

ACTS OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL

LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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“BELONGING MORE TO GOD, MORE TO THE CONFRERES, MORE TO THE YOUNG”

Rome, 16 August 2014

Beginning of the Bicentenary of the Birth of Don Bosco

1. IN THE STEPS OF MY PREDECESSORS. 2. A PRESENT TIME TO BE LIVED IN FAITH, WITH HOPE, WITH REALISM AND WALKING TOGETHER. 3. BELONGING MORE TO GOD. 4. LET US BRING TO LIFE THE ‘UTOPIA’ FRATERNITY ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL. 5. WITH THE YOUNG, FOR THE YOUNG ‘OUR MASTERS’. 6. A MISSIONARY CONGREGATION: IN WHICH DIVERSITY IS A TREASURE. - 6.1. Because there are fields of pastoral mission where at the present moment we are very necessary ... - 6.2. ... And diversity is a treasure. 7. CELEBRATING THE BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF DON BOSCO. 8. “LET US MAKE A PLACE FOR OUR BLSSD LADY IN OUR HOME”: «And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home» (*Jn 19,27*).

My Dear Confreres,

Three and a half months have already passed since the end of the GC27 and, although I have been able to communicate with you by letter and by a video message, the letter of the Rector Major which is published in the Acts of the General Council is a special occasion.

I have chosen as the title of this first letter of mine the same as the one I gave to my contribution at the conclusion of the G27 since I believe that in the contents of the Chapter a whole programme of reflection and of action for a six year period is to be found, one that we need to examine more closely at different times and in different ways. It is my intention to refer to some of the key issues of the General Chapter, but in the first place and before anything else I want to convey to each and to everyone of you my Salesian Confreres, all my affection, and my wish that sometime somewhere in our ‘Salesian world’ we may meet. For me that will be a real gift and a great joy.

I also want to tell you that thinking about the best way to tell you what this moment of writing to you and this service that I have been called to means to me, I decided to look up and to read the first communication of each of the Rector Majors who have preceded me. I have to say that it has been a great pleasure and gift to familiarise myself with these testimonies, and I cannot fail to share with you what I have observed, because it speaks for itself.

1. IN THE STEPS OF MY PREDECESSORS

I have to tell you that as I thought about the Rector Majors we have had, I found it very moving just to write this account. One sees in all of them that this beginning of their service was something very special indeed.

Fr Michael RUA (Blessed), who wrote his first letter as Rector Major on 19 March 1888, after the Holy See's recognition and the decree which confirmed him as Rector Major, says that after the letter sent by the Superior Chapter, for the first time he was writing to them in his new role as Rector Major, to which "*in spite of my unworthiness I have been led by Divine Providence in such a way that it has been made clear to all of you*"¹. Having said this, Fr Rua explains that after a private audience with Pope Leo XIII, the Cardinal Vicar in his final words had said: "*I recommend to you the cause of Don Bosco; I recommend to you the cause of Don Bosco.*"² Afterwards he expressed his total conviction that the Salesians ought to be worthy sons of such a great Father as Don Bosco was, so that the main effort had to be that of sustaining and at the same time developing even further the works that he had started, faithfully following the methods practised and taught by Don Bosco himself. He then thanks them for all the letters he had received full of expressions of respect and affection, and acknowledges that all of this had been a comfort in his sorrow (for the loss of Don Bosco) and had filled his heart with confidence that he would find his journey less difficult: "*Nevertheless, I cannot hide from you or from myself the great need I have for your prayers. Therefore I recommend myself to your love so that you may all support me with your fervent prayers. For my part I assure you that holding you all in my heart, each day at Holy Mass I shall commend you to the Lord so that He may assist you with His holy grace, may keep you from every danger and above all grant that one day we may all without exception be together to sing His praises in Paradise where awaiting us, as he has written to us, will be our Beloved Father Don Bosco.*"³

Fr Paul ALBERA writes his first letter in Turin on 25 January 1911. The XI General Chapter had ended on 31 August 1910. In this letter, with all his usual simplicity, Fr. Albera began by saying that he was aware that people were waiting with a certain impatience for the first circular letter of the new Rector Major and recognised that as soon as the General Chapter had come to an end, he should have given information about the elections of the Superiors and of other important matters.⁴

With that simplicity that we recognise in Fr Albera, in the letter he says that he is writing on a day close to the anniversary of the death of the Venerable Don Bosco, a date that Don Rua frequently chose to write one of his 'admirable circular letters', and that he is convinced that "*from that memorable date more than anything else will come authority and effectiveness to my own poor and unadorned words. This is why I present myself to you not with the language of a Superior or a Master but rather with the simplicity and the affection of a brother and of a friend. It is my intention to express my thoughts to you from the bottom of my heart, and confident that my voice will find a faithful echo in all Salesians and will serve as a stimulus to show ourselves ever more worthy sons of our Venerable Founder and Father.*"⁵ Having said this, further on in the same letter entitled: "...

¹ *Lettere Circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Turin, 1965, p.25

² *Ibid* p.26

³ *Ibid* p.27

⁴ *Lettere Circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani*, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Turin, 1965, p.6

⁵ *Ibid* p.8

Under the burden of responsibility”, Fr Albera writes a beautiful page in which he declares that he feels weighed down by a great burden and that he would have liked to have been freed from “*an appointment that I know to be far superior to my very weak physical, intellectual and moral strength.*”⁶

He saw around him – these are his words – many others better prepared than he was to take up the government of our Pious Society, more gifted with virtues and wisdom ... As soon as he could he had hastened to Valsalice to kneel at the feet of Don Bosco, remonstrating with him, as he expressed more in tears than in words his anxieties, his fears and his weakness, that he had allowed the rudder of the Salesian barque to be placed in his hands.⁷

Fr Philip RINALDI (Blessed) writes his first letter which is published in the *Acts of the Superior Chapter*, ‘Acts’ which under Fr Albera had already made their appearance three years before and of which 13 issues had been published. In his opening sentence he writes: “*This is the first time I am writing to you as Rector Major, I would very much like to be able to show you in all their fulness the sentiments and affection which this new great responsibility has aroused in my heart in these memorable days. But you can easily understand that this is not possible. In our lives sometimes there occur events so unpredictable and overwhelming that words cannot adequately express and describe what they arouse in us. Therefore I leave it to your imagination and goodness to interpret these sentiments and affection of mine.*”⁸

Afterwards Fr Rinaldi writes that not being able to thank each and every single Salesian, not even with a simple word, he expresses his own gratitude in these few lines addressed to all, adding that on the 24th of the previous month of April accompanied by the Provincials and Delegates at the General Chapter, and surrounded by the confreres and the boys of the Oratory, overcome with emotion, he had knelt before the smiling image of Our Lady Help of Christians in her beautiful church, knowing that all were entrusted to her as beloved sons.⁹

Fr Peter RICARDONE writes his first letter of greeting on 24 June 1932, beginning in this way: “*My first greeting is a prayer. Our Society is no longer in the expert and saintly hands of Blessed Don Bosco, Don Rua, Fr Albera, Fr Rinaldi: help me to obtain from the Lord the grace that in the hands of your new Rector Major, the fervour of its zeal and the rhythm of its expansion will not grow weaker.*”¹⁰

Fr Ricardone asks that he might be forgiven in that he had not been able immediately to write and send his affectionate and paternal greetings even though his thoughts had at once turned to all of them, but the General Chapter and urgent matters with the Provincials needing to be dealt with, in addition to a journey to Rome had prevented him from doing so. He thanks them for the heartfelt support he had received accompanied by promises to pray to God for him and to remain faithful to the observance of the Constitutions and firmly attached to the spirit of Blessed Don Bosco.

On 24 August 1952, **Fr Renato ZIGGIOTTI** writes his first letter saying that he had waited until the XVII General Chapter was over and the 15th and 16th August had been celebrated with the new professions in memory of the birth of our beloved Father and Founder, “*before sending you*

⁶ *Ibid* p.13

⁷ *Ibid* p.13

⁸ *Acts of the Superior Chapter of the Pious Salesian Society*, Year III, n.14, 1922, p.4

⁹ *Ibid* p.4-5

¹⁰ *Acts of the Superior Chapter of the Pious Salesian Society*, Year XIII, n.58, 1932, p.2

this first letter of mine, which I put under the special protection of Our Mother Mary the Most Holy Help of Christians, on the monthly day sacred to her memory."¹¹

Then the Rector Major expresses his thanks for the good wishes that had been sent to him on the occasion of his appointment and promises a remembrance in his prayers for each and everyone, especially, considering the many letters received, should anyone not have received an appropriate reply.

Further on he tells the confreres about the moment of his election on that 1st August. *"It was about 1.00 p.m. that day when the long necessary preparations having been made, the oaths of the electors sworn and the solemn counting of the votes taken place that the incomparable honour for a Salesian and at the same time the very grave responsibility of becoming the fifth successor of St John Bosco fell on my poor self. I cannot tell you, my dear Confreres, about my embarrassment and at the same time my joy at seeing myself applauded, congratulated, embraced with such visible emotion by all the members of the General Chapter and especially by some of my former beloved Superiors and companions, by the old and the young, which witnessed the closure of the period of mourning and the beginning of a new term of office of the Rector Major."*¹²

Fr Aloysius RICCERI writes his first words as Rector Major on the date of what he calls the 'glorious anniversary', the 16th August 1965, saying: *"I present myself to you for the first time on a day so dear to our filial hearts. Today occurs the 150th anniversary of the birth of our most dear Father,"*¹³

He then writes about the emotion experienced in celebrating Holy Mass in the lower church of the Temple at Colle, surrounded by the Superiors, with Fr Ziggiotti, Fr Antal, the Mothers of the General Council of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, confreres, novices, sisters, cooperators, past pupils, devotees and friends of Don Bosco, a Mass that was broadcast to millions of people in eleven countries on television, by 'Eurovision'. His thoughts dwelt on the contrast with the humble and unknown birth of our Father 150 years before. He began to reflect on Providence and in his heart to intone the Magnificat.

Further on under the title of 'reasons for confidence' he states: *"Certainly looking at Don Bosco, and also at his Successors, I feel my own littleness and how inadequate I am to join their ranks."*¹⁴ Fr Riceri says that faced with this sense of inadequacy he had drawn some comfort from thinking that he had been called to that role in the Congregation, through the vote expressed by the members of the Chapter. And that the Lord whose ways are not men's ways had decided that he should be called to govern the Congregation. *"Together let us do His will. For me all that now remains is to be always a more docile, however humble, instrument in the hands of the good God."*¹⁵

Another source of comfort for him was the affectionate and sincere love and great confidence of those at the side of the Rector Major to help and comfort him, and to be as real sons and brothers his friendly and active collaborators.

Finally he shows his *Father's Heart* as he says: *"On my part opening my heart to you I want to tell you that I feel that with a father's heart I am at the service of each one of you. I am fully convinced that authority, especially nowadays, is not an exercise of power, but an exercise of that love that becomes service like that which a father and a mother give to their children. (...) In a word I should like each one of you to feel my most ardent desire, my wish to always be and to show*

¹¹ *Acts of the Superior Chapter of the Pious Salesian Society*, Year XXXII, n.169,1952, p.2

¹² *Ibid* p.3

¹³ *Acts of the Superior Chapter of the Pious Salesian Society*, Year XLVI,n.262, p.2

¹⁴ *Ibid* p.4

¹⁵ *Ibid* p.5

myself a father; for this reason I am praying insistently to Don Bosco and Don Rinaldi, that they may give me something of their own heart."¹⁶

On the Solemnity of the Annunciation, 25 March 1978, **Fr Egidio VIGANÒ** wrote his first letter to the Confreres, telling them: *"I greet you with joy and hope and I would like to share with you some thoughts that I have at heart. (...) A few months ago Providence upset my whole existence with my election as your Rector Major. The awareness of the heavy responsibility inherent in this 'family service' which demands real spiritual fatherliness in full harmony with Don Bosco is already becoming second nature to me.*"¹⁷

Fr Viganò goes on to emphasise his certainty that the Lord is helping him to perceive the beauty and the abundance of grace that comes with this service and in particular the motherly help of Mary that accompanies this ministry with the joy of being able to enter into communion with each one of the confreres and with every community so as to reflect and to grow together in a spirit of gratitude and fidelity. And speaking for himself he says: *"Would that I had the calm and penetrating style of Don Bosco and the facility of communication shown by his successors. I hope to be able to make up for the lack of this charm and simplicity at least by sincerity and solidity.*"¹⁸

It was the task of **Fr Juan Edmundo VECCHI**, in his role as Vicar, to transmit the message of hope in memory of Fr E. Viganò after his death on 23 June 1995. After the serene farewell of the seventh successor of Don Bosco, he guided the Congregation towards the celebration of the GC24, which he began on 18 February 1996 with the opening session and closed as Rector Major on 20 April.

So it is understandable that, having assumed the government of the Congregation prior to the Chapter, his first letter dated 8 September 1996, on the Apostolic Exhortation "Vita consacrata", did not make any reference to the beginning of his service as Rector Major. In this way there is a difference compared with all the previous situations.

Finally, **Fr Pascual CHAVEZ**, elected Rector Major at the GC25, begins his first letter to all the confreres some time after the closing of the Chapter which he describes as a strong Salesian spiritual experience. The Chapter documents at that time had just arrived in the Provinces and, as he writes, he wanted to make *"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.*"¹⁹

The letter is dated the Vigil of the Assumption of Mary and two days before the date of Don Bosco's birthday. In it Fr Pascual wants to express his desire to be close to everyone: *"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*

¹⁶ *Ibid* p.5

¹⁷ *Acts of the Superior Council of the Salesian Society*, Year LVII, 1978, n.289, p. 3

¹⁸ *Ibid* p.2

¹⁹ *Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society*, Year LXXXIII, n.379, p.3

his supreme gift, that of the Holy Spirit, to renew you and to sanctify you in the likeness of our Founder."²⁰

After expressing this desire, Fr Pascual says that it is his intention in this first letter to speak to the Congregation about holiness, not so much to write a brief treatise on it, as rather to present it as a gift of God and a necessity in the apostolate.

2. A PRESENT TIME TO BE LIVED IN FAITH, WITH HOPE, WITH REALISM AND WALKING TOGETHER

Dear Confreres, I can tell you quite sincerely that several times I was moved when in this way I traced the history of our Congregation. This journey, after that 31 January 1888, when Don Bosco left us, is an invitation to me (I believe to *us*) to make a *deep act of thanksgiving* for all that our history has been. A history that it would be foolish to reflect on with a spirit of triumphalism, but rather one that we need to interpret with the eyes of Faith, that speaks to us of the way in which the Lord has wanted to write beautiful pages on behalf of the young by means of the many confreres who have gone before us.

Thinking about my poor self, I can tell you that as far as I am concerned, in order to better serve the Congregation and the Salesian Family of which we form part – I should like to possess all those *very special characteristics* which marked each of the previous Rector Majors, as regards their theological and social context and the stage of development of the Congregation.

It is not possible in a few lines to describe the path we have followed in our Congregation. A very carefully prepared historical publication would be required; but in any case the historical experts of our Congregation would accept that it is possible to speak about the characteristic stages: those of the *Foundation*, of the *Consolidation and Structuring* (with considerable growth and expansion), of the *Postconciliar Revision and Theological Definition*, of the *Pastoral Projection of the Mission*, and the stage of *Salesian Identity and the Radical Gospel Nature of our life as Consecrated Persons*. All of this of course has been enriched by the many directives and options made by General Chapters, subsequently taken up and made their own by the various Rector Majors.

The inheritance we have received is a very rich one and it makes even greater our responsibility before the Lord, before Don Bosco and also before those who in previous ages gave the very best of themselves.

You might ask me what position I take up in this situation and what programme of *animation and government* one can expect. Personally I can share with you what I said on 25 March. This is how I feel I am living my life:

- From the Faith standpoint, ***I am abandoning myself to the Lord.***
- Because ***I know that I am not alone***, already experiencing in my life that '*interior strength*' that comes from the Spirit ("My grace is sufficient for you"), that is the *presence of the Mother* ("Son, this is your mother"...). And I am not alone because I feel that fraternal and helpful communion on the part of Salesian Confreres (those of you who are at my side on a daily basis and those of you who are in many parts of the world as so many examples of '*Don Bosco today*' for the young people dependent on you). And I am not

²⁰ *Ibid* p.4

alone because I also feel the warmth of the affection and the kind consideration that I receive from our Salesian Family.

- And I am living ***carrying the young people in my heart***. I feel this very strongly and in a special way the poorest, those most in need, the excluded ones.

As far as the *Programme of Animation and Government* for the six year period is concerned, the GC27 gave indications for this in a splendid manner, and I have no doubt that everything that we would want is contained in it, in one way or another.

The programme for the six-year period will be:

To continue to cultivate ***our Charismatic Identity*** in total fidelity to Don Bosco, a new identity in the forms and expressions it takes 200 years after his birth, but identical in the purity and essential character of his charism which we have received as our inheritance.

To guarantee in all parts of our Congregation our condition as consecrated persons, *men who freely choose to take our place fulfilling God's Design being mystics in our daily life*.

Taking care of the human, affective and vocational life of each confrere and of our communities. We really want to dream of the ***Utopia of an irresistible Gospel-based fraternal life***.

To witness in a more eloquent and evident manner through ***the sobriety and austerity of our lives, our Poverty which is Work and Temperance***.

To live out to its ultimate consequences ***the option for the poorest young people*** with humility, without triumphalism, but as in the times of Don Bosco *so that we might be known primarily for these options, decisions and actions*.

And we are not doing all this on our own. We form part of a *large Salesian Family* which also needs to grow in its identity and sense of belonging, and we have available to us the ***great strength of a laity that is well trained and committed to a Shared Mission***.

I put into my own words what the GC24 said eighteen years ago:

At this time, the shared mission with the laity is no longer an option, it is a charismatic necessity.

3. BELONGING MORE TO GOD

I must confess dear Confreres that expressions such as *The primacy of God, Mystics in the Spirit, God's Design, God's Closeness, Union with God, Seekers of God ...* are phrases which set my heart beating, telling me that here we have something important, that this is the key, all the rest on which we spend so much energy 'is given us as an extra,' or 'falls like ripe fruit', in other words follows naturally, is guaranteed.

At the same time, with great sincerity I have to confess to *a fear* that I have felt in a similar way during my years of service as Provincial: I feel that in speaking like this there can be confreres who simply distance themselves, who consider all this 'a priori', as outdated theology, as a model which 'does not apply anymore', 'is already out of date'.. And yet one finds these expressions in the most diverse places, in theological writings and in magazines dealing with current affairs in which one can take the pulse of religious life.

In our GC27, drawing on the experience of the whole Congregation, our own diagnosis coincided with that of others.

I really believe, Confreres, that *the spiritual life must have the first place*,²¹ a spiritual life that first of all is a *search for God* in everyday life, in the midst of all we are doing, of all our occupations. And I am saying this because for us, as it was for Don Bosco, in seeking what is best for the young, their salvation, and for all religious life today *the fundamental element* was, continues to be and will be, the person of Our Lord Jesus and His message: in short, the *centrality of Jesus Christ in our life*. It may be that this has never really been in doubt, but that is not the same as making it come alive and actually be the criterion of our life.

The *raison d'être* of our religious life – since we should not forget that our life is not only Salesian life, but *religious life as consecrated Salesians* – is not to be found in what we do, nor even in the ways we organise ourselves, nor in the effectiveness of our programmes and planning. Either our religious life as consecrated persons *makes us become a sign* (communities of believers at the service of the Kingdom), or we run the risk of becoming more concerned about our strength (if in fact we have any) than the message of God.

The inherent danger in every religious life is that of losing its charismatic freshness. It is possible that we become so involved in works, activities, roles (pastoral or otherwise) ... that we can lose the symbolic value of our life. For example, when I hear, as I did recently, that in a particular place, where there are many Salesian works, we have a great reputation for our social works but as Salesians we are little esteemed as people who believe in the consecrated life, I have to say that I am very worried and I ask myself: what is it that we are not doing properly? what is it that we are not able to witness to?

For this reason ... when we ask ourselves what is it that is essential in our lives? - the way ahead is a return to a meeting with Him Who gives meaning to every moment. We need to ask ourselves why, what is the reason for which we do things, what is the basis on which we make our decisions and live the way we do?

For all of this we can say that at the heart of our identity and the *raison d'être* for our religious life, in the final analysis is the experience of God. And again in the final analysis the question about the quality of life in religious life is the question about the quality of this experience of God.²² And it is in this framework and in this context that our Chapter at number 32, points out that as for Don Bosco, so also for us the *primacy of God* is the cornerstone of our *raison d'être* for our presence in the Church and in the world. This primacy gives meaning to our consecrated life, helps us to avoid the risk of letting ourselves become too caught up in our activities, forgetting that we are essentially '*seekers of God*' and witnesses of His living among the young and the poor.

Therefore once again we have to help each other to really believe that this fundamental experience in our lives, that of God within us, or in another theological expression, living the whole of our existence 'in God', dear Confreres, whatever may be the words in which we want to express it, ... at the root of our Salesian life as of all consecrated life, is *the mystical*, since if that

²¹ GC27, *Introduction*, p.21, in John Paul II, '*Vita consecrata*', n.93: "The spiritual life must therefore have first place... 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."

²² The actual quotation is as follows: "The heart of identity and the *raison d'être* of religious life and of every Christian life is the experience of God. One can speak about the experience of God, radical faith, the absolute priority of the Kingdom of God and of His justice, of living life in eschatological terms... The words do not matter much. What is important is to keep well in mind that it is this central experience that gives its whole meaning to this style of life; it is this that gives quality of life to the members and ensures that it really is a question of a vocation and not simply a profession. Any question about the quality of life in religious life is a question about the quality of this faith experience." (*our translation from*: FERNANDO PRADO (ed.), *Adonde el Señor nos lleve*, P.Claretiane, Madrid, 2004, 31).

which sustains, that which moves us *is not a real and nourishing experience of the Lord, all the rest will not get us very far*. Every day, the examples of weariness, of brokenness, of existential emptiness that so often we see in our confreres – even though we may think we are living our whole lives for God – etc., provide a sad but irrefutable proof that this is so.

May the Lord be willing to grant us the gift of being truly more ‘seekers after Him’ giving real meaning *to our Being*, first of all, and then to our living and our acting.

4. LET US BRING TO LIFE THE ‘UTOPIA’ OF FRATERNITY ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL

‘Home’ and ‘family’ – we read in number 48 of our GC27 – are the two terms frequently used by Don Bosco to describe the *‘spirit of Valdocco’* that must be clearly visible in our communities.

The Chapter Assembly undertook an examination that was open to hope but also realistic (with its lights and shadows) of our community life, *an aspect of our life that while potentially having the greatest prophetic force is certainly that which has the ‘most fragile health’ across our Congregation*.

It says in the Chapter document that since GC25 there has been a growing commitment to *living our community life more authentically* (n. 8) even though it appears that behind ‘respect’ and ‘tolerance, may lie indifference and a lack of care for our confrere (n. 9). Creeping materialism and activism make us perceive community time as time ‘stolen’ from the ‘private sphere’ or from the mission (n. 9). If we respond with difficulty to God’s call to live in a radical way this is due in part to a *weak conviction...* in bringing about communion in community (n. 36).

At the same time and with a positive and hopeful view we recognise that *community life* is one of the ways of having *an experience of God*. Living “mystical fraternity” is an essential element of our apostolic consecration (n. 40).

Living *the spirituality of communion...* and building community, presupposes shifting from life in common to communion of life (n. 45).

These and other observations we can find in the reflections of the Chapter which we are doubtlessly reading and meditating. I shall not dwell any further on this point. There is no need to find any more quotations to demonstrate the mosaic of lights and shades. In the light of our GC27, the question is: to what do we need to devote our attention, what do we need to change, what do we need to continue to do and what not to do so that *in a real way our community life may have all the attraction that Fraternity lived according to the Gospel has*, to the point of being ‘irresistible’ ?

Certainly, community life has, as one author has written, “all the charm of what is difficult and what is possible, of grace and of weakness. Only with the grace of God does one remain in community and deepen this experience... And it is a penance and an asceticism that purifies and provides an exercise in collaboration, in participation and in communion. But it is also, and above all a charm. People are in community in order to be happy and there are many who succeed in this (...) and if we want to speak about the charm of community life it is necessary to say something about the short cuts to fraternal love. This presupposes presence, shared affection and fraternal correction, taking care of one another, helping each other: in short fraternal love in all its manifestations. The heart needs and demands it. *Community life in the future will be fraternal or it*

*will not exist at all*²³. This is one of the ingredients that today's candidates are mostly looking for, and for the most part it is not always something they encounter."²⁴

Nowadays this aspect of religious life certainly has great witness value. Just as in most of our social contexts there exist, beside the positive aspects, a growing lack of communication, isolation, an ever-increasing individualism and loneliness which in many cultures is the great malady of our time together with its twin-sister depression. The witness of religious communities, our own included, should constitute a real gospel proclamation, good news, a genuine challenge or invitation.

For this reason I can tell you that one of my greatest worries is that of our thinking, seeing, imagining, telling ourselves that we can carry on in this way going in the right direction in the face of this weak situation in not a few of our presences. Confreres, so often our communion of life is sacrificed for other things! I ask myself, for example, why is it that we who are supposed to be *experts in humanism*, especially in our role as educators of the young, have at our side in our communities, sometimes in our dining rooms or the rooms next door some confreres who are wounded in their hearts, by loneliness and disillusion, brothers who wanted to be happy as Salesians and are not. It is true that this is not the whole picture of our Congregation, far from it, but it is something real, and a single example of a single wounded confrere should be enough for all of us to be genuinely concerned. In our case I think it would be a sin if by words or deeds or by our silence we were like Cain answering the Lord's question: "Where is your brother?" I don't know – he replies. – Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gn 4,9*). **Yes, we are! Not his keepers but his carers.**

The great challenge, dear Confreres, for every Provincial, Council, Rector and every confrere in each of the communities in the Salesian world is this: *To make our Community a real place of a life of communion*. How do you move from a life in common with a fixed timetable, regulations, plans – which certainly can be a help to us – **to a life of communion**? This certainly presupposes personal and even community conversion, it requires an affective and effective commitment to achieve this; it is a question of a process that requires us to accept that every stage of our lives is an opportunity for growth, to open ourselves to the new experience of a more authentic meeting with Confreres and with the strength that God gives to make His presence among us more visible.

5. WITH THE YOUNG, FOR THE YOUNG, "OUR MASTERS"

The expression is not mine but Don Bosco's who often said: "Youth are our masters"²⁵; and in their regard he always maintained the attitude of a real servant.

Dear Confreres, all the writings we have in the patrimony of our Congregation from Don Bosco himself to our our days regarding our priority: the young especially the poor are fascinating. This is due to the fact that we really have this in our hearts, in our DNA, as I have said many times. It is also due to the fact that sometimes we have to remind ourselves about it so that this special love of ours is more evident, remind ourselves and also others so as not to forget it.

As SGC XX reminds us, Don Bosco gave a very special recommendation among the advice for the first missionaries which retains its full relevance for all of us: "*Let the world know that you are*

²³ Putting this phrase in italics is a personal decision of mine given the importance I attribute to it, The author did not give it any particular emphasis.

²⁴ J. M. ARNAIZ, ! *Que ardan nuestros corazones. Devolver el encanto a la vida consagrada!*, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid, 2007, 95

²⁵ *Salesian Special General Chapter* Rome, 1971, Acts, n.351

poor in clothing , food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God and will win the hearts of men."²⁶

If it has been like this throughout the history of our Congregation, in the light of the GC27, dear Confreres, and with a determined decision to be servants of the young, this option for the young and especially for the poorest of them becomes, and needs to become in an imperative manner the greatest effort and the distinctive feature of the Congregation in this six year period, with a deep sense of God and being a real prophecy of fraternity, in which our option for those most in need becomes so evident that there is no need for words to explain it. *"The world will always receive us with pleasure as long as our concern is always for those children who are poor, the needier ones in society. This is our true wealth that no one will take away from us."*²⁷

In this way the option for the poor will be the most evangelical expression of our vow of poverty and will certainly help us to overcome the inclination which is so natural to us as individuals and institutions, to associate ourselves with power and the powerful, to have and to possess in excess, an inclination totally contrary to the Gospel and to the ways of Jesus.

Confreres, when our recent General Chapter states that we want to be a Congregation of poor men and for the poor, because like Don Bosco we believe that this ought to be our way of living the Gospel in a radical manner and the way of being more available to the demands of the young we are not thinking that this is a suggestion only for the more sensitive or for those rather more generous but are proposing it as a **way of making in our lives a genuine exodus**²⁸. It ought to be something *essential for our being Salesians of Don Bosco*, and what every Salesian has to have at heart. The exception will be on the part of those confreres who do not feel themselves to be capable – because something in their lives is not going well – and then they can rely on our brotherly assistance and help, but it should never be a question of an option for tepidity or mediocrity in dedication , and opting out of the choice for the poorest and even less should there be a case of a boy, a girl, a teenager a youngster having to leave Don Bosco's house because they don't have the resources to pay this, that or the other.

There could perhaps be someone who will be thinking that this is something fine and beautiful but unfeasible, someone who will say we need to maintain schools, cover expenses, and I am saying to them that with generosity, with clear options, looking for assistance, funding for scholarships, with the ability we certainly have of creating a spirit of solidarity when it is a matter of helping those who have less, we can create a situation where *a Salesian house is never inaccessible to those who have less* (whether it is a question of a school, an oratory, a children's home, a youth centre...) I should like to recall what I have already said in my concluding words at the General Chapter: *The young especially the poorest are the ones who will save us*. They are a gift for us Salesians, they are indeed "our burning bush" before which we remove our sandals²⁹. This is the key to our fatherly role as educators, givers of life, even to giving our life, laying it down for the excluded, since responding to the Lord's call we have decided to do so. If we have been capable of the greater (our 'yes' for the whole of our lives) we cannot settle for the less, for not being an alternative for anyone, a sign of nothing.

I am convinced – without as yet knowing the whole Congregation – that the dedication and the generosity that exists is very great, yet that which is well-focused on God and on the excluded cannot make us content with ourselves and make up for those real situations in which we are not responding in ways that Don Bosco would nowadays. It is in this sense that I encourage all the

²⁶ *Ibid* n.597, quoting BM XI, 364-365

²⁷ *Ibid* n.597, quoting BM XVII, 250

²⁸ Cf. GC25,n.55. The emphasis is mine.

²⁹ GC27, n.52, quoting Ex 3,2 and "Evangelii Gaudium", n.169

confreres to place themselves in a attitude of conversion to God, to their brothers and to the young as GC27 asks us to do.

For the young we are real fathers and brothers as Don Bosco was and as in his day John Paul II reminded when he said to us at the GC23: “*Your attention therefore must always be centred on the young, the hope of the Church and the world, towards whom everyone looks with faith and trepidation. In the richer countries, as in the poorer ones, you must be always at their service, with special attention to those who are weaker and on the fringe of society. Take to each of them the hope of the Gospel, so as to help them to face life courageously, resisting temptations to selfishness and discouragement. To them you must be fathers and brothers, as Don Bosco has taught you.*”³⁰

6. A MISSIONARY CONGREGATION: IN WHICH DIVERSITY IS A TREASURE

Under this heading or title I want to say something simple and clear: *The missionary dimension is part of our IDENTITY and that cultural diversity, a multicultural and intercultural situation are a treasure towards which in this six year period we are advancing.*

According to ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’³¹ the proclamation of the Gospel is the mission of all the people of God and is meant for everyone, since “there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek ... but all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal 3,28*). It means being the leaven of God within the human race, a humanity and a People of God with many faces, with many histories and different cultures where we are all *missionary disciples*.

The Pope is calling for the Evangelisation of all peoples and we are directing our gaze, always so as to recognise ourselves in our *identity*, on the missionary character of our Congregation. Don Bosco wanted the Salesian Society to be determinedly missionary. In 1875, from among the small group of the first Salesians, he chose ten to go to America; before his death he had already sent 10 missionary expeditions and the 153 who were in America at the time of his death were almost 20% of the Salesians at the time according to the Elenco of the Congregation for 1888.

This missionary identity, preserved and cultivated as the years passed led the Special General Chapter to make a special appeal which I want to renew today, on the threshold of the Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco and as a living homage to him: “*The Special General Chapter appeals to all the provinces and even to those who are poorest in numbers so that by obeying the invitation of the Council and following the courageous example of our Founder they may contribute, even in a temporary manner, to the spread of the kingdom of God.*”³²

I sincerely believe dear Confreres that this call remains fully relevant in the current situation of our Congregation. When I speak about a homage to Don Bosco on the celebration of the Bicentenary of his birth I am not doing so in an empty spirit of celebration or for the sake of statistics, but because I truly believe – and it was the feeling of the GC27 – that a great wealth of our Congregation is its missionary capacity, the possibility of being there where there is the greatest need for us in the work of Evangelisation, even though all our efforts are very valid wherever we may find ourselves. In this context I take this opportunity to invite all the SDB Salesians – and I earnestly extend my invitation to all the Salesian Family – at an appropriate time to read, meditated on and discuss the ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’. Certainly it will be good for us to do so; in many places it is still not known.

³⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the members of the Chapter*, in GC23, n.331.

³¹ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n.111, 115 and 120

³² SGC, n.477

6.1 BECAUSE THERE ARE FIELDS OF PASTORAL MISSION WHERE AT THE PRESENT MOMENT WE ARE VERY NECESSARY ...

In this regard not only for 2015 but for all the six year period, we want real help to be given in certain mission areas where there is a degree of special difficulty at this time, for example among others:

- Missionary work in Amazonia, especially in Manaus, Campo Grande, and Venezuela...
- Missionary work in the Chaco Paraguayo.
- Missionary work in some regions of the Pampas and of Argentine Patagonia.
- A missionary presence among the immigrant communities in the United States.
- A missionary presence in the Middle East, in addition to being tremendously afflicted by a variety of armed conflicts with which we are familiar.
- A missionary presence among the Muslims of North Africa, the countries of the Arabian Gulf and Pakistan...
- A new missionary presence required by the Project for Europe which is concerned in large measure with the emarginated as a result of the various migrations.
- Strengthening of the new missionary presences for first Evangelisation in Asia and Oceania: Mongolia, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Laos...

6.2. ... AND BECAUSE DIVERSITY IS A TREASURE

On more than one occasion in my Salesian life I have heard it said by those who had more vocations that in their own country or Province they had no need for help since they had a sufficient number of vocations. But precisely for this reason and because difference, diversity, a multicultural and intercultural situation is a treasure, this help becomes more and more necessary also in order to ensure the identity of the Salesian charism, so that it is not monochrome, in order to encourage the exchange of confreres between Provinces for some years, to offer confreres on a temporary basis to the Provinces most in need, in addition to those who offer themselves as *missionaries 'ad gentes'* in response to this call and to others that may come; and in this way also to prepare confreres in all parts of the world, with a more global and universal outlook. We Salesians of Don Bosco, even though we have a juridical organisation which is expressed in Provinces do not make our religious profession for one place, one country or one destination. We are Salesians of Don Bosco in the Congregation and for the *Mission*, there where there is need for us and where our service is possible.

I am aware that this message may appear surprising, but dear Confreres we have to be daring in our dreaming and not be afraid of the new no matter how demanding it may be if it is good in itself. A simple but immediate practical example of what I am saying is the need to prepare young Salesians in the learning of languages; the more languages the better. The time, which was my own experience, has passed in which learning a foreign language was considered superfluous and when going to a nearby country even though the frontier was only fifty kilometres away was considered "going abroad", and obtaining the necessary permissions within the Congregation was very difficult. We have to prepare the new generations therefore to learn languages and among these the Italian language so that with the passing of time access to the sources and the original writings of

our Founder and of the Congregation does not become something almost impossible through ignorance of the language.

So too I want to emphasize that we should not be afraid nor put obstacles in the way of our young confreres studying outside their own Province. One does not love one's homeland, roots and origins any less on account of not studying in the same place. There is no truth in that idea and there is no danger of losing a sense of reality. On the contrary one's horizons are widened and the capacity to understand diversity and differences increased - something that is essential in our world of today and of tomorrow.

7. CELEBRATING THE BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF DON BOSCO.

When you are reading this letter of mine we shall already have inaugurated the year of the Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco: on 15 August in Castelnuovo Don Bosco and on 16 August at Colle Don Bosco. Under the guidance of our Rector Major Emeritus, Fr. Pascual Chávez, we have had an intense period of three years preparation throughout the Congregation, deepening our understanding of the historical situation, the pedagogy and the spirituality of our Founder.

It seems to me appropriate to say that the year of celebration that we have begun has *two aspects*. One is external, more public and official while the other is interior, more intimate.

The two hundred years since the birth of Don Bosco, raised up by the Holy Spirit through the intervention of Mary (cfr. C. 1), is a sufficient time to see and to understand what we have inherited. In the first place the life of a man of God, a saint with the heart of a father who lived what he had promised: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys."³³ We have also inherited the *responsibility* of living and of making real the authenticity of a charism which came into being not as a merely human venture but by the initiative of God to contribute to the salvation of youth (cfr. C. 1).

Celebrating the Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco *in society, in our towns and cities, with the people of God*, enables us to recognise what it means to us to have Don Bosco as our Father.

- It is an opportunity for us to feel gratitude to the Lord that two hundred years after the birth of Don Bosco, we are here as a gift from God to the young. An opportunity to appreciate God present in our history, since we can recognise *that He (the God of Life) has always gone before us*.
- It is engaging ourselves more with the power of the Gospel which ought to reach in a special way the young and among these the humble ones, those who, for no fault of their own, *have been excluded from life's feast*.
- It is a suitable occasion to speak again about the *relevance of a charism* which is at the centre of today's problems, especially those of the world of the young. Because Don Bosco continues nowadays to have something to say and to suggest to the youth of the world since, even though situations and contexts may have changed, nevertheless *the hearts of the young, of each young person, continues to beat in the same way with enthusiasm and an openness to Life*.
- The Salesian charism has been and is the gift which God makes to the world having chosen Don Bosco for this purpose. Therefore we insist so much, with conviction, on the fact that Don Bosco is a benefit conferred on the Church and on the whole human race.³⁴ As time passed he was formed, from the first moments of his life in the arms of Mamma Margaret,

³³ C. 1, cf. MO, 16

through his friendship with good life teachers and above all in daily life with the boys who in molding his heart day by day helped him to become more devoted to God, to people and to the young people themselves.

Celebrating the Bicentenary *within our Congregation and our Salesian Family*, means living as Saint Paul recommended to Timothy asking him to ‘fan into a flame the Gift that God gave.’ So, every time that a Salesian, a member of our Salesian Family, is living his or her own vocation to the full this is in its turn a gift of God to the world.

Celebrating the Bicentenary in the intimacy of our *own home* (as each and every one of our communities ought to be) means letting ourselves be challenged in our very being and our way of living so that we can say about ourselves with clear and open eyes, that “*the holiness of the sons proves the holiness of the Father.*”³⁵

This celebration also means recalling two hundred years of the history of men and women who *gave their lives for this ideal* so often in heroic ways, in difficult and at times in extreme conditions. This is an immeasurable treasure that only God can appreciate in its real value and we entrust it to Him.

We are among those who believe that 1815, with the birth of little John Bosco and his being chosen by the Lord, was just the beginning of a long line of witnesses and that we, like Don Bosco, want to commit ourselves to contributing to the writing in colours of hope the future of life, and the life of believers, of the young, and among these those most in need.

Finally, and briefly so as not to go on too long, I want to underline the singularity in the Salesian charism of that aspect known as the *Preventive System* which is much more than a method of education. **It is a true and rich form of spirituality, an extraordinary way of understanding the meaning of life from God’s point of view**, in this way being a great gift from our Congregation and Family to the Church. I shall write much more about this in the letter about the Strenna at the end of the year.

8. “LET US MAKE A PLACE FOR OUR LADY IN OUR HOME.” «And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home» (Jn 19,27)

I wanted to finish this first circular letter of mine with the same words used by Fr E. Viganò in his first letter about Mary who is renewing the Salesian Family of Don Bosco.³⁶ Fr Viganò tells us that while on the afternoon of Good Friday that year he was listening to the reading of St John’s account of the death of the Lord, with Mary and the Disciple at the foot of the cross, he was particularly struck by a conviction that led him to say: Yes! We must take the evangelist’s affirmation as our own programme of renewal: “Make a place for Our Lady in our home.”

Don Bosco had an acute awareness of the personal presence of Mary in his life, in his vocation and in his apostolic mission. “Mary Most Holy is the foundress and will be the support of our

³⁴ As Pope Francis says in ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’, n. 130: “The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; (...). A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God’s holy and faithful people for the good of all.”

³⁵ Advice given by a pious and generous Cooperator and which Don Rua quotes and makes the watchword in a letter dated 8 February 1888, eight days after the death of Don Bosco, a letter addressed to the Rectors of the Salesian Houses indicating the suffrages for Don Bosco. Cf. *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai salesiani*, Direz. Generale Opere Don Bosco, Turin, 1965, p.14.

³⁶ *Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society*, Year LVII, n.289, p.4

works,”³⁷ and we Salesians, as part of our Salesian Family, are convinced of the unquestionably special role that Mary played in the life of Don Bosco and of the Congregation. For Don Bosco Mary was the Mother attentive to his boys and their *spiritual teacher*. And for himself she was always the Mother to whom he had a tender and manly devotion, simple and true.

At the same time, as a true educator and catechist, Don Bosco succeeded in a most exceptional way in ensuring that in the house, in the house of his boys, Valdocco, the family atmosphere was always enveloped by a maternal presence: Mary.

Today, two hundred years after the birth of Don Bosco, we can say that devotion to Mary, for us especially as Help of Christians, is in fact a constitutive element of the ‘*Salesian phenomenon*’ in the Church, and forms an essential part of our charism: permeating it and giving it vitality.

May Mary, who is the Lady who listens, Mother of the new community and Handmaid of the poor accompany and bless us. To her we address Pope Francis’ own prayer.³⁸

*Star of the new evangelisation,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth.
illuminating even the fringes of our world.*

*Mother of the living Gospel,
wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones,
pray for us.*

Amen. Alleluia.

With my affectionate fraternal greetings,

Angel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, SDB
Rector Major

³⁷ *Preventive System*. Regulations, n.92

³⁸ ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’, n.288