

## The lay element in the Salesian community

"THE LAY ELEMENT IN THE SALESIAN COMMUNITY" - 1. The uniqueness of our Society - 2. The Salesian Brother delineated: Description of his various functions; The essential qualities of the Salesian Brother. 3. Identity struggle: The Salesian Brother is a religious; He is not a "consecrated secular"; He is totally Salesian; He has opted for the lay aspect - 4. In what does this lay aspect consist?: Laicism in creation; Laicism in the mission of the Church; Laicism as a practical aspect in the religious life - 5. The true mark of the Salesian Brother: Belonging to the community; Secular slant in the Congregation - 6. Parlous situation: Some statistics; Suggestion for the future; Trust in the Holy Spirit. 7. Today's most urgent task - 8. The crucial task of formation: Unity of formation; Specific formation; Ongoing formation - 9. Two authoritative appeals.

Dear Confreres,

For quite some time now I have wanted to speak about a topic of vital importance: the *Salesian Brother*. Indeed in today's situation this theme should be a matter of vital interest and study in every province, in every house: it should occupy the mind and heart of every single confrere.

The two recent General Chapters have treated the topic with deep concern; and the current state of affairs surely presents us with an urgent challenge. This is a matter that concerns not only our Brothers but each one of us; it has a bearing on us all as a body, on the community, on a very dimension of our Congregation: it is not a question of "him" but "us". We are dealing with a matter that is essential for the Congregation, part of its very framework; it forms a vital part of its identity and constitutes a quickening and distinctive element in our mission.

We are well aware of Don Bosco's creative thinking in this regard. During his lifetime the first four General Chapters dealt with this particular topic; in fact it has been on the agenda of almost all succeeding Chapters.

Our Rector-Majors have discussed the topic in various ways in the context of the Congregation, in the conviction that the subject belonged to a unique element of our community. At the eve of his life Father Albera had prepared the main points for a circular entitled "Don Bosco, model of the Salesian Brother" as a follow-on to the circular of 1921, "Don Bosco, model of the Salesian Priest". In 1927 Father Rinaldi wrote a truly penetrating letter on "The Salesian Brother in the thinking of Don Bosco" (ASC 40), and it still merits our attention and meditation today (if anything more than ever because of today's crisis) for it sets forth clearly the scope of Don Bosco's thinking on the whole subject.

The profound social and ecclesial changes of our times urged the two recent General Chapters to take up the theme with particular determination, and GC21 has done this in most systematic fashion in its Document 2, "The Salesian Brother: a lay- religious vocation at the service of the Salesian mission" (GC21, 166-211) and in Document 3, "Formation to Salesian life" (GC21, 299-306). *In this letter I wish to touch on the aspects of these documents that call for special renewal, and to refresh our memories regarding various enlightening directions and certain practical needs.*

### 1. The uniqueness of our Society

Father Rinaldi has written that "the Salesian Brother is a brilliant creation of the great heart of Don Bosco under the inspiration of Mary Help of Christians" (ASC 40). He underlines the splendid modern features found in such a vocation and clearly sets out the reasons therefore: "The Salesian Brother is not to be considered as in second place, nor just a helper, nor even the right arm of his priest-confreres: he is their equal and capable of outpacing them in the way of perfection, as daily experience amply testifies" (ASC 40).

Keeping this excellent quote in context, we must try to understand how this "brilliant creation" Father Rinaldi speaks of really affects the very being of the whole Congregation. It will help us in our reappraisal of all members within the Salesian community.

After Vatican II the *community* was the object of an in-depth study; and this probing had more than a superficial influence on the specific character of community members. Our Constitutions affirm that our Society is made up of clerical and lay religious (art 3), and go on to say that "to live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental need if we are truly to fulfill our vocation" (art 50); our same "mission is entrusted to the community at provincial or at local level; the work done by the members is both important and complementary" (art 34).

These citations from the Constitutions must have an important bearing on the *spiritual life and thinking of every member*. The Salesian is a *community member* and as such must feel in his heart an innate complementary relationship with other confreres who are Salesians in a different way. Hence the Salesian who is priest or cleric (or permanent deacon - which would need its own particular study) should feel a spontaneous bond of communion with the Brother - and the Brother should feel the same towards his priest or cleric confrere.

Our vocation is essentially a community vocation: hence there must be an effective communion that goes deeper than mere friendship between persons. More profoundly significant is the mutual relationship of the two basic elements, priestly and lay. Every confrere (priest, cleric or brother) lives his sacerdotal or lay vocation in a close and integrated relationship with the other - not separately, as though the vocation of each were independent or indifferent from the other.

These two basic choices call for a mutual and vital rapport between the different persons who live them. The two aspects grow and develop together in a life of communion; each is an advantage to the other; the one seeks to imbue the other harmoniously as both strive towards that "splendid modernity" and common mission that constitute the *distinctive character* of our Congregation (cf. GC21, 194). Indeed it was Don Bosco's wish that the Society of St Francis of Sales should be a "fellowship of priests, clerics and laymen (especially craftsmen) desirous of living in unity with the aim of doing good among themselves and among others", Note also", continues Don Bosco, "that among the members of our Congregation there is no distinction; they are all treated in the same way, whether they be craftsmen, clerics or priests, We all consider ourselves as brothers" (MB XII, 152).

It is clear that our Holy Founder, when structuring the Congregation, decided that it should be both clerical and lay in character: not simply clerical, not simply lay, but clerical and lay in one sole communion of life and apostolate.

GC21 has shown the importance and influence of the Salesian Brother element in the educational and pastoral practice of the Preventive System. It has clarified and deepened the ways that priest and brother can complement each other; it has carefully measured the extent to which each element can imbue the other within the organism of a religious pastoral community served and animated by a guide enhanced by the charisms of priestly ordination (GC21, 196, 235, 212-239); yet the Chapter leaves the door open to further research and understanding, to the problem of improving mental attitudes, to courageous rethinking consonant with the cultural evolution and ecclesial renewal that is all about us.

In a special way has the Chapter called on us to build up a kind of community that of its very nature is able to *evangelize by educating and educate by evangelizing* - on which so much stress was laid. The close relationship between priests, clerics and brothers (the Chapter reminds us) "does not mean subordination or opposition; nor does it mean the loss or fusion of one's individual characteristics. On the contrary, it is a distinguishing mark of our Salesian apostolic communities and their members" (GC21, 194).

The differences in the image and role of the confreres are not to be considered as limitations or degrees, but as *sources of riches they share in common*; there is no question of something lacking, but rather the integrating potential to share each other's excellence (GC21, 179); an harmonious contribution to a unique type of religious and apostolic community.

If we lose sight of this organic difference or allow it to become unbalanced, we do serious harm to the identity of the Congregation in its community dimension and hence in its style of apostolate. The present crisis

we are facing is an attack on both our lay and priestly aspect; and especially is it impairing the suitable measure of blending of one aspect with the other. The sacerdotal dimension, nevertheless, having the benefit of long ecclesial tradition, has enjoyed a certain preponderance in this first century of our existence, and has made greater progress (even though today it too needs profound doctrinal revision and greater fidelity to its true nature); on the other hand, the lay dimension (which Don Bosco saw as something quite new - his "brilliant creation", as Father Albera and Father Rinaldi called it) it's lacking in doctrinal tradition and has developed less vigorously despite the illuminating help of superiors and scholars. Gradually this difference also upset the balance of our distinctive Salesian character, and this should cause us to take up the matter seriously and do something about it with all the energy we can muster.

Vatican II and the recent General Chapters have brought new insights to bear on the subject so that we may study and develop what is already contained in the embryo of Don Bosco's foundation.

## **2. The Salesian Brother delineated**

The Brother in our Congregation (like the layman in the Church) can fulfill a vast variety of functions (GC21, 166), and this very fact could throw a false light on his vocation and cause the lay element in our communities to be misunderstood.

### *Description of his various functions*

Speaking generally, the different offices fulfilled by our Brothers during the Congregation's first hundred years would follow this pattern:

1. *Functions of an educational, social, pastoral and formative nature:* that is, cultural and scholastic activities, especially in technical and professional schools; apostolic, sporting, music and drama groups; help and animation for leisure activities, the media, introduction to the work-force, social formation, etc.
2. *So-called tertiary activities:* that is, as office workers, administrators, accountants, buyers, secretaries, sectional representatives, infirmarians, sacristans, staff managers, etc.
3. *Domestic services:* that is, generous workers, about the house, willing to perform all kinds of tasks for which they feel sufficiently competent, such as attending to cleanliness and orderliness, working in the fields, kitchen, bakeries, seeing to the smooth running of establishments, looking after visitors, and often performing the tasks of the invaluable factotum, etc.

This is a summary and incomplete list, but it does make it clear how diverse the activities and services are; the different aptitudes and training required; and the vastly different programming needed for the formation of the Salesian Brother.

In practice, however, these activities are also carried out by priests and clerics (and not necessarily is this an abuse); indeed it is often a necessity and a matter of brotherly co-operation, practicality and part of community living. In fact it is desirable that certain transient daily domestic chores should be increasingly performed together by all members of the community as simple acts of solidarity.

Looking at the various types of services rendered by the Brothers; however, the above list does stress their many-sided (full-time) dedication to a type of activity or service that belongs peculiarly to their special calling.

### *The essential qualities of the Salesian Brother*

All these different services call for a reasonable variation in the apostolate and in formation; but before planning for this it is necessary to see beyond the multifarious activities and discover what constitutes the basic common denominator, the characteristic element, the essential make-up of the Brother as distinct from the priest.

Radically the difference is not one marked by any negative quality or lack of ecclesial endowment; it is a case of a different choice: the Brother has opted for a positive Christian ideal not determined by the

sacrament of Holy Orders but constituted by a number of values which form of themselves a true vocational objective of high quality. Article 37 of the new Constitutions points out clearly the nature of this choice, calling it a vocation - indeed a vocation that is in itself *specific* (it has its own special nature), *complete* (it lacks nothing), *original* (it is the brilliant creation of the Founder) and *meaningful* (it is entirely relevant) (cf. GC21, 173).

*What is the essential and distinctive aim of the Salesian Brother's vocational choice?* GC21 speaks of one of its explicit options as "laicism"\*: "The lay dimension is the concrete form in which the Brother lives and operates as a Salesian Religious. This is his specific characteristic, a noteworthy and essential value of his identity. This lay aspect, then, is not to be taken in a negative sense. Neither is it to be understood as a service or a function. It is rather the sum total of the values that constitute a lay Christian conditioned by the Salesian Religious consecration" (GC21, 178).

### 3. Identity struggle

This statement that the Brother has made an explicit choice of a type of laicism is quite clear but needs to be studied further with calmness and diligence.

Unfortunately we find ourselves in an area not ready for in-depth research; and even the very terminology in use is far from clear, being vague and ill-defined both in secular and ecclesiastical usage. Nevertheless it is essential for us to understand well the assertion of GC21 that "the lay dimension is the concrete form in which the Brother lives and operates as a Salesian Religious". If we do not grasp clearly the truth within this declaration, how can we hope to get down to basics, develop our true community identity, and plan thoroughly for the renewal and reinstatement of this unique vocation?

True, we do have a number of very clear delineations in GC21, 172-180; but there are others that also need study. Let us ask the Holy Spirit for light to deepen our understanding and knowledge regarding the lay element in our community, with special reference to the identity of the Salesian Brother. Here we shall content ourselves with offering a few reflections on the Chapter findings; its documents serve as an indispensable basis for the work we must undertake in respect of this vocation and the formation it requires.

#### *The Salesian Brother is a Religious*

It is eminently clear that the Salesian Brother is a true Religious and not a lay person in the sense used in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (v LG 31). The Council document indicates that the Brother's ecclesial life is not "secular" in character: he does not live for God as a "secular", immersed in matters of the family, employment, culture, politics. Our Salesian Brothers belong well and truly to the *Religious life: their vocation in the Church "testifies in a splendid and singular way that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes" (LG 31)*; their ecclesial commitment, as also that of their confreres, is to "work to the extent of their capacities and in keeping with their particular kind of Religious life to which they have been individually called, whether it be one of prayer or of active labors as well, for the implanting and strengthening of the Kingdom of Christ in souls and for spreading it to the four corners of the earth" (LG 44).

#### *He is not a "consecrated secular"*

Secondly, it is equally clear, for the same reason, that the reinstating of the Salesian Brother is not to be based on that "consecrated secularity" which is the mark of lay members of a Secular Institute ( my letter to the DBV in ASC 295). In the latter vocation there are certain individual ways of carrying out the apostolate, certain ways of interpreting obedience and poverty, certain temporal commitments beyond the specific mission of the Congregation - and these do not fit in with the Brother's true religious profession.

\* Italian is rich in such words as *secolarita*, *secolarismo*, *laicita*, *laicismo* (and others), all with varying nuances. Rather than invent English equivalents (*laicity*?!), the translation keeps to a limited vocabulary: but the context should make the meaning clear in each case.

The community aspect is basic and indispensable for him; it is explicitly prescribed by Don Bosco and insisted on by the Constitutions. His specific spiritual heritage embraces the *sense of membership*, of being complementary, of participating in the mission to youth and the masses, of availability and obedience, of sharing the goods of the community according to the superior's approval, of chastity as the basis of brotherly communion, of daily community prayer, etc. This is a heritage he shares with all Salesian confreres, with all the rights and duties annexed thereto. To quote Father Rinaldi, "The Brothers are true Salesians, obliged to strive towards the same standard of perfection, and to exercise, each according to his own profession or craft, the exact same educational apostolate that is at the heart of the Salesian Society" (ASC 40).

*He is totally Salesian*

Thirdly, it is also very clear that since he is a Salesian Religious with full rights, the Brother is the bearer of the spirit and mission of the Congregation in their entirety. The Society of St Francis of Sales lives the active life, is involved with human beings, and hence is interested in temporal values and areas.

Its mission is obviously religious, dedicated to evangelization and necessarily linked to the vast field of human culture, especially in education and influencing social and political affairs - even though its activity is of quite a different nature. It involves indeed a close merging of Gospel and culture, sacred and temporal, Church and world, Beatitudes and social progress. It is committed to a holiness that really makes an impact, that involves the young, that has an influence in building a new society.

Now the joint efforts to renew our "earthly city", even when this is done with a specific religious mission, implies knowledge and cultivation of the characteristic riches that are in the many so-called human values. The new emerging culture is enriched with the discovery of the wonders of the earth, and at its center labor has pride of place and is man's means of harnessing natural and cosmic forces for the progress of humanity.

An evangelizing mission so involved with the development of man will consequently demand that the community (that carries out this mission) will need to assume many roles and make sundry approaches to the realities of life. This will mean not only different and complementary functions but also diverse and overlapping attitudes. Thus we find in the Congregation's single vocation two fundamental aspects: the sacerdotal and the lay. It is not simply; a case of this or that confrere arbitrarily, independently and haphazardly preferring the ministry or things temporal; no, it is a matter involving the Salesian community as a vital organism, that is, *the Congregation as such*, which has of its essence a peculiar and simultaneous sense of both the sacerdotal consecration and the lay dimension, each imbuing the other and forming together a unique life of communion.

Hence all members of the Salesian community must experience as a part of their lives a kind of "lay sensitivity" and a specific "sacerdotal sensitivity" as they strive for brotherly communion and co-responsibility. At the same time each will achieve this blending through different attitudes and roles, and both will avoid the perils of worldly: laicism on the one hand and an exaggerated clericalism or "popular-front Church" on the other.

It is plain that the Brother's attitude and roles are oriented to the lay aspect and the priest's and cleric's to the sacerdotal; but both are conscious of an intimate and indissoluble relationship in such a way that this mutual and harmonious overlapping constitutes part of the special Salesian spirituality they share in common; hence my initial statement: that every confrere is a community member, and as such must feel in his heart an innate linkage - priests and clerics with the Brother, and Brother with the priests and clerics.

Unfortunately in some places people refer to us as "The Salesian Fathers", as if the community or Province were reserved for priests only or characterized by them alone. Even amongst ourselves at times, for some reason or other, apostolic commitment are planned which have little if any place for the role of the Brother. Such activities imply a perilous imbalance in our vocation.

The community can deviate into two dangerous "clericalistic" extremes: reducing the Salesian apostolic project to a simple cultural and catechetical activity; or a kind of secularist monopoly on the part of the priests that is a travesty and falsification of their sacerdotal character and ministry, and invades the field proper to Brothers and layfolk.

A Salesian community should always study what constitutes the specific and essential contribution of the Brother, even if no Brothers are yet available for the community (and in that case the substitution should be on a temporary basis.) This is the only way to put a correct assessment on how necessary the Brother is and set about seriously remedying such a harmful deficiency.

It is sad that not all in the Congregation seem to feel this way. In a recent questionnaire put out by the Formation Department among the Provinces the question was put: "Salesianly speaking, how does the Province feel about the lack of Brothers?" Some answered, "We are getting used to it". If in the face of this sad reality we assume such an attitude of resignation, it is my sad conviction that we are on the way to losing a distinctive dimension that belongs to the essence of our Congregation.

*He has opted for the lay aspect*

And there is a fourth factor that is reasonably clear, at least as an affirmation of the distinctive character of the Brother - namely, that the lay aspect is, in our Congregation, the practical way the Brother lives and acts as a Salesian Religious. This is hardly the place to describe the many and various roles of the Brother. We would rather examine the attitude that is basic to his characteristic vocation - by which the Salesian heart of the Brother (and hence his special apostolate and formation) is distinguished by particular positive values from that of the priest or cleric (and this is a difference that is a rich asset to communion). It is this very diversity that invests the Brother with an indispensable element of community identity and is responsible for a unique modern touch in the Salesian way of life and action.

At this point certain fascinating and difficult queries arise. Basically the problem does not lie in the practical and material activities of the Brother but in the fundamental psychological reason of his choice. To understand the *lay aspect* one's first task is to grasp *not what the Brother wants or is able to do, but what his attitude is as he works*. In other words, what goes on inside him that characterizes his life choice? What is his state of mind in his thinking, his activities, his witnessing, his influence on the religious tone of the whole community?

Naturally this attitude will as a consequence indicate certain preferences and differences in his activities and practical responsibilities. There will be in the community's mission certain necessary and opportune things that will appear as belonging to the Brother - not in a stereotyped way according to a set of fixed rules, but according to the various and changeable cultural or circumstantial requirements. As Don Bosco said so practically and understandingly, "There are things that priests and clerics cannot do, and you will do them" (MB XVI, 313).

The lay aspect, then, is not a *negative* affair (the absence of ordination); nor is it a *passive attitude* (waiting for the word to collaborate), as though the Brother were a mere instrument in the hands of another. No, the lay aspect requires that the Brother show a *positive drive* proper to an associate who is active and co-responsible, with initiative and ideas for the apostolate. In fact it expresses an essential aspect of the Salesian vocation itself.

Hence the last Chapter very rightly indicated a number of practical, distinctive and excellent traits in the spiritual life of the Brother (v GC21, 186-191); and it did so because his identity houses a living soul, that is, a spiritual force that nourishes, develops and energizes him and makes him an enthusiastic bearer of the riches of the Gospel to others.

What are the contents and the extent of this lay dimension? This is a question that demands an answer; and an attempt to answer it means in effect a deeper understanding of the identity of the whole Congregation.

Our vague ideas and little knowledge regarding the true significance of "laicism" are probably the main reason for not understanding the thinking of our Father and Founder in relation to the Salesian Brother (and this goes too for the Co-operators and indeed all the Salesian Family). But, not to digress, we must keep to the lay aspect in the religious community of the Salesians of Don Bosco.



## 4. In what does this lay aspect consist?

When a Salesian Brother makes his religious profession he is invested with a characteristic ideal which becomes part and parcel of his life, urging him on with an intense, unique, spiritual drive and receiving its specific nature from the *lay dimension*. However, the so-called "laicism" to which the Brother refers his vocation-choice, presents such a vast array of diverse aspects (some clear, some vague, some divergent) that one could lose oneself in listing and explaining them all. But there is a common nucleus that forms the basis of the values we are searching for.

We limit our findings to a few of the more established clarifications in present day Christian thinking. We shall briefly indicate three main levels of laicism that are to the point in this study.

### *Laicism in creation*

In the first place there is a level of laicism that refers to the universal condition of the values of creation. This is anterior to the Church and in a sense beyond its pale; it reaches out to all nature in its basic truth, that is, all created things in as much as they all have their innate goodness (v Genesis I, 25, 31 also AA 7).

Such laicism is at the base of all knowledge, all science, all technology. It is important to note that created things are not eternal, nor are they the result of a creative determinism. They are the object of a free God who knows what he wills and why he wills it. They constitute then the first step of a dialogue between God and man before any human word, any interpretation and indeed before any religion.

It is not out of place to observe that the awareness of this kind of laicism could initiate a spiritual attitude and a universal dialogue; and this is very important today in a world obsessed with science and technology yet without any sense of creation and unable to see unity in the cosmos and its significance for man. Thus a *healthy lay mentality* at this level is a protection against all ideological brainwashing; it humbly and painstakingly seeks objective truth in creation's complexity.

Furthermore, our Christian faith has here a reliable yardstick for self-examination, for avoiding or getting rid of any irrational or mythological superstructures. Secularism today, in its positive aspects, can be considered a just maturing in reason and faith in reference to creation and its truths. God and creation are not two mighty antagonists dividing between themselves what is sacred and what is profane. Between God and creation there is unity, in the sense that nature exists precisely because the Creator wills it so.

A "lay mentality" therefore views the "profane" not only with enjoyment but also in a spiritual sense, recognizing its natural goodness. The temptation to separate God and creation is equally pernicious whether in the attitude of the "laicist" who sees nature as something quite apart from God or in that type of "clericalism" (in any religion) which manipulates temporal values in an arbitrary fashion that has nothing to do with religion. Our Christian faith tells us that Christ is not an alternative to the cosmos, but its fulfillment, "In him all things hold together... and through him .God reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col I, 17, 20). Unfortunately the widespread creed of today preaches that to liberate man and make him a Prometheus of the universe requires the elimination of God. This is just short-sighted materialism or dreary mythology. It is no proper lay mentality but a degenerate atheistic laicism; whereas the knowledge of the objective realities of creation is a basic premise for every type of proper laicism.

We could say in this sense that a "lay mentality" is concerned with objective truth; it dedicates itself to this no matter how complex things are, no matter how much study, science, technology, patience and experimentation be called for; it cultivates a close attention and respect for assessing facts, a deep sense of professionalism, an awareness of the importance and problems of all facets of work, a factual approach to reality, a serious attitude to planning, an instinctive co-operation, and a profound appreciation of organization. Indeed the universe is a good teacher.

All these qualities will be hard to find in one who thinks he can do away with secular values. Intuition, poetic temperament, goodwill or prayer will not fly a plane. Gilson justly says, "We are told that medieval

cathedrals were built by faith; but faith would have built nothing without the architects. We Catholics who acknowledge the excellence of nature, since it is the work of God, must show our respect for it by making it a prime rule in our activities *that devotion never dispense with technology*".

### *Laicism in the mission of the Church*

There is another level of laicism and it belongs specifically to *the Church in the history of mankind*. It has reference to those disciples of Christ whom the Church calls *the laity*. They "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence" (LG 31).

*This laicism sees the world not so much as creation in general but as human beings*, as "the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and its failures, the world freed from the slavery of sin by Christ" (GS 2).

The lay Christian lives as a member of a Church which is the servant of man and the universal sacrament of salvation. Its mission is also "to imbue and perfect the whole range of the temporal with the spirit of the Gospel" (AA 5). And the layman sees himself as living out his baptism in his particular role of secularity (v LG 31). He is engaged in the multifarious temporal affairs and sees them as belonging to his vocation – matters to do with the family, social affairs, health, education, culture, employment, professions, industry, the economy, the sciences, justice, politics, public relations, peace, and many other such concerns.

Areas of human interest to be imbued and perfected by the spirit of the Gospel are indeed numerous and complex and call for all kinds of functions and professions, different ways of involvement both by individuals and associations, and in various walks of life ranging from the married state to consecrated secularity. Thus there is an ever-varied and beneficent pluralism in the Church's laity - with one thing in common, their identical *secular character*.

Unfortunately it is the daily experience of the laity that among human beings the *mystery of evil* is ever active, with its overbearing idols of eroticism, riches and power. The laity are aware of the fetters of human weakness, ignorance and sin that hinder man from perceiving and respecting the basic laicism of creation and from reaching out to the transcendent and throwing open the doors to Christ. They see clearly that evil is not seated in creation but in the heart of man and certain structures set up by him. It is man's free will that manipulates temporal affairs towards evil.

The laity thus feel called to wage a constant war. In the midst of the world they understand that we cannot do without Christ and his Church. They rejoice that they are a part of a vast and divinely efficacious Mystical Body. They look to the priesthood and religious life as essential elements of their Christian existence and indispensable sources of inspiration, energy and spirituality. They see in the whole ecclesial community the fruitful means of salvation.

In the first level of laicism we made reference to a "lay mentality". In this second level of laicism we must now speak of a "*lay vocation*" - which is, after all, a life that participates in the mission of the Church. Living such a vocation, the layman impregnates his temporal commitments with the Gospel; he feels his lay state is not genuine without the help of grace; that his engagement in any profession or craft is unhallowed until he conquers the temptation to put his own interests before objective values; and he knows from experience that a man is not whole and entire without Christ the Lord of history.

The lay vocation urges one to make a useful contribution to the history of mankind; to courageously opt for man and to stand staunchly by him in his misfortunes; to view the world not just as a place for sociological development but as a godly area where he may live his life of faith; to acquire proficiency in some temporal activity; to be aware of the extreme complexity of many of these activities; to strive to see what is possible and probable in social, cultural and political situations. Thus he will not strike the didactic pose nor dogmatize on matters that are open for discussion; he will respect other people's ideas and be willing to dialogue as he goes in quest of the fundamentals of laicism in creation and of the mystery of Christ.



The lay vocation calls for a psychology of realism and practicality; it is based on the conviction that apostolic action requires serious effort, dedication, study, planning, sacrifice, humility, prayer and courage.

The layman does not naively ignore or shut his eyes to complications that go with organization, structures, institutions; indeed he marvels that some clergy and religious see their Christian commitment in such an abstract and superficial light that it becomes disembodied and immaterial - attractive, perhaps, but quite divorced from reality and its needs.

Since he belongs by baptism to the prophetic and royal priesthood of the People of God (v LG 34-36), he sets about making the world the true temple of the Lord and turning man's manifold activities into a conscious and vital liturgy blending with the Eucharistic Christ. Creation thus becomes, through salvation-history, a dialogue of love between God and man, and the world is seen in the guise of the sacramental mediation of this intercommunion.

Such a vocation enables the layman to unearth from the "profane" a rich vein of sanctity - even attaining to spiritual heights traced out by holy Founders who have initiated special Gospel projects. We thank the Holy Spirit that among these latter he raised up Don Bosco at the beginnings of the industrial revolution to offer to men his special spirituality of apostolic action suitable for all, cleric, religious or laic.

### *Laicism as a practical aspect in the religious life*

Within the Church there is a third level of laicism, *in a more limited field* and suitable for the religious life. It is not what in ecclesiastical circles is known as "secularity", but is classed by the Church as a "form of religious life". It does not mean an immediate involvement in the world and its temporal activities but implies that one directly and publicly belongs to a community of Religious who witness to the Beatitudes; it is urged on by the overriding conviction of man's final destiny in which the values of the resurrection are seen as already present, operative and all-important in the history of man after the Easter victory.

Religious are groups of disciples of the Risen Christ whom the Church recognizes and charges with the public testimony of that charity that was the definitive gift of the Risen Christ at Pentecost. Thus they are specifically characterized by a total self-donation to a supremely loved God who ratifies the *gift* with a more intimate consecration of docility to the Holy Spirit (v LG 44).

This specific character is obviously quite different from "secularity" in so far as it is a form of life - incorporated in a particular community, bound by public vows (aimed at the three idols of evil), professing a Gospel project sanctioned by Constitutions, owing obedience to a legitimate authority, and specifically participating in the Church's mission according to the design of the Founder.

It is to be noted that in itself the Religious life (given the organic structure of the Church) can include priests, clerics or layfolk. "It should be seen as a form of life, to which some Christians, both clerical and lay, are called by God so that they may enjoy a special gift of grace in the life of the Church, and may contribute, each in his own way, to the saving mission of the Church" (LG 43). The Religious life is not one-sided and cannot be interpreted narrowly as if there were not many different charisms raised up by the Spirit of Christ through the various Founders.

Amongst the numerous types of Institutes of the active life the lay aspect may wear many different coats. Many such Institutes are solely laic in character; others, such as our Congregation, have a lay dimension that is specific and original. Such a characteristic must not be interpreted and lived as "secularity"; yet it will have a real connection (according to the different charisms) and a certain congruence of thought and activity with the two levels of laicism we have already spoken of. The contemplative aspect that is proper to every religious vocation does not oblige a Congregation of active life to have a monastic soul - but rather to cultivate its eschatological thrust in an apostolate among men. It would be ignoring facts to maintain that with reference to the world and the problem of salvation our Congregation should not include the area of the working classes and the education of youth. Vatican II proclaims loud and clear: "Let no one think that their consecrated life alienates Religious from other men or makes them useless for human society" (LG 46).

Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation "Evangelica Testificatio" addresses Religious in these words: "A burning question of the present day preoccupies us: How can the message of the Gospel penetrate the

world? What can be done at those levels in which a new culture is unfolding? ... where a new type of man is emerging? You must give your full attention to the needs of men, their problems and their searchings; you must give witness in their midst, through prayer and action, to the good news of love, justice and peace. Such a mission, which is common to all the People of God, belongs to you in a special way" (ET 52).

Indeed, the "secular character" proper to layfolk reflects and imbues them with a dimension of realism that belongs to the whole Church in its sacramental and universal mission of salvation; and so it can be in some ways shared by various religious charisms according to their special way of life. And this is the case with us, The Society of Salesians of Don Bosco was born at the dawn of the industrial revolution to co-operate "in a religious manner" in the building up of the new society.

In those Institutes of active life that have a lay dimension, there will be *lay confreres* to fulfill that specific role. They will assure the Institute of this special dimension and see to its implementation. This role is a *vocation* and not simply a service performed. It implies the daily consolidation of three complementary and inseparable aspects that constitute the main source of the identity of the lay religious.

- *Religious consecration*, which is his fundamental option in his following of Christ.

- *The spirit of the Founder*, which is the Gospel setting he lives in and from which he draws his inspiration for his charges in the apostolate.

- *The choice of the lay dimension*, which is the positive and ideal vocation he assumes in the light of the overall charism of the Institute he belongs to.

In this third level of laicism it is clear that the nexus with the other two levels cannot be reasoned out by arbitrary or 'a priori' arguments: they must be the subject of updated and practical examination by all the Institutes concerned.

## 5. The true mark of the Salesian Brother

We have seen that to determine the content and scope of the lay dimension of the Salesian Brother, it is not enough to list his tasks (that is, what he actually does), but it is necessary to examine his interior attitude to these activities. This latter involves a religious consecration animated by the spirit of Don Bosco and specified by an aware and positive bonding to the lay aspect that is proper to the Society of St Francis of Sales.

### *Belonging to the community*

We are now back where we started, but with enriched and clearer ideas.

We began with the overall significance of the Salesian vocation, considering the Congregation as a whole, or a communion of complementary members. Only by basing our examination on our specific *community* characteristic (the very essence of our Salesian life and mission) were we able to describe more accurately the make-up of the Salesian Brother. Analyzing the different levels of laicism (to further clarify the role of the Brother) we found ourselves again reflecting on the overall meaning of the Congregation as such.

It is significant that one cannot study the Salesian Religious without beginning with the concept of community and ending up at the same point. As we set about this brief examination of the lay dimension and arrived at the "third level of laicism" we found ourselves back again at the ideal of unity that our overall charism insists on so much.

This is just as it should be. Indeed it is only in this kind of circling that we shall find the various kinds of elements that constitute the true badge of the Salesian Brother. Furthermore, such research improves once again that we are not in crisis over a category of members, but that the problem is one that touches the very nature of our community in the face of the new culture and its challenge.

Rightly did the recent Chapters change the nomenclature from Salesian priest, Salesian cleric and Salesian brother to priest-Salesian, cleric-Salesian, and Brother-Salesian. They were not just juggling with words: the Chapter members had really clarified their identity. The Brother as such, precisely because of his choice of the lay dimension, is a true Salesian, and bears the responsibilities (with his other associates) of the whole community.

Hence it is understandable that in the light of the clarifications of these recent years the very term "coadiutore" (that we have become used to over the years) presents something of a problem. Even in Don Bosco's time this was so. He accepted the then official usage of the Bishops and Regulars. It would seem that the word does not really express the unique thinking of our Founder. The terms priest-Salesian, cleric-Salesian and deacon-Salesian express the nature and ecclesiastical characteristics of these members, while the title "Salesiano coadiutore" (Salesian-who-assists-in-the-ministry) really indicates a *function* and derives from the ecclesiastical terminology (Fratres coadjutores) of a different age. Perhaps certain misconceptions of what exactly Don Bosco held in mind are due to the ecclesiastical use of this title. Indeed in common parlance outside the Congregation the name has meant little and certainly does not get near Don Bosco's unique ideal; in fact in some places it has a whittled-down and negative significance.

Unfortunately it has not been easy to come up with a more suitable term that is clear and precise. After the studies of the last Chapter and our subsequent reflections thereon, it is understandable that the term "lay Salesian" is coming into favor, especially as the word "Salesian" expresses the essential state of "Religious" and member of the Society of St Francis of Sales founded by Don Bosco. Still, we have to admit we have not arrived at a term that catches the uniqueness of the lay element in our Congregation.

Our Society is an Institute of the active life. It explicitly interests itself in the toils and moils (even secular) of human life - and this to the extent that it is at the heart of this vast family to involve innumerable layfolk. We are not monks who fly from the world (which is meant in the good sense and is characteristic of many excellent Religious Orders); we nourish within ourselves an "interest in the temporal" in our restless apostolate among men: we live "religiously" immersed and interested in the day to day vicissitudes of human society - and hence the birth of our Secular Institutes.

The consecration of the Salesian Brother (which is identical with that of all his fellow Salesians) is inextricably linked with specific problems of man's development.

There is no preconceived tabulation by which we Salesians must list our vocations under certain categories, and the clarifying of the vocation of the Salesian Brother is a test (Father Rinaldi would call it transcendent) for the clarifying of the lay element in our Society. We have already noted how Don Bosco, at the dawn of the industrial revolution, founded the Society of St Francis of Sales for working-class youngsters. For him they were the most precious members of human society, on whom rested the future hopes of mankind (MB II, 45). In our first Holy Rule he wrote, "From the quality of their education, good or bad, will depend the happy or wretched future *of society* (MB V, 931). In our holy Founder's thinking there is clearly a *social concern*. I think we could justly speak of a kind of "lay style" in our Congregation as we take stock of the history of its founding, the unique way of life Don Bosco had in mind, and the very nature of the mission he chose. A few instances follow.

### *Secular slant in the Congregation*

Don Bosco's plan was to set up a vast apostolic movement for youth and the masses, suitable for work among the new social and cultural conditions of the times. When he condensed his ideas into a "Rule" he drew up a chapter on "Extern Salesians", and the first article expressed very well this innovation: "Any person, even living in the world in his own home and family, can belong to our Society..." (MB X, 889, 1308).

In this we see a deep interest and a definite slant towards the secular conditions of his times. Later Father Rinaldi tried to carry out this idea, at least partly, when he organized the group of devotees who have developed into today's Secular Institute of Don Bosco Volunteers.

Then as Don Bosco, prompted by God and backed by Pius IX, realized that it was absolutely necessary for his project that an animating nucleus be organized that would have the stability and consistency of a true Religious Congregation, he founded our Society. Such a foundation needed a *new style* to suit the particular exigencies of the rapidly developing new social conditions. It was none other than the anti-clerical Minister of State, Ratazzi, who advised him along these lines. Everything about the new Society needed to fit in closely with the inescapable process of secularization towards which man was speedily heading: hence our new style of life, flexibility of structure, ownership of goods, religious garb, easy adaptability, family spirit, terminology

(casa, ispettore, sig. direttore, sig. assistente, etc.), our special fields of apostolate, and our working-class circumstances.

The very nature of our activity is slanted towards a witness and service open to the secular: the "activity-spirituality" of St Francis of Sales is explicitly interested in temporal values and translates the wealth of the contemplative dimension and the religious vows into an education aimed at building up among men a society of love. Our mission among youth and the masses, in which we live out the vital tenets of the Preventive System, direct the Salesian's evangelizing efforts along channels of secular culture and social education that open up man's development to the indispensable mystery of Christ.

In such a Congregation there are surely ample areas and conditions for the vigorous development for the vocation of the Salesian Brother. Father Rinaldi, in his incisive circular letter makes this point very emphatically. It is worth while quoting him, even at considerable length.

He says that Don Bosco "made religious perfection accessible at all levels of society". Then, referring to layfolk in the world, he says that "the field is vast and the harvest is ripe everywhere. It is necessary to invite to the harvest those to whom the Lord has given the bright vision of a higher vocation. And there are many who would willingly embrace this kind of spiritual life which occupies their thoughts in times of closer union with God. They make no decision because they think that kind of apostolate and life of perfection is only for those who are called to the priesthood.

"My dear Salesians, we must acquaint all with the too-little known fact that the religious life is not just for priestly vocations but for all who feel within themselves the desire to lead a more perfect life and serve the Lord better in the many functions of the apostolate. Let us bruit abroad this good news by word of mouth, by writing, indeed by every means at our disposal. The beauty and grandeur of the vocation to the simple religious life is a divine gift of inestimable value and must be described as such. Let us make known the beauty and grandeur of the Salesian Brother's vocation. Let us train many good Brothers in all the various professions and trades. In the beginning Don Bosco was particularly absorbed in priestly vocations because without them he would not have been able to set up our Society, and also because in those days there was a great dearth of priests. However, in his Constitutions he sanctioned the principle of the simple religious vocation on the same plane as the priest-religious in all but the sacerdotal dignity. He made it clear that one day his Society would have a large number of lay Religious to carry out a true apostolate throughout the world" (ASC 4).

Those who would share and savor again this prophetic vision of the lay element in our Congregation should ponder well this excellent circular of Father Rinaldi.

## **6. Parlous situation**

At this juncture, and at the risk of grieving you I think it apposite to quote certain statistics on the critical situation that obtains today in the Congregation.

With certain exceptions it would seem that various communities have not really fathomed the depths of the "unique creation" of Don Bosco's project. Perhaps they do not know or have not yet experienced the extensive excellence and enriching influence that the Salesian Brother brings to the Congregation. Furthermore, there is no doubt that for many years there has been a certain lack of adequate formation. A glance at some figures may rouse us from a perilous torpor.

### *Some statistics*

In Don Bosco's time the ratio of Brother to priest and cleric was 1:2 (one laic to two ecclesiastics). Today the ratio is 1:4.62 and falling. In the last 14 years (i.e., from 1966, when the Brothers reached their peak of 4,299) they dropped by 31.02% to the present number of 2,962. On the other hand, the drop in priests and clerics in the last 13 years (since 1967, when they peaked to 17,346) has been 20.65% to the present number of 13,346. There is a difference of 10.37% in the fall of each group - to the disadvantage of the Brothers.

A glance at the candidates entering the Congregation shows Brothers to clerics in a ratio of 1:9.88 (i.e., 44 Brothers to 435 clerics).

The maximum number of Brother-novices was 393 in 1956. Compared with today's numbers the drop is 84.98%. Cleric-novices reached their maximum in 1966 with 1,225; their number today shows a fall of 64.49%. The difference between the two groups is 20.49% - to the disadvantage of the Brothers. In the first months of this year, 1980, there were at least 57 Provinces without Brother-novices; 9 Provinces had 1; 7 had 2; one had 6; one (Madrid) had 15. Several Provinces have had none for some years: some up to 10 years without, and one up to 14 years (since 1967).

### *Suggestion for the future*

This is today's sad situation, when we really should be expecting a change for the better in the lay dimension in the Congregation. Vatican II has shed new light on the lay vocation and given it a fresh impetus; it has initiated an ecclesial and apostolic evolution that has changed not only the importance and function but even the very proportion of committed layfolk and their role in the apostolate.

To apply this situation to the Congregation is not stretching the matter too far; nor does it mean that we are dividing ourselves into two separate categories: rather do we see our two groups as having developed and matured as one united whole - a growth that does not impair the distinctive character of the Congregation but rather increases its apostolic efficiency, since it implies an overall renewal of the community; and this, after all, means improving the authenticity of its two basic and overlapping dimensions, priestly and lay.

Father Rinaldi presents us with a curious thought, both humorous and daring. "According to the spirit in other Congregations", he writes "(and I do not refer here to the quite different cases of the ancient monastic Orders), the number of laybrothers was made to depend on the number of 'secondary jobs' available. When the required number was filled, God was expected in some way or other to make no more vocational calls, since there were no places left for the poor layfolk. "With his Society", continues Father Rinaldi, "Don Bosco opened up the way of religious perfection not just to a given number but to *all laymen who felt the call to holiness in community life* in educating poor and abandoned youth or in the apostolate of the missions. Thus Don Bosco, with his Society, put religious perfection within the pale of people of all classes: they could follow their various callings, artistic, cultural, mechanical or agricultural. In the Salesian Society there is a place for every category: the lesser educated can attain holiness in the ordinary chores of our houses; the teachers have the classrooms or the universities, the craftsmen their workshops, the farmers their fields" (ASC 40).

In the face of this prophetic vision of Father Rinaldi, the above statistics leave us shocked and grieved. They call for a serious soul-searching on our part, a reawakening from a kind of lethargy induced perhaps by a lack of serious thought over a long period of time as well as the agonizing that is due to today's sweeping changes.

Of course our own statistics are a part of the vast cultural upheavals of today. In some ways these have seriously impinged on certain aspects of our Salesian life more directly connected with today's industrial developments.

The world of industry is intimately bound up with progress in science and technology; hence it has been subjected to an intense acceleration. Furthermore, together with the steady development of modern means and the astounding novelties of our times, man has become increasingly self-centered, inclined towards secularism (both the well-to-do as well as the working-force) and contemptuous of the ideals of the Gospel. Our Civilization is rich in technology but poor in wisdom, open to consumerism but closed to sacrifice; it smothers the worker with a subtle and penetrating materialism; the worker is seen as the only one who matters and who has all the answers.

When interpretative studies are attempted, recourse is had to materialistic philosophies that reduce everything to a purely secularist basis. Thus the lay Christian who would realize his ecclesial vocation in the ordering of the world is made to appear dwarfed and effete. We must recognize that *the crisis in the lay vocation in its various expressions is truly colossal*.

This is an enormous problem that overwhelms us: but we are still involved. We shall not solve the difficulties of the Salesian Brother vocation with nostalgia for the good old days or with an attempt to patch things up. What is needed is a lively awareness of the meaning of the World and the mission of the Church - in which there is a privileged place for the multifarious forms of a renewed Christian laity. The indispensable drive of this laity must be brought to light and intensified. And this is exactly what is happening in the Church. We are on the verge of a new era that is positive and promising.

### *Trust in the Holy Spirit*

In the last ten years the Holy Spirit has helped us in the renewal of the People of God by means of Vatican II, giving a fresh relevance to the lay vocation. He has raised up new groups of people to form Secular Institutes who fulfill their consecration by committing themselves to extensive areas of lay involvement. He has awakened the Church to recognize the signs of the times in the promotion of women for an immense and fruitful lay apostolate. He has inspired the many lay vocations for men in the religious life to excellent new ventures and updating to suit the times.

GC21 draws our attention to the fact that during our century of existence the lay dimension in our Society has truly flourished in its own inimitable way, and many of our Brothers have attained to heroic degrees of charity. "All of us know of such confreres in different places and circumstances achieving sanctity sometimes in the most hidden and self-sacrificing ways. Many have found a place in the annals of the Congregation. Some of them, martyrs for the faith or heroes of charity, have become candidates for canonization" (GC21, 191). We are reminded of such men as Simon Srugi of Palestine and Artemides Zatti of Patagonia, whose causes for canonization are in progress. The many wonderful examples raised up by the Holy Spirit in the past and present are an invitation to us Salesians to marshal our forces in confidence and make an enlightened recovery.

The Christian vision of creation, the ecclesiology of Vatican II, statistics, cultural changes, the signs of the times, the deep travail of the Church - all challenge us to be up and doing in a united search for an answer to our problem as a vast new future looms ahead of us. Our solution will be based on faith and prophecy. We shall find encouragement in the renewal commitment of these years, the recent practical efforts to widen the scope of the Brothers' responsibilities, the significant successes in some zealous Provinces, and the serious post-capitular work in the areas of vocation and formation. These are all positive steps towards a genuine renewal.

## **7. Today's most urgent task**

The SGC warns us that "the main point at the moment is the change in mind and attitude of the whole Congregation towards the Salesian Brother" (SGC 184).

Hence in the ensuing six years there were Provincial and Regional Conventions, followed by a World Convention. But we have to admit in all humility they were not sufficient. Therefore we must get busy on other initiatives according to the future thinking and guidelines of GC21, delving deeper and involving every single Province, every single house and every single confrere.

Quite a few Salesians really do need a veritable change in outlook - which, as we have seen, involves in the final analysis the very nature of the Congregation. I believe that to a certain extent all of us need to rethink, in all honesty and Salesian loyalty, this special aspect of our identity. Without this basic rethinking all our practical efforts could end up with just another shallow "categorizing" of our vocation, another flash in the pan.

I began this letter with the intention of being brief and practical; but in dutiful deference to the vital urgency of the topic I have had to modify its content and length. Pardon me if I insist that we cannot afford to delude ourselves: this is not a case of patching up an old coat - we have to get busy on a brand new garment. It is not just a case of a "category" of confreres that is in crisis; it is the lay dimension of our Salesian

Congregation that IS being challenged. We must rethink this dimension in genuine fidelity to Don Bosco and the times.

In line then with the Chapter's behests, let us make practical efforts to achieve the following aims:

- *A more accurate knowledge of the identity of the Salesian Brother* in our Congregation.
- *An acute awareness in all confreres and all local communities* of the whole situation.
- *A genuine effort to ensure the co-responsibility of the Salesian Brother* at all levels (GC21, 192-193, 210-211).
- *An efficient vocation apostolate*, seeking ways and means for an effective, significant and apostolic presence of the Salesian Brother among the young (GC21, 209).
- *Renewal in the formation of all Salesians*.

This final point could be considered the real key to the practical solution of the crisis.

Broadly and basically the problem of the "Salesian Brother" lies in this: How shall we bring fresh life and immediacy to the lay dimension of the Congregation without falling into the trap of certain secularist abuses seen here and there in some of our priests (the which is the opposite extreme of an exaggerated clericalism and is not only erroneous but at times smacks of the ridiculous)? How shall we ensure that the relaunching of the lay dimension will at the same time involve a clearer and more genuine priestly dimension? In the emerging culture of today how shall we initiate new and authentic Salesian presences, both priestly and lay? If we abandon certain institutions which have made these presences a reality for a hundred years, what practical steps are we taking to ensure their continuance in the future? How shall we reestablish the vocation of the Salesian Brother and preserve our form of community life and the principles of the educational and pastoral project of Don Bosco? How can we set up a Salesian Brother vocation apostolate, making sure it is true to the "transcendent modernity" of the Salesian community? In these modern times how shall we present the religious ideal of the overlapping of the priestly and lay dimensions in our Congregation? Where shall we look for candidates, and how shall we train them for maturity? How shall we form them according to Salesian principles for each of the two options?

I beg of you to read again the "practical directives" of GC21 with renewed and enthusiastic commitment (206-201).

Our missionary ideals, our Project Africa, the adequate revival of our trade schools, the promotion of youth centers for young workers, Christian worker movements, (v GC21, 185), the cultural and social fact of youth problems in the

work-force (GC21, 183) - all these factors must be included in our forward planning. Let us turn again to GC21 as it develops the principle of the Brother's full, active and responsible participation in the apostolic activities of the Salesian community in accordance with his lay dimension (GC21, 181), which is not limited to professional matters but extends to educating in the faith and to the non-sacerdotal ministries for those who feel themselves called thereto (GC 21, 182).

It goes without saying that it is the serious duty of the Congregation to make it possible for the Brothers to reach the peak of their mission as Salesian educators (GC21, 184) in accordance with the talents and roles of each individual. Especially should each Brother be assured of the adequate spiritual elements we have been speaking of.

## **8. The crucial task of formation**

Before concluding I want to insist on responsibility in the task of formation. After all that has been said, it is plain this is not limited to young Brothers, but extends to all confreres, both Brothers and priests, and embraces initial and ongoing formation. Without extraordinary and earnest emphasis of formation I believe it impossible to achieve radical change in a short time. But if the formation is given in a thoroughly renewed fashion, especially for the younger generation, there is good promise for the future.



For reasons already touched on (v GC21, 244), the last General Chapter, when discussing formation, determined that the priests and Brothers should have their formation in common, even though there would necessarily be a different slant for each (GC21, 240). We have to admit that despite the initiatives set afoot, much remains to be done in this area (GC21, 299-300).

### *Unity of formation*

GC21 lays great stress on *unity of formation*. The Salesian priest or cleric who has no knowledge of the practical values of the lay vocation in the Congregation lacks a true Salesian awareness; and the same goes for the Brother who knows nothing of the sacerdotal dimension.

Taking up article 103 of the Constitutions, GC21 confirms that "clerics and lay religious receive the same religious basic formation" with parity of programming. This means not only that the period of formation up to final profession goes through the same phases, but also the same complete content of Salesianity, avoiding the error of treating the groups as two different and separated categories. Hence "it is desirable that", both in the novitiate and immediate post-novitiate period, "clerics and Brothers lead a life in common in the same formation community, where they may gain an appreciation of both forms of the single Salesian vocation" (GC21, 303).

We are further reminded that "unity of formation is assured in the community when it has a harmonious formation team of priests and Brothers" (GC21, 245). The presence of a Salesian Brother in the formation team is a *new and important injunction*. In substance it comes to this, that if a confrere reaches maturity in his vocation without a clear awareness of the overlapping of the two elements, he runs the risk of being an incomplete Salesian.

To avoid this separate categorizing of confreres, the Chapter goes on to add that "to be faithful to our founding charism, those in charge of formation should seek to know, to present, and to make better appreciated our Salesian identity in the twofold dimension of our Salesian religious vocation, lay and priestly" (GC21, 305). "Wherever possible" (and every effort should be made to make it possible) "the Brother should be present in the formation structure, not merely through cultural and formation duties, but above all through responsibilities of formation to the religious and Salesian life. Therefore special care must be taken to prepare Brothers capable of playing a suitable role in such a formation team" (GC21, 305).

This is indeed a clear duty, albeit here and now an arduous one, given the present critical situation.

### *Specific formation*

After treating of this basic unity of formation, the Chapter goes on to enjoin a *specific formation*. So that the Salesian Brother or priest may truly enrich his confreres (be they priests, clerics or Brothers) with the wealth proper to his own specific calling, it is necessary that each cultivate and deepen his own proper formation (v GC21, 292).

The present situation makes it obvious that certain "specific contents for the formation of the Salesian priest and of the Salesian Brother are missing" (GC21, 247), and this is more so in the case of the Brother. Certain elements of the specific formation of the Salesian Brother are enumerated as necessary in all phases of the formation process, and a constant part of formation at the twofold level of "study-reflection" and "practice-experience". These are listed as:

- a *religious and Salesian formation*, which will help the Brother to grasp the special ethos proper to our Society;

- an *adequate pedagogical, cultural and Salesian training*;

- a *sufficient apostolic competence* in theology and catechetics;

- a *technical or professional training* suitable to the talents and circumstances of each individual in accordance with the pastoral and educational character of our Congregation; and

- a *social and political education* to prepare him for specific educational activities among the workforce (v GC21, 302).

Naturally, in all this, account must be taken of the many different facets of our lay dimension and the practical circumstances of each member.

All will be able to bring to bear the riches of their own personal experience and thinking and further enhance the above directives of the Chapter.

### *Ongoing formation*

Finally, special importance must be given today to ongoing formation. In this matter GC21 has presented us with a document rich in new ideas and prospects (v GC21, 307-342). This is required reading and study for our relaunching of the Salesian Brother vocation. When planning for ongoing formation, the sources to be accorded pride of place should be the Chapter documents on the Brother, this present letter of mine (and especially Father Rinaldi's), and the various studies and source material already available. Every Province, every house, every confrere must shoulder this responsibility .

It is highly desirable that seminars, including live-ins, be organized with the aim of making an in-depth study of certain areas not yet well understood. (Several groups of Provinces must be praised for already having done this). Much good will result, not only in the personal enrichment of the participants, but also in the contribution such study groups will make to the drawing-up of the Brother's formation curriculum required of all Provinces by GC21 (301 & 306).

## **9. Two authoritative appeals**

In conclusion allow me to remind you of the anguished and fatherly appeals made by the two Rector-Majors who lived with Don Bosco and had profound convictions of the uniqueness and importance of the Salesian Brother's vocation.

First *Father Philip Rinaldi*. In his circular of 1927, addressed particularly to "his dearest Brothers", he wrote: "From the little that has been said so far, you will easily appreciate the *grandeur of your vocation*. Thank the Lord from your hearts for this vocation; love it; treasure it jealously.

"Never forget for a moment that you are Religious by God's special grace. He has called you to aim constantly at perfection. So let it be seen everywhere that you are everything our good Father expects you to be. Imitate him in his solid piety, in his ardent love of Jesus and Mary Help of Christians, in his constant self-discipline; in avoiding the occasions of sin, in dignity of demeanor, in unworldly and becoming simplicity of attire, in hard work, in love of the Congregation, and in the zealous Christian education of your young charges, attracting them more by the gentleness of your lives than by your words, so that they too will want to become Salesians and help other young people.

"Dear Brothers, to achieve all this, you will need to spend every moment you can spare in the zealous study of religion and spiritual things. To be a Religious means being a spiritual man, a man consecrated to God. This is the way you will persevere in your vocation which will be beset by difficulties from all sides. This is the way you will become teachers and catechizers. Aim high, strive after sanctity, and beware of the danger of becoming too materially engrossed in your trade" (ASC 40).

The second appeal is from *Father Paul Albera*, in his circular on vocations, in which he invites the whole Congregation to work intelligently and tirelessly in a vocation drive for the Salesian Brothers.

He writes: "If we present to young people the mission of the Salesian Brother in all *its social importance*, in all its attractive beauty and variety, they will soon be drawn to embrace it themselves. These vocations, my dear confreres, are most urgently needed in our Society, for *without them it would be unable to carry out the high social aims that our present times require*. Furthermore, the vocation of the Brother is one of the most transcendent creations of charity and makes the ways of perfection more available for all.

"Let us be particularly zealous, then, in cultivating good Salesian Brother vocations. When we speak of the Salesian vocation, let us make it clear that it can be whole and entire without the priesthood, and that the Brothers in our Society are equal in all things to the priests in social rights and spiritual advantages.

"Let us 'bear in mind, dear confreres, that the most assiduous efforts to gain Salesian Brother vocations will be of no avail if the pupils do not see in practice that equality of brotherliness that we speak so much of as a part of our Salesian lives" (ASC 4 May 1921).

Dear confreres, let us take heed of the burning concern in these two authoritative appeals. Let us reawaken in ourselves the knowledge and love of the integrated uniqueness of our Congregation. Let us stir up our spirit of initiative, our adaptability to the needs of the times. Let us use our capacity for prayer and organization in achieving the revival of the Salesian Brother vocation that will guarantee us the lay dimension in our communities.

Following the example of Don Bosco, let us have confidence in Mary's special protection, for our origins were in her motherly care. She will help us put fresh enthusiasm and vitality into our wonderful Salesian vocation that in all difficulties has been under her quickening and guiding help.

In communion of prayer, and in sharing together our co-responsibility for this urgent commitment, let us hope and pray for an abundant harvest.

With affection and hope,

Father EGIDIO VIGANO

*Rector Major.*