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Reshaping and revitalisation of salesian presences

Guidelines for Provincial Accompaniment

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Youth Ministry General Councilor

YOUTH MINISTRY SECTOR
Salesiani di don Bosco SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA



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1 Importance of the Topic

*The Congregation (and the Provinces) are living realities that are evolving over the years and according to the needs of the times. We are living in an era of rapid change and the new challenges of our societies drive us towards new evangelizing responses. Structures are limited and temporary and must always be at the service of the evangelical life and mission. It is not enough, therefore, to maintain what already exists, but it is necessary to revitalise works that are useful to the mission that our times require. **Our institutional history and our charismatic journey have their own pace: time goes by relentlessly.** A pace that we cannot change.*

Listening to God's will requires carrying it out in the times in which we are living in

these circumstances, with the people we are, with our possibilities, and with our limitations. Asking what the Lord wants from us today requires revitalisation, discernment, restructuring and consequent renewal.

Revitalisation and reshaping/restructuring are words that define this process with different nuances. 'Revitalisation' indicates the goal and objective to be pursued; 'reshape', the relevant means.

The Congregation, by its very nature, wants all Provinces to enjoy vocational, formative, spiritual, apostolic and economic well-being. In this context, the Salesians *have always felt seriously challenged in the project of "reshaping" and "restructuring"*: the decrease in avail-

¹ Cf. Cfr. GC 19; CGS 20, 398; GC21, 154-161; GC22, 6; GC23, 226-230; GC25, 193; GC27, 26,69,6; GC28, 13, 45.

able forces or the increase in works or their complexity can create urgency or a climate of never-ending emergency that crushes people and breaks the delicate balance between apostolic mission, fraternal communion and the practice of the evangelical counsel in which our consecration consists.

This situation, moreover, hinders our ability to find new responses to the new challenges of evangelisation and makes it enormously difficult for us to focus on what is essential: **the quality of evangelical life and the evangelising mission**. The main concern is to ensure the continuity of the presence of our charism - according to the criterion of “significance” (GC23 226-230) – and not the survival of current structures.

In order to choose on which pastoral educational fronts we are called to remain, with which modalities, with which strengths, and in view of the choices of reshaping or reorganising our works and presences, Father Juan Vecchi offered some discernment criteria that are still relevant today².

In some Provinces, in fact, there is a need to downsize or restructure the activities and Works. This consists of a reorganization or a *painful process* in which, however, we are called to discover a moment of grace in order to make an attempt to restore meaning to what we already have.

Discerning involves deciding with a horizon and deciding with conviction, that is, deciding by looking beyond oneself, one’s own well-being, one’s own comfort, one’s own affections. Without this gaze at the horizon, there is no discernment, but only mere pragmatism.

This is, quite simply, the aim of this *basic guide*: to give guidance to those starting out

² Vecchi, J.E., *The Significance of Salesian Presence in AGC* 340 (1992)

in this field on the keys that should be present in every process but also to warn against those possible mistakes or oversights that can ruin our efforts.

2 The Goals of Reshaping and Restructuring

[a] Redesigning is the ability to **rethink** our presence in a new way, to **reorganize** and **redevelop** our mission, and to **reinvigorate** our Works and Communities.

Therefore:

- *Apostolic consciousness requires revitalisation*. A constant evaluation of our lives is also required of us by the symptoms of unease in our communities and EPCs that tell us that we need to revitalise and renew our presence. “One must see to it therefore



that the Salesian does not become overburdened with a multiplicity of organizational, material and administrative functions because of the reduction in our numbers and an uncontrolled expansion of our works”³.

- Reshaping and restructuring must be done not only for practical reasons (we have become fewer), but above all to be *a permanent attitude to respond to the signs of the times*, i.e., events, words, trends, attitudes, silences, absences..., from God’s point of view.
- The central point is not (only) on the houses to be closed, and/or confreres to be transferred to other communities, but on knowing how *to interpret those existential peripheries* that are challenging the Congregation.
- *To respond to God’s calls* to us today through the signs of the times and places, Provinces

must initiate processes of redesigning and restructuring in order to:

- promote the quality of evangelical life and the witness of the confreres in the communities, which are called to become a “sign,” a “school” and an environment of faith (GC23 216-218);
- “ensure consistency in the number and quality of communities” (GC27 69.6);
- give new dynamism to evangelical and apostolic life, opening up room for new “models of pastoral intervention” in response to the needs of the poorest young people of our time;
- remain open and available to establish new presences or launch new services, replacing others already in place, required by emerging ecclesial and socio-cultural changes.

³ Ibidem, p. 34.



[b] Another fundamental aspect of redesigning is the **conversion of people** from a mature, serene and balanced consecrated life and the commitment to restore strength to the charism expressed in the mission.

Therefore:

- *Conversion or the conviction that change and transformation are necessary to overcome routine, devitalizing communities and dysfunctional services. In an age of rapid change, living the gift of the Gospel and giving it back to the world, as Salesians, requires us to have permanent discernment, a serious review of our practical choices, and the courage to initiate new paths of presence and witness. Neither conversion nor discernment are automatic realities. We are asked to take risks with confidence because the faith-filled reading of reality is by no means simple or clear.*
- It is believed that change depends on an administrative act, a legislative measure, or a change of people. *Positive and constructive attitudes* toward redesigning and restructuring need to be fostered among the confreres, helping them to grasp the present *kairos* that leads us to discernment and to concentrate on the values of the Gospel and our charism.

3 Motivations of Those Opposed to Reshaping

- “The Province has its own specific identity which must be saved.” This attitude usually mistakenly includes the belief that *structure is more important than the evangelical life of people*. The justification is that people come and go and structures remain. An apostolic and community life without questions and therefore without answers. On the other

hand, there are *those who have had painful experiences in other restructurings* and have not overcome the trauma caused by them (thus, people with prejudices that need to be overcome).

- “Reducing the presences decreases the contact and integration among people and therefore weakens youth ministry and the birth of new vocations.” This means *focusing more on quantity than quality*, thus blocking renewing changes. But also *evading the analysis of the situation*: regarding people, their age, their preparation, their skills, the actual possibilities of the Province, without losing perspective and a sense of reality when we are caught up in a thousand apostolic commitments.
- “Closing a home means resigning oneself to one’s own death,” that is, *to the fear of the unknown*. There are three aspects that usually produce the most obstacles: spaces, affections (experiences, passions) and objects. Let’s face it: decisions are made about the future, not the past. However, when we discern and decide, we tend to consider the past rather than the future, rather than leaving our land, as Abraham did (cf. Gen 12:1, 4a).
- *Resistance and obstruction by bishops, family fathers, teachers, civil authorities, etc.*: restructuring usually involves the suppression of representative or otherwise important positions because of their qualified services performed in the Church or in society. Therefore, discernment is needed so that particular interests do not prevail over universal ones; the interests of a particular Church over the good of the universal Church; the interests of a people or a few families over those of other people and families who are more in need; so that the good of a few individuals does not prevail over the good of the Congregation.

4 Six Principles for Reshaping and Restructuring

Restructuring must be in view of revitalisation and our life on the Gospel. This involves:

[a] Making a thorough discernment of the priorities of the various types of activities **by the communities and the Provincial Council**, so as to understand:

- the structures (religious community or educative-pastoral activities, for example) that must continue (indispensable);
- the structures (sections, courses, activities, sectors) that need to be adapted, transformed or have a different purpose;
- the new structures that need to be “invented,” in response to new needs (e.g., Works of lay management, the possibility that several Works operating in a synergistic and integrated way can refer to a single Salesian community);
- the presences that need to be “initiated” and the ones that need to be “concluded” where the implementation of the SEPP does not seem to be effective with and for young

people, it is not consistent with reality and does not have prospects for the future, and where a restructuring of the Work according to the Provincial criteria appears difficult.

[b] While reshaping is necessary, it is not in itself the solution to the problems. On the contrary, at times it may worsen them, bringing about in the confreres and co-responsible lay people a sense of mistrust, the feeling that the end is approaching. Reshaping must be **pre-ceeded and accompanied by the development of a common plan**, that is, an idea of the future, a moment of hope, of missionary spirit, with a realism filled with faith, hope for the future and the revitalisation of the charism.

For this to be successful, the process requires **an appropriate pedagogy**: all confreres must be involved and in particular those of the Works to be reconsidered, so that they are sensitized, conscious and therefore able to make shared decisions.

[c] Devising a **plan with progressive stages** and proceeding **without haste, but also without pauses**, in order to be able to make meaningful choices that meet the needs of the environment and our charism.



[d] We have gained experience in recent decades that makes us aware of the true paths of lay participation: **Lay-managed Salesian Works under Provincial responsibility** (AGC 439). These proposals require not only time, but investment in formation, and are the fruit of shared paths with religious figures who have been able to 'not bind them to themselves' but make the laity mature in their ability to interiorize values and methodology. Today we can say that there are, within our Works, some mature, trained and reliable lay figures.

If the Salesian Work is not only an economic structure, but first and foremost a presence with *charismatic conditions of significance*, then the relationship with lay people will also have to be redesigned, being able to incorporate them within the local pastoral plan. Yet always a relationship whose aim is not solely the continuity of a job (for lay people) or the conservation of patrimonial value (for the Provinces); it must see the *Salesian charism as a meeting point, a compass* that allows us to find ways to redesign the continuity of presence between tradition and innovation.

[e] Always keeping in mind what must drive any process: **realism, lucidity, boldness, vision of the future**. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that discernment tends to ensure the **honesty of our research**, and not so much its infallibility or even its effectiveness.

[f] Ensuring that the whole process is led by a **leadership team**, composed of the Provincial Councilors.

The purpose is, firstly, to draw up a **work plan** for the entire process and monitor it; secondly, **to involve the confreres** in this process by sending materials for discernment, questionnaires, consultations, etc.; and finally, to **periodically inform** the confreres on the status of the process.



5 Stages, Procedures and Guiding Criteria

STAGE I: RECOGNISING

Instrument 1: *History of the House and Current Reality*

A simple, not detailed, but very informative study on the development of the House, which should not exceed three or four pages.

1. The origin of the House, and its primary purpose.
2. The most relevant historical moments in which the House has undergone important changes (services provided, number of recipients, allocation of facilities, moments of social relevance, evolution of the number of Salesians in the community, etc.).

3. The current reality of the House:
 - 3.1. The current configuration of the community.
 - 3.2. The evolution of the Salesian environments of the mission.
 - 3.3. The involvement of lay people in leadership positions.
 - 3.4. The current reality of the House (groups and Salesian Family, involvement in the Work and vitality).
 - 3.5. ...
4. Possible challenges for the future.

It can be very useful to analyze the records of the Provincial and Extraordinary Visitations of recent years: the strengths and opportunities that appear most frequently and repeatedly in the various records; the weaknesses and threats that appear most often and repeatedly in the various records.

Instrument 2: Guiding Criteria for Discernment

With regard to practical discernment, the restructuring must take into account the following criteria. They must be examined their entirety, without any one of them being considered exclusive, in the sense that their absence implies the rejection of a Work. However, **priority must be given to Works that meet a greater number of criteria or are significantly in one of them.**

[1] Mission-related Criteria: Which Works should be Prioritized?

• Profile of the Beneficiaries of the Work

Priority is given to Works that meet the needs of young people, including those belonging to the working classes, or the abandoned or those at risk; in particular, those that respond or can best respond to

the need to integrate young people into society and the labor market.

• Charismatic Density

The degree of application of the Oratorian criterion (cf. Const. 40) that the Work has achieved and, specifically, the possibility of fruitful evangelisation work. Preference is given to works in which, because of the existing educational team or the structure of the work, a pastoral ministry consistent with the Framework for Youth Ministry has been developed, so as to organically combine the four dimensions of the Oratorian criterion (home, school, playground, parish).

• Vocational Criterion

Relevance of the educative-pastoral offer, whose indicators are the effective presence among young people, personal accompaniment and the promising environment for the elaboration and implementation of one's own life project, centered on the specific vocation.

• Overall View of the Province.

Any hypothesis of reshaping Salesian presences, if it is not intended to be merely a rationalization in the distribution of human resources and activities, must be articulated according to the overall vision of the Province. One risk could be the progressive depopulation of the territories (following the closure or restructuring of the Houses) and the disproportion between the confreres present in a city or region and in the rest of the Province. On the other hand, there is the danger of charismatic impoverishment due to a privilege only in certain sectors or environments of pastoral animation.

Hence the Province's obligation to take care of *the qualification of a sufficient number of confreres* in a planned manner. The criterion guiding this plan must be according



to the current possibilities of the Province, but also according to a prudent forecast of the pastoral needs of tomorrow.

- **Complementarity with the Work of the Church.**

The permanence of a Work in an area should be considered according to:

- the ecclesial presences operating there (first and foremost the Salesian Family groups, then any other religious educational institutes, and finally realities that fall under the local Church) evaluating every possible collaboration and avoiding any unnecessary overlapping; in other words, priority is given to works that serve sectors or populations where there is no other Church presence offering the same service;

- the presence of the youth population, particularly youth in difficult situations;
- the ability to plan and implement networks and collaborations in both civil and ecclesial environments.

[2] Criteria of Sustainability of Human and Economic Resources.

- **Economic Sustainability**

Priority is given to Works that are economically sustainable on their own, in the manner chosen. We must take into account the economic situation: it is not the most important criterion, but it is also the guarantee that a downsizing can have a future.

In some cases, the Province considers investing economically in the Work out of *a stra-*

tegic or prophetic choice, even if the Work is not self-sustaining.

• **Sustainability of Human Resources**

The main resources of the Congregation are the Salesians whom God has called to live their consecration and mission among the young. Both their quality and quantity are crucial factors in order to be able to live the communion and apostolate in a meaningful and fruitful way. The redistribution and sharing of personnel is becoming increasingly necessary, especially in Provinces suffering from a lack of personnel. *A good human resources policy will only be successful if it is not improvised, but well thought out, prepared and planned.*

Statistics and trends in the number of Salesians help us to measure our real stren-

gth in terms of the life and mission that, as Salesians, we are called to develop in the Church, while recognising that we must go beyond statistics or purely human parameters. Starting from this trust in the Lord of history, 'in whose hands are the times and the destinies of persons, institutions, peoples, and therefore also the historical action of his gifts (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 63), and precisely for this reason, we must ask ourselves what the human reality of the Province will be in five or ten years, and discern what the Lord is asking of us today.

[3] Criteria of the Quality of Community Life.

How to live and what role we should play in the Works we have. As regards the communities, they must all meet the Salesian crite-



ria of community cohesion and care for the person (AGC 422):

- **The cohesion of the community present in the Work**
 - The community must be able to take care of the confreres, especially the elderly and the sick, without conflicting with the focus of the mission.
 - The community must be able to organize itself in such a way that all the confreres, especially those working in the mission, can share life, prayer and rest.
- **Focus on the vocation of the Salesian**
 - The responsibilities entrusted to each confrere must be in line with his real possibilities.
 - The community must accompany the spiritual and pastoral life of each confrere (AGC 421).
- **Importance of the community**
 - **Witness:** the community must have a sufficient number of confreres to ensure visibility and witness to the entire EPC.
 - **Vitality:** the community must be able to ensure its influence on the Educative-Pastoral Plan, and in particular the Rector must be able to prioritize his role of accompaniment and pastoral care.
 - **Presence among the youth:** the community must be able to ensure the presence of Salesians among the youth, with the time to be with them and accompany them.
 - **Ability to join forces together and commit them to the mission:** so that the community can dedicate Salesians to the animation, accompaniment and forma-

tion of the Salesian Family and the various educators of the work.

- **Openness towards the ecclesial and social territory:** the community must be able to effectively reach out to the local Church and civil society.

STAGE II: INTERPRETING

As part of Stage II - Interpretation, it is suggested that during one or more **community assemblies, with the presence of a Provincial Council member**, we address dynamics to help us discern the above criteria.

The questions we need to answer honestly are: What is the Lord asking of us consecrated people here and now? How can we organize ourselves to live more evangelically and better serve the Lord and our young people? Where are we and where should we be? What are the expectations of the local churches and areas where we are or should be?

Redesigning must be accomplished according to the criteria of *sharing and discernment* and of correct and timely information at all levels. It's an error to act only on works while neglecting people. All the confreres of the community, and also the lay people involved, must be made aware of some important factors: the initial objective data and a realistic forecast of future scenarios, the concrete hypotheses of reinforcing some areas, the range of possible decisions, their careful and timely evaluation, and the clear and correct indication of the reasons that make us prefer one solution over another. Experience shows that the broader the basis of consultation, knowledge and sharing, the broader the consensus.

STAGE III: CHOOSING***Rationale for different operational models. Proposed scenarios::***

Scenario 1. The mission we are developing in the current characteristics of the Work and the Community

– Advantages:

– Disadvantages or needs:

– Vote:

Scenario 2. The mission we are developing, with the necessary redesigning measures (reorganisation of environments - services and human resources) entrusted to the current community

– Advantages:

– Disadvantages or needs:

– Vote:

In this scenario, it is necessary to submit SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS that are justified by the community.

Scenario 3. The mission that is developed with the suppression of the religious community and the continuation of the Work (lay management under the project of the Province)

– Vote:

Scenario 4. Suppression of the Salesian work.

– Vote: