example.

– *A spirituality of daily life and work.*¹⁵ This panorama includes the *lay dimension*, both consecrated and non-consecrated. In the first group we can think immediately of the two figures of the “Good Samaritan”, Simon Srugi and Artemides Zatti. For the non-consecrated lay dimension our thoughts go to the first of the Cooperators – Mamma Margaret – whose figure, ever more attractive, is a fruitful source of devotion and special graces.

– *A spirituality that harmonizes contemplation with activity*¹⁶. This brings to mind the figure of the recently beatified Sister Maria Romero Meneses, the animator of 36 Oratories and of a series of pastoral institutions which came into being with unexpected speed and achieved the status of landmarks; or Attilio Giordani, a splendid model of the Salesian Cooperator, a powerful source of initiatives among his oratory members.

– *A spirituality of relationships and of the family spirit, which invests everything with joy and happiness*¹⁷. Here we may think of Don Cimatti: “At his approach – said one forthright witness – the very walls seemed to smile”.

– *A well balanced spirituality.* This takes our thoughts to Don Quadrio, an irresistible source of attraction for his clerics and a wonderful combination of gifts of nature and of grace.

– *A spirituality that takes on the dimension of sacrifice.* Here one need only read the biographies of Don Beltrami, Don Czartoryski, and Don Variara to see how they made of suffering the royal road of their sanctification, even – as in the case of Variara – a new Congregational charism. By contemplating the suffering Don Bosco, they were led to “desire” the cross and derive from it interior joy.

– And finally we cannot fail to emphasize the already numerous group of our **martyrs** – confreres, sisters and young people! – whose Beatification has marked the end and the beginning of the two centuries. Proud at having attained more than a hundred years of life, the Salesian Family is happy to have more than a hundred martyrs (today they number 111)¹⁸, and on this account feels a certain responsibility: *martyrdom*, the shedding of one’s blood, and also the gift of one’s life in daily sacrifice, *goes naturally with the salesian spirit*. Do we understand the significance of this gift? Are we able to accept its consequences? In the homily on Sunday, 11 March 2001, when he beatified 233 Spanish martyrs, 32 of them Salesians, the Holy Father said: “At the beginning of the third millennium, the pilgrim Church in Spain is called to live a new springtime of Christianity”.¹⁹ Why should not we also count on the incomparable help of our martyrs so as to fill with hope our apostolic initiatives and our pastoral efforts in the not always easy task of the new evangelization?”²⁰ For us Salesians too must be verified the saying: *Sanguis martyrurum, semen christianorum*. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians!²¹ Let us not be discouraged therefore in the face of difficulties: we are facing the future in good company!

¹⁴ FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Working document for 21st General Chapter (Rome 2002)*, p.46

¹⁵ Cf. GC24, 97-98

¹⁶ GC23, 167-168

¹⁷ Cf. GC23, 165-166; GC24, 91-93

¹⁸ 95 in Spain, 14 in Poland, 2 in China

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, in *Oss. Rom.* 12-13 March 2002, p. 6-7

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ Tertulliano, *Apol* 50, 13: *CCL* 1, 171.

These are the petals of our holiness which – thankfully through them – provides a convincing stimulus in the broad array of ages, ways of life and of service, of times and messages, of ethnic and cultural differences. “Underlying such a diversity of origin, states of life, role and level of education, and geographical provenance there is a single inspiration: salesian spirituality. This can indeed be presented in doctrinal form, but there is an advantage in recounting it through biographies, which bring its characteristics much closer to the circumstances of daily life”.²²

1.2. *Our sanctification, a gift and a challenge*

The brothers and sisters we have mentioned above represent a form of sanctity already attained and fixed for ever at the point of growth they have reached. Our holiness, on the other hand, is still in the process of development. They have followed a course and have reached the goal, By knowing something of their life and following the same path, we too learn how to correspond with God’s grace and his gift of holiness. Each of them is an example of the different patterns of salesian life, and of their certain success. I wonder if – and to what extent – they influence our earthly pilgrimage.

The brothers and sisters who have reached the goal assure us that holiness is possible; but above all they show us different and fascinating ways of achieving it. Cannot we on our part find the way best suited to our own possibilities, the one best suited to our personal situation, the one in greatest harmony with our state of life? It is my hope that we may be able to fulfil what is stated in our Rule of Life: “The confreres who are living or have lived to the full the gospel project of the Constitutions are for us a stimulus and help on the path to holiness”.²³

From the life of our Saints we learn three important truths, which we must make our own:

– Our sanctification is “*the essential task*” of our life, in the words of the Pope, If we attain this, we shall have attained everything; if we fail to do so, all is lost, as is said of charity (cf. 1 Cor 13, 1-8), the very essence of holiness.

Against the tendency to spiritual mediocrity, we need to endorse anew each day the priority of this goal of our sanctification, which is nothing less than the “high standard of ordinary Christian living” indicated by John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.²⁴ “God must be our first concern” – he reminded the members at the beginning of the Chapter. “He it is who sends us forth and entrusts young people to us. . . . God is waiting for us in the young in order to give us the grace of an encounter with himself”.²⁵ If our life is enlightened by this desire it has *everything*, despite its privations; but if this incentive grows weak, our pilgrimage becomes colourless, and the effort to follow it is useless, despite an apparent effectiveness.

– Sanctification is a *gift of God*. The initiative is and always remains his: the certainty that we can change our life is rooted in the certainty of being already transformed into him, on account of which holiness is – in the words of Card. Suenens – “an assumption before being an ascension”.²⁶

“There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of

²² AGC 368, p. 13

²³ C 25

²⁴ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI), 31

²⁵ GC25, 191

²⁶ *Lo Spirito Santo nostra speranza*, Ed. Paoline, p. 88

course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that ‘without Christ we can do nothing’ (cf. *Jn 15:5*).²⁷

In sanctity the primacy of God shines unchallenged: holiness is never a personal project to be planned and carried out in line with times, methods and options decided by ourselves; more than a generic desire of God, it is his will expressed for each of us (1 Thess 4,3); a pure grace, always a gift, that we cannot acquire by ourselves, but neither can we reject it without serious consequences. God has created us good, indeed even very good (cf. Gen 1,26-31), and has seen us as holy “before the world was created” (Eph 1,4); but it remains for us to do our part: we can help God to complete in us his creative work if we allow him to realize his wonderful and highly original design in us. More than this is not asked of us; but neither is anything less.

– For us Salesians, holiness is built on the daily response, as the expression and fruit of the spirituality and asceticism of “*da mihi animas cetera tolle*”. God, the source of all holiness, cannot fail on his side. It is our response that needs continual stimulation because, as St Francis de Sales says: “Even though the source may be abundant, the water enters a garden not in proportion to its quantity but only according to the breadth, great or small, of the channel which allows it to enter”.²⁸

Hence the indispensable need for mortification, i.e. the death of everything that shuts off our being from the gift; everything in us that puts God in second place does not deserve our care or attention. Ours is a paschal existence; the path towards Easter – as we know very well – passes necessarily by way of Calvary (cf. Mt 16, 21-23): he who was raised to life had first been crucified. For the Christian, therefore, mortification is not an objective but a means; it is not the goal but the way to it; we do not need to look for it, but it cannot be avoided.

Our Saints are a living testimony to such a desire for holiness and to a journey of this kind towards life and resurrection. In this connection I recall some expressions of Blessed Maria Romero: “Take from me, O Lord, everything you have given me in the past and give me nothing more in the future, but grant me the grace to live each day united more intimately to you in an uninterrupted act of love, abandonment and trust without losing your presence for even an instant”.²⁹ “O God whom I adore, to love you, make you loved and see you loved by others is all I desire and yearn for, my ambition, my concern and obsession”.³⁰

2. We are educators to holiness

Since, as Salesians, we can never separate our identity as religious from that as educators, nor our religious consecration from the apostolic mission, anything we say about our sanctification necessarily implies a plan of holiness for our young people. For us too “the pastoral path is that of holiness”.³¹

The Pope wanted to remind us that “holiness is the best guarantee of an efficacious evangelization, because in it is to be found the most important testimony to offer to young people, the ones for whom you carry out your various activities.”³² The Holy

²⁷ NMI, n. 38

²⁸ ST FRANCIS DE SALES, *Treatise on the love of God, bk II, ch. 11*.

²⁹ GRASSIANO Domenica, *Con Maria tutta a tutti come Don Bosco*, p. 228

³⁰ o.c. p. 417

³¹ Cf. NMI, 30. “stressing holiness remains more than ever an urgent pastoral task.”

³² JOHN PAUL II, *Address in the audience to the Capitulars* cf. GC25, 170

Father's words seem a paraphrase of what our Constitutions say in the article we quoted earlier: "The witness of such holiness, achieved within the salesian mission, reveals the unique worth of the beatitudes and is the most precious gift we can offer to the young".³³

To sanctify ourselves, therefore, not least in view of the sanctification of our young people, and to grow in the Spirit in view of the same growth in them by becoming ever more and better educators to holiness, able to place sanctity as the explicit objective of our educative and pastoral programs, is for us a compelling duty. The Holy Father asked a similar question: "Can holiness ever be planned?" And he replied: "I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness".³⁴ These are words that should appear particularly significant to our hearts as educators.

"Diligent educators and skilled spiritual guides as you are", the Pope tells us again, "you will know how to meet with young people who long to see *Jesus*. You will know how to lead them with gentle firmness along the demanding paths of Christian fidelity".³⁵ "Salesians for the third millennium! May you be enthusiastic teachers and guides, saints and formers of saints, as was Don Bosco".³⁶

Within such a program, the first conviction to take on board is that holiness is accessible to all and is the "most excellent way"³⁷ to follow. In fact for Paul the love-feast is first and foremost the indispensable element for the building of the Church, and its superiority derives from the fact that it will never end and that it makes us like to God who is Love.

2.1. Holiness, the aim of salesian education

We are all called to holiness. It is the vocation of all human life – as we are all aware – which in Baptism is made capable for such an objective. "All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love".³⁸ Paul VI once said that the proclamation of the vocation of all baptized persons to sanctity "is the most characteristic element of the entire teaching of the Council, and its ultimate purpose, so to speak".³⁹

Later John Paul II was able to say to all the Church in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard* of ordinary Christian living".⁴⁰ It is a text which re-echoes St Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians⁴¹ and which the GC23 had taken as a guideline when speaking of the goal of the education of young people to the faith: "To promote the growth of the young to the fullness of life *after the measure of Christ the perfect man*, is the goal of salesian work".⁴²

Sometimes this may still appear somewhat extraordinary, either not in line with the present day or not appropriate for everyone, but it is very much appreciated by those who take their life seriously. To quote a writer whose opinion may well be shared by many confreres and lay people seriously committed to their Christian maturing: "I have passed

³³ C 25

³⁴ NMI, 30-31

³⁵ Message of the Pope at the beginning of the GC25, GC25, 141

³⁶ GC25, 143

³⁷ 1 Cor 12, 31b

³⁸ LG, 40

³⁹ PAUL VI, *Sanctitas clarior*, 19.1.1969

⁴⁰ NMI, 31

⁴¹ Cf. Eph 4, 13b

⁴² GC23, 160

an important spiritual milestone: I have come to consider holiness not as a luxury but as the sole possibility for our life on earth".⁴³

Our educative and pastoral project offers a plan of spirituality: "The journey of education to the faith reveals progressively to young people an *original plan of Christian life* and helps them to understand its implications. The youngster learns a new way of being a believer in the world and arranges his life around certain perceptions of faith, choices of values and gospel attitudes: he lives a spirituality".⁴⁴

Such a demanding project awakens unsuspected resources in the young. The desire and attraction of the human heart no longer turns to mediocrity but to the "high quality" of life, and the latter – before being an imperative from without – is an internal demand of human nature which, though wounded by sin, still feels the echo of the primordial state preceding original sin. It is from this original and shared holiness that stem consuming desires and incessant nostalgia in man.

Those who walk more radically in this direction – the Saints – prompt a deep and mysterious nostalgia in us, because they send us back to the roots of our being and lead us to understand instinctively that we are all made for this path of surpassing excellence. To follow up such nostalgia is the source of true greatness and becomes the source of unsuspected energy.

This is true also and to a greater extent for young people. It is precisely at their age that they begin to feel the fascination of demanding and challenging values even though subsequently, and especially in today's circumstances, they discover their own frailty. It is up to us, "educators of young people to holiness",⁴⁵ to make use and help in the development of this craving that is in all of them. To us "is entrusted the task of being educators and evangelizers of the young people of the third millennium".⁴⁶ We cannot conceal from our youngsters the fact that aiming at holiness satisfies their deepest aspirations and responds to their desire for happiness. Let us follow the example of John Paul II, who at Toronto told them with evangelical courage: "Do not wait until you are older before venturing on the way of holiness! Holiness is always young, just as eternal is the youthfulness of God".⁴⁷ In this way we shall be following the example of Don Bosco himself, who was convinced that young people can become holy, and that few ideals can be put to them more attractive than that of becoming saints. "Be welcoming and fatherly", John Paul II exhorts us, "ready at every opportunity and in every situation to ask young people *through your way of living*: 'Do you want to become a saint?'" (italics mine).⁴⁸

Don Bosco, successful educator that he was, was never afraid to point to high ideals. Let us therefore "keep our eyes fixed on Don Bosco".⁴⁹

It can be said that the origin of the holiness of Dominic Savio began when he heard Don Bosco explain in a sermon that holiness was within the reach of everyone. Allow me to quote, even though it be rather lengthy, the relevant text from the *Biographical Memoirs*, because it reveals to us on the one hand the educative skill of Don Bosco who was able to suggest lofty ideals even to boys, and on the other hand the every-day nature of the model of sanctity, which made it feasible for all.

⁴³ Henri d'Hellencourt, in *Diario di Bordo*

⁴⁴ GC23, 158

⁴⁵ GC25, 143

⁴⁶ GC25, 146

⁴⁷ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, Toronto. Oss.Rom. 29-30 July 2002, p.5

⁴⁸ GC25, 143

⁴⁹ GC25, 144

“One Sunday Don Bosco spoke about becoming a saint, stressing three points which made a deep impression on Savio’s receptive soul: it is God’s will that we become saints; it is quite easy to do so; there is a great reward in heaven for one who becomes a saint. Dominic later told Don Bosco: “I feel a deep yearning, an earnest need, to become a saint. I never knew it could be so easy, but now I see that one can be happy and holy too, I definitely want to become a saint”.

Don Bosco praised his resolve and showed him that the first thing God wanted of him was a *constant moderate cheerfulness*. He advised him to *carry out his scholastic and religious duties diligently and always to join in the games of his companions at recreation*. At the same time he forbade austere penances or long prayers as unsuitable to a boy of his age.

Savio obeyed, but one day Don Bosco saw him very dejected. “I really do not know what to do!” the boy complained. “The Lord says that unless I do penance I cannot get to heaven, and you won’t let me do any. What are my chances for heaven?”

“The penance Our Lord asks of you is obedience”, Don Bosco replied. “Just obey, and you will be doing enough”.⁵⁰

2.2. An educative process in the light of salesian spirituality

The text just quoted shows that sanctity is a process which develops within a spiritual experience. The latter provides the climate, the road, the nourishment. A spirituality is a particular and concrete way towards holiness. We have *our own youthful spirituality*. It is a spirituality that puts the young people at the center but is nevertheless for everyone, especially for the lowly and those in need. Today we enjoy a sufficiently systematic understanding of such a spirituality, thanks to the studies that have been done. We need think only of what has been said by the GC23, by the GC24, and by Fr Vecchi who made it the subject of a retreat and spoke of it also in various meetings of the Salesian Youth Movement.⁵¹

It may be useful, I think, to recall its essential elements:

– *A spirituality of daily life*. I like to emphasize the privileged setting occupied by humble daily life, because this was one of the ideas Don Bosco liked best. “All his life Don Bosco set young people on the road to a simple, serene and happy form of holiness, bringing together in a single vital experience the playground, serious study, and a constant sense of duty”.⁵²

He never had much sympathy with exceptional gestures, but always pointed out to his boys the royal road of each one doing his duty, convinced that if this be done with love and joy it contains all that is necessary for spiritual growth. We know that this personal approach he had derived from other specialists. Going back to St Francis de Sales – an apostle of the universal call to holiness for all ages and categories of persons – he liked to emphasize a preference for what God gives us, rather than what we choose for ourselves. His “ask for nothing and refuse nothing” contains a valid educative truth and valuable theological wisdom. His insistence on love, which is like the contents in respect of the container, was echoed with the same insistence by Don Bosco the educator, in contrast to us who are sometimes more concerned about the form of things to the detriment of the substance.

⁵⁰ MB V, p. 209

⁵¹ Cf. VECCHI Juan, “*Andate oltre*”, Temi di spiritualità giovanile, Elledici. Torino, 2002

⁵² GC23, 166

– *A delicate pedagogical wisdom*. As regards aiming at holiness, Don Bosco showed himself to be a true educator, a master. He spoke explicitly of holiness to Dominic Savio because the boy was already capable of understanding it since he had already used the word himself. To Michael Magone on the other hand, at the station of Carmagnola, he said: “Listen, come to the Oratory; there you can study and play, and you will find companions”.

This means that it is important for us educators to know that there is a happy path of holiness that can satisfy the expectations of a young heart, and so we must be able to suggest it to every member of our school, youth center or oratory with suitable words. There will be some groups of young oratorians where we can speak expressly of holiness or vocation, knowing that they will understand us. In other cases we shall have to begin from square one by breaking down a previous mentality, purifying it from false ideas about God, or knocking down the previously created idols they are trying to reproduce in their lives.

The most important thing is that as educators we are conscious of the fact that God is calling everyone to holiness, i.e. to give him a joyful response which is a path that can be followed, in the knowledge that we must follow it with our youngsters, starting from their present situation: “the paths to holiness are personal”.⁵³ And so they call for “a genuine training in holiness adapted to people's needs”,⁵⁴ on which we must reflect as Salesians and try out various forms of support⁵⁵. We may recall that Don Bosco's first step was to invite the boys to the oratory on Sundays to enjoy themselves with many companions. This was his first call to the “holiness of joy” and to a holy life.

From the early years of his priesthood Don Bosco recognized instinctively that it was possible to accompany the boys to the fullness of Christian life according to their age, through a kind of youthful spirituality organized around some key-ideas open to the faith, in line certainly with his times but prophetic as well and promoted with enthusiasm and educative skill. A decisive factor in this was, precisely, the ability to involve the youngsters themselves in the enterprise, and thus make them the first beneficiaries as well as being real protagonists. The youngsters themselves helped Don Bosco “to begin, in the context of everyday experience, a new style of holiness tailored to the typical requirements of a boy's development. In this way they were to some extent *both pupils and teachers at the same time*”.⁵⁶ Ours is a holiness both *for* and *with the young*, because in the search for holiness “Salesians and youngsters walk side by side”:⁵⁷ either we sanctify ourselves with them, walking and learning with them in their company, or we shall not become saints at all.

The stages of this process have all been clearly defined. The GC23, in particular, has presented them to us in a synthetic and stimulating manner, inviting us to organize the life of the youngsters around them and insisting with them on the choice of evangelical values and attitudes. I mention this as a reminder and strongly invite you to take up the document itself and read its analysis more deeply:⁵⁸

- A basis of *practical realism centred on daily life*, which is the setting for recognizing God's presence and discovering his tireless activity, as I said earlier. “In our salesian experience we have an intuition which is both joyful and fundamental, i.e.

⁵³ NMI, 31

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid*

⁵⁶ GC23, 159

⁵⁷ Message of the Pope at the beginning of the GC25, GC25, 145

⁵⁸ GC23, 158-180

that *there is no need to detach oneself from normal life* in order to seek the Lord".⁵⁹ This is why Don Bosco frequently spoke of the "religious sense of duty" at the different moments of the day;

- an *attitude of hope mingled with joy*. "I want to teach you", he said in the opening words of the *Companion of Youth* – "a way of Christian life that can make you (...) happy and content".⁶⁰ To offer young people the possibility of experiencing life as festivity and faith as happiness is certainly "a style of holiness that could prove surprising to some experts in spirituality and pedagogy, concerned that it could lead to a playing down of gospel demands and educational obligations. But for Don Bosco the source of joy is the life of grace which obliges the youngster to undertake a difficult apprenticeship in asceticism and kindness."⁶¹
- a *strong and personal friendship with Christ the Risen Lord* (cf. C 34). "It is he who enables man to find his identity by the very measure of God"⁶². "Is not Christ the secret of true freedom and profound joy of heart? Is not Christ the supreme friend and the teacher of all genuine friendship? If Christ is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross".⁶³ "In contact with the Risen Lord youngsters acquire a more intense love for life";⁶⁴ once arrived at a relationship of close friendship, which is more than simple admiration and impractical empathy, they deepen their knowledge and adherence to the person of Christ and his cause; they open up to the radical demands of the Gospel and respond with commitment and generosity.

To reach this friendly relationship personal prayer is needed, that is centred on listening to the Word which helps to mature "the vision of faith, learning to look at reality and events through the eyes of God, to the point of having 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16)"⁶⁵. Don Bosco, in particular, thought up a "pedagogy of holiness" giving pride of place to "the educative influence of Reconciliation of Penance and the Eucharist";⁶⁶ these, in fact, provide "means of exceptional value for education to Christian liberty, to conversion of heart and to a spirit of sharing and service in the ecclesial community" (C 36);

- an ever more responsible and courageous *sense of membership of the Church*, both local and universal. Supported by the relationship that grows up between persons who find in Christ a common friend and the one and only Saviour, "the young people in salesian environments feel a great need to be together",⁶⁷ to make community and become "an effective sign of the Church they want to build together".⁶⁸ "What does this mean in practice? (...) It indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. (...) It means also an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith (...) as "those who

⁵⁹ GC23, 162

⁶⁰ Cf. MB III, p. 9

⁶¹ GC23, 165

⁶² X Symposium of Bishops of Europe; final message 2,a

⁶³ NMI, 9

⁶⁴ GC23, 168

⁶⁵ *Starting afresh from Christ*, Instruction of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, 19.05.2002, n. 24

⁶⁶ GC23, 173

⁶⁷ GC23, 169

⁶⁸ GC23, 170

are a part of me". This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship";⁶⁹

- a *practical commitment to good works*, in line with one's own social responsibilities and the material and spiritual needs of others. The Pope asked us to help young people "to be in their turn apostles of their friends and those of their own age".⁷⁰ "The history of youth at the Oratory during Don Bosco's own lifetime is rich in this apprenticeship to the Christian life: to be always of service to others, and this even in an extraordinary manner at times".⁷¹ Service to one's neighbour is a measure of progress in personal holiness, and this in the face of so many needs awakens "a new 'creativity' in charity not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by "getting close" to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters".⁷²
- "Salesian youth spirituality reserves a special place for the person of Mary,"⁷³ whose *motherly presence* redounds throughout the whole process and inspires all its phases. "She is the living representative of the laborious but happy journey of every individual and of all humanity towards its fulfillment. In her the path of everyone meets that of God. She is therefore the key for interpretation, a model, a type and a journey".⁷⁴ Our Lady has, in fact, an exceptional power in the education of the sons of God and the disciples of Christ Jesus: where there is the mother of Jesus the disciples become believers (Jn 2, 1-11) and succeed in being faithful (Jn 19, 25-27).

3. Holiness flourishes in the Community

We have just finished a General Chapter centred entirely on the theme of Community. Looking in a brief manner at what we had done in two months of work, I summed up the community process traced out in the five working guidelines:

"The capitular text concerning the community is directed to the salesian community as the principal subject. By taking it on, the latter is invited to give willing acceptance to the call of God that comes through historical and ecclesial events, the indications of the Word of God and of our Rule of life, the appeals of young people and the needs of the laity and of the Salesian Family. The community then examines more deeply its own situation and discovers its own availability and resistances, its resources and lack of them, its possibilities and limitations. It learns moreover to recognize fundamental challenges and face them with hope and courage; it can put to itself appropriate questions that demand a reply. Finally, the community considers the practical guidelines that have been given, and decides on the conditions needed for putting them into effect".⁷⁵

3.1. Re-echoing the GC25

The community is truly the cradle and crucible of our sanctification. I want to emphasize that individual and community holiness have an influence on each other. If it is right to expect a community to help and sustain its members in their unceasing search for

⁶⁹ NMI, 43

⁷⁰ GC25, 145

⁷¹ GC23, 179

⁷² NMI, 50

⁷³ GC23, 177

⁷⁴ GC23, 157

⁷⁵ Address at the closing of the GC25, GC25, 184

God, it is also true that the individual members by their personal holiness enable such an objective to be attained.

Fr Vecchi spoke very well about this in his well known letter “*Experts, Witnesses and Craftsmen of Communion*”, when he described that of Valdocco as our model of community: “It is a *community highly charged spiritually*, characterized by “*Da mihi animas*”. Don Bosco shaped his first collaborators, with simplicity and tangibility, according to the program: work, prayer and temperance. He asked them to carry out a ‘work of charity’ for the benefit of their neighbour. Love of Jesus Christ and trust in his grace was what lay behind his concern for the good of the boys, beginning with their human and spiritual needs. Even the most abandoned were helped to make contact with God and the Church, and those who showed particular dispositions were led explicitly towards holiness. The nearness of God and the presence of Mary most Holy were almost sensibly felt”.⁷⁶

His educative and evangelizing mission for the benefit of the young led Don Bosco to create a school of spirituality, in which “holiness was built up together; it was shared and mutually communicated, in such a way that the holiness of some (the youngsters) cannot be explained without the holiness of others (the Salesians)”.⁷⁷

And Fr Vecchi continues: “To build and enjoy this climate of *shared holiness* is something to which consecrated persons are committed. The religious community is the setting for an experience of God. Everything is thought out with this in mind and with a view to this end. ‘The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the Families of consecrated life... Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment’ (VC 93)”.⁷⁸

The GC25 took up the same theme again and very specifically in the second scheme “Evangelical witness”, emphasizing the primacy of God, the following of Christ and the grace of unity: “We live this option in the certainty that it contributes to the building of an *alternative model* for humanity and the human family, in the perspective of Christian hope. In this way we respond to God’s gift with a *personal and community process of holiness* towards full maturity in Christ, by means of which we become a sign and prophecy of the ultimate values of the Kingdom of God in the spirit of the Beatitudes”.⁷⁹

Seen in this light, the expression “the community is the privileged setting for ongoing formation” could be better understood if reformulated as “the community is the privileged setting for growth in holiness”, so as to make it more clearly understood what the community is for us and what is meant by ongoing formation.

3.2. The stimulus of our recent Beati

If we look again at our Saints, we are at once struck by the contribution they offered to the communities in which they had been placed by obedience. Many examples of this could be given, but I will limit myself to our last three Beati, to point out the distinguishing traits of each of them which converge on the aim of building the community: “they are three splendid models of the holiness we want to live in our communities and to offer to the young people of the present day”.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ AGC 363, p. 17

⁷⁷ CG24, 104

⁷⁸ AGC 363, p. 24-25

⁷⁹ GC25, 25

⁸⁰ GC25, 168

Blessed Artemides Zatti

Although he had a task that could well have taken him away from community life, he has been described as one of those who took part in it most, beginning with his prompt presence at all community activities. I quote from the "*Positio*" prepared for the Cause of Beatification: "Often in a religious community, whoever takes care of externs has a tendency to be absent from one's confreres, but Zatti was closely integrated into his community. He was unfailingly present at the practices of piety, at meals and at community meetings, As infirmarian he used to look after both confreres and young people, and was above all else a contributor to spiritual union and fraternity".⁸¹

He was a source of optimism and serene joy, among his confreres first of all and then among his sick patients. He was an excellent intermediary between the salesian institution and the various lay groups of doctors and nurses. In short he felt himself a member of the community, even at times when others could have felt themselves let down, as when the hospital had to be demolished. We read in fact in a letter he wrote to his sister Ildegard at Bahia Blanca: "With the demolition of the hospital at the centre, next to the church, to make way for the Bishop's residence, we have been transferred body and soul to the Agricultural School, *where we find ourselves in an earthly paradise*, and when the planned changes which are just beginning are completed there will not be either a hospital or a sanctuary better than ours! Let us give our heartfelt thanks to God".⁸²

Blessed Luigi Variara

He made out of difficulties a path to success, and infused the same spirit into his Sisters. His attitude in the face of contradictions was exemplary, to the extent that he called *Paradise* what the Provincial referred to as a *bit of hell*, and he said he was in very good health on the very day that his Rector wrote to the Provincial expressing concern in that connection, and while in addition there were clashes going on at the time in Agua de Dios between armed groups. Fr Variara wrote at the time: "The work is going ahead only slowly because there are no workmen available. For two weeks there has been no progress, and now it is raining as well. The workmen who remain are so afraid that they clear off at the first sign of danger.. and so things go on... . Here, nonetheless we are all fine and content so that it seems like Paradise. May the Lord help us with his blessings, because with all this work we do not get a moment's rest. *I have never felt so happy to be a Salesian as during this past year, and I bless the Lord for having sent me to this leper colony, where I have learned never to lose my happiness and peace of mind. May the Sacred Heart bless me always and I will do my best to do whatever he wants of me*".⁸³.

Without any doubt his greatest trial came when he received an obedience to leave Agua de Dios; it was then that he showed how he could renounce himself to unite himself to the will of God. It was in that circumstance that he confided to a confrere: "Look, Joseph, it will kill me to leave Agua de Dios, but I shall obey".⁸⁴ And in fact he did obey the order of his superior.

Fr Variara was a Founder while continuing to be a Salesian: two roles that might seem incompatible, with the temptation to adopt attitudes of autonomy. But he always remained loyal to his Rector and Provincial, even though at times they greatly misunderstood him.

Blessed Maria Romero

⁸¹ *Positio*, p. 253

⁸² *Positio*, p. 182

⁸³ *Positio*, p. 88

⁸⁴ *Positio*, p. 151

Her huge number of activities never became an excuse for keeping her from the life of the community. Right from the novitiate she showed she had a gift which was to prove very useful within the community: a positive view of all the Sisters.

She used to say to Sister Anna Maria: “How happy I was in the novitiate. All the Sisters seemed to me to be so many saints, especially my novice-mistress. What a great deal I owe her! How pure a soul, so observant of poverty, so delicate and understanding. When I think about her, I see her as a true saint: her dignified bearing and her air of recollection reflected her constant union with God. The advice she gave was always consistent with her own actions. Her correct manner of speaking was impressive, as also was her self-control and piety. She always wore a loving smile but nevertheless she never let pass in us anything that was not as it should be. Her example was a lesson in itself”.⁸⁵ With such a way of looking at things we can easily imagine what her relationship was with all the Sisters.

4. An invitation to revision

We started from the joyful certainty that we are all called to holiness. We have applied this to ourselves, because it is a challenge to our sense of responsibility. We have applied it to our young people because as educators we can point out to them this objective, arduous though it may be to attain it, in the conviction that we are offering a program of blessedness that can help them to make their choices and life-plans. And finally we have applied it to the community: the setting par excellence in which the process of our sanctification takes place, convinced as we are that “our future vitality depends on our ability to create communities that are significantly charismatic today”, and that “the essential basis for this is a renewed commitment to holiness”.⁸⁶

I repeat here what I said at the conclusion of the General Chapter: “Holiness is the demanding way that together we want to follow in our communities; it is ‘the most precious gift we can offer to the young’ (C 25); it is the highest goal that, with courage, we can set for all. Only in an atmosphere of holiness that is lived and experienced will the young people have the possibility of making courageous life choices, of discovering God’s plan for their future, of appreciating and welcoming the gift of vocations of special consecration”.⁸⁷

Our names are written in heaven

I invite you now to fix your gaze on the high-fliers. Above us the sky is studded with them. As we look at them we can all say with perfect truth that our names too are written in the book of life (cf. Acts 13,8; 17,8). By imitating them let us make ourselves effective educators, leading our young people along the lofty paths of holiness, prophetically directed in a particular way to those who seem the most unresponsive and indifferent.

4.1. Recognizing the need to be practical

It is useful from a pedagogical standpoint to insist on a touch of realism and submit ourselves to some practical self-examination with regard to daily life and ask some direct questions about our experience. This is precisely what we did in the last General Chapter;

⁸⁵ GRASSIANO Domenica, *Con Maria tutta a tutti come Don Bosco*, p. 40-41

⁸⁶ PASCUAL CHÁVEZ, Presentation, “The salesian community today” AGC 378 (2002), p. 20

⁸⁷ GC25, 196

in fact in each of the schemes there are questions to be answered. This is a way to ensure that the community becomes aware of its own situation, recognizes the challenges and learns to find the appropriate solutions with courage and hope.

I would like the theme of holiness, and that of the letters that will follow, to prompt a revision of life and to foster its application in a more practical manner. This can be done individually or also as a community. If those involved wish to do so, and it would be desirable, this could be done in an open community discussion.

I will try to list some questions directly linked with what I have already said:

Holiness and the personal plan of life

- *Do I feel that I am called by God and by the young to become holy? If I have given up this plan of God, what have been the reasons? If I am still serious about it, what am I doing to bring it about?*
- *What is my attitude regarding the ranks of Saints in our Family? What relationship do I have with these Family models? Do I know them sufficiently? Do I draw inspiration from their lives?*

Holiness and common life

- *Am I convinced that “the first educative service that the young need from us is the witness of a fraternal life”,⁸⁸ that “it is the eloquence of holiness that makes our mission fruitful”,⁸⁹ and that, finally, holiness “is the most valuable gift we can offer to the young” (C 25)? What can we do to make holiness the primary objective in the common plan of life?*
- *In the community to which I belong are our Saints remembered? Do we make good pastoral use of their feasts? Are there any updating initiatives in this regard?*

Holiness and apostolic mission

- *What value do I give to these “burning words” in my educative and pastoral service? And in particular in my activities among the young?*
- *Do I believe that holiness, i.e. a high standard of Christian life, is the goal to which God is calling every youngster? Do I speak to young people appropriately and offer practical and adequate suggestions?*

4.2. A revision that becomes prayer

“Dear Salesians, be holy!”. “Be enthusiastic teachers and guides, saints and formers of saints, as was St John Bosco”. Let us accept the Pope’s summons, entrusting to these prophets of the future – who are the Saints – the period following the Chapter through which we are now living, and from which we hope to derive a powerful thrust for a better future, where the primacy of God will shine in us with greater clarity and we may share with him his great concern for the world.

“We cannot fail to believe deeply in a reality and accompany it with prayer and sacrifice without it gradually growing among us. This is how Don Bosco lived!”.⁹⁰ When we consider the many great things the Lord has already done, the wonders worked in the Salesian Family, we can easily imagine what he will still do in the future, if he finds us well disposed and with an open heart.

⁸⁸ GC25, 7

⁸⁹ FMA, Working Document for 21st General Chapter, p. 48

⁹⁰ Card. Eduardo MARTÍNEZ SOMALO, GC25, 150

This loving design of God strongly invites us to prayer.

My Lord and my God! Thank you for calling us to share in your own divine life through the pouring of your love into our hearts. What wonders you have worked throughout the history of mankind and of the Church, by raising up men and women who have reached so exalted a level of maturity. You have caused them to flourish also in the salesian garden, beginning with Don Bosco and continuing with the ranks of holy men and women who have made of the salesian vocation a path for the perfecting in love, martyrs who have borne witness to Christ by cruel deaths, and young people who have found in salesian education a way of holiness.

I bless you, Lord, for the confreres and members of the Salesian Family who continue to believe in you, listen to your Word, and remain open to the action of your Spirit. They are a sign of your love for the young, and particularly those who have greater need to experience that you are close to them, that you are concerned about them, and that you want them to be happy. I praise you for the vocations you continue to sow in the field of the world, for the families that foster them and for the communities that make them grow.

I thank you, Father, for allowing us to live in this exciting and challenging period of history, and for asking us to put out into the deep and let down the nets. I want all those who listen to this appeal to feel a vivid sense of gratitude for your continuing to believe in us and count on us, and regain the faith, hope and courage to venture into the open sea of youth with a life that is lived in depth.

The recognition of the greatness of your gifts does not blind us to our limitations; and so I feel the need to ask for forgiveness.

We feel the weight not only of our personal shortcomings but also those of the institution when, as a Congregation, we become aware that we have not always been able to take seriously the recommendations left us by Don Bosco in his spiritual testament: "Be on your guard and see to it neither the love of the world, nor affection for relatives, nor the desire for a more comfortable life lead you to the great mistake of profaning your sacred vows and betraying the religious profession by which we are consecrated to the Lord... Let personal and financial sacrifices be made if necessary, but always practise the preventive system and we shall have vocations in abundance... When the desire for ease and comfort grows up among us, our pious society will have run its course... Never forget that we work for poor and abandoned children".⁹¹

There are times, however, when we allow ourselves to be deceived by a worldly spirit in the ideas and organization of our personal and community life. We have been wanting in pastoral zeal and have lived the mission only partially, reserving more time for our personal interests. We have not been sufficiently courageous in presenting Christ to young people as the highest value in their life and his Gospel as the way to achieve it in all its fullness. Sometimes, unfortunately, we have done harm to the youngsters who have been entrusted to us, and instead of imprinting your image in their hearts we have left there the mark of our selfishness.

I recognize that at times our communities have been lacking in religious identity and that our works have not always been truly educative and pastoral, and for this with sorrow and humility I ask forgiveness. I ask pardon of all those we have disappointed by our attitudes: benefactors, collaborators, and those for whom we work. I ask forgiveness especially of the young people to whom we have done

⁹¹ Appendix to SDB Constitutions, pp 267-269.

harm of any kind, precisely because they are the raison d'être of our salesian life, because they have been entrusted to us by you, because in Don Bosco you have called us to offer them a "home, playground, school and parish". I ask forgiveness finally for the good we could have done and failed to accomplish.

We trust in you, Lord, in the certainty of your presence and companionship throughout our history, as you have guided the Congregation and the Salesian Family to the present day..

We believe in you, we hope in you, our love is for you alone.

Mary, mother and teacher, you who are skilled in the ways of the Spirit; open us to his action so that he may work in us the miracles of grace he has already performed in our Saints. In this way we can be worthy of the vocation to which we have been called and of the fullness of life prepared for each one of us by the Father. Amen.

I send you my affectionate greetings and I wish you and your young people an educative and pastoral year rich in the fruits of holiness. May the Lord bless you and be with you always.

Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva