**Goodnight by Fr Fabio Attard – Rector Major**

**25.03.2025**

Dear Confreres,

At this so intensely human moment I would like to share three reflections with you that arise from a feeling of deep gratitude and awareness. The personal dimension, although real and touching, is only a fragment of a much broader reality: today, the focus is not on me personally, but on the Salesian Congregation. This is the true protagonist, and with the gesture made today it bears witness not only to vitality, but also to the desire for this vitality to continue over time.

We are part of a larger dynamic than ourselves, in which men and women are called, for a time, to serve where others will follow, taking on the same mandate. In this profoundly human story, the Spirit of God continues to speak, create, redeem and sanctify. It is a story inhabited by the Triune God who challenges us, the Salesians of Don Bosco, to remain open to his saving action which has its beginning and fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

This morning, reflecting on what could happen — and then what happened — I asked myself, “What is the Lord saying with all this?” Like many confreres around the world, I followed the path of this General Chapter, recognising a genuine desire to listen to the Spirit. From the beginning, Fr Pascual Chávez’ reflections helped me a lot; they resonated deeply in me, in continuity with what Fr Ángel confided to me in September 2023, when the Chapter theme was announced: “Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people, living our Salesian vocation prophetically”.

I remember that moment well: we were in the school of accompaniment with Brother Raymond Callo, engaged in an exceptional work of the *Salesian school of Spiritual Accompaniment*, and Fr Ángel came to greet the participants. I took the opportunity to thank him. In my opinion, that title was — and is — profoundly apt: it summarises what we are experiencing, listening to, searching for. It is interesting to note how the last three General Chapters have addressed, in different ways, the question of the identity of the Salesian. Since 2014 with “*Mystics, Prophets and Servants”*, then going through the complex period of the pandemic, we came to reflect on “What kind of Salesian for today's young people?”

We need to interpret the choice of the General Chapter not so much as an expression of a personal preference — albeit legitimate — but as adherence to a shared call which challenges each of us. It is not so much who is chosen that is relevant, but the way in which this service is taken up, the spirit with which one makes oneself available, the desire that animates those who are called. Whether it is Fabio or another confrere, the substance does not change: the Congregation is greater than its Rector Major, although it remains true that the Rector Major has a significant role.

Fr Pascual has repeatedly stressed how today, we Salesians are called to live the charism in an authentic way, avoiding the risk of being “pastoral photocopies” Pope Francis reminds us that simply repeating what has always been done is no longer enough. The greatest danger, however, is not in ignoring this awareness, but in getting stuck at a theoretical level. Knowing things intellectually, sociologically, analytically, is not equivalent to living them in a prophetic and faithful way. And it is precisely in this tension that my thoughts for us today lie.

Together — and I say “together” as Don Bosco would have said — we are called to rediscover, first of all, a passion for God. Without this, the passion for the human being also disappears. And since nature does not tolerate a vacuum, when passion for God is lacking, selfishness inevitably takes over. Other than being servants: we become people who make use of their role.

Hence the second point of my reflection, connected to the Word that has been proclaimed to us: “*We are the last called to serve*”.

For years, every Saturday evening, during the celebration of Evening Paryer, I have meditated on the canticle of the Letter to the Philippians: the mystery of kenosis, the emptying of the Son of God, who takes the form of a servant in order to serve, to identify with us, to become incarnate. This morning, providentially, the short reading at Morning Prayer brought us back to this same mystery on the feast of the Annunciation: we do not celebrate a divine spectacle that breaks into history, but we contemplate with humility and intelligence the mystery of the Incarnation, which involves us deeply, personally.

God became flesh so that, in my flesh, in my history, I could live and act with that same power of love. Today, in the epochal change which Pope Francis speaks of, we are called to share this love. This is where our educative and pastoral service plays out: in which direction are we moving? Vertically, as if we were benefactors, masters, service providers? Or in the evangelical sense as authentic servants?

I remember with gratitude some words of Fr Viganò in one of his letters: he spoke of the need to combine *pastoral charity with pedagogical intelligence.* It is a combination that guides us, a *grace of unity* that keeps us faithful to our Salesian vocation.

In this particular moment that the Chapter is experiencing, we are immersed in the very heart of the charism. It is good to see, even from those who are following from afar, how much the work of communication is making visible what is being built here. It is a very positive sign. Now, the real question that challenges us is: will we be able to bring all this back to the Provinces? Will we be able to embody this call in a radically new context?

If these are new times, the thirst for meaning that runs through them is not. It is ancient, constitutive of humanity. And those who, like us, have had the gift of knowing the world, know that today young people really live in a “global village". The questions I heard in Vietnam are the same ones I picked up in Brazil. The same issues, the same questions that I heard last year in Madrid, in the Province of St James the Greater, I found a few months later in Bangalore.

Young Christians, young Catholics, but also young people of other religions or without religious affiliation, who nevertheless enter into a relationship with us: we recognise that everyone carries a thirst in their heart. The question we have to ask ourselves is: are we really able to hear this question? The answer is yes, only if we agree to be servants. Only then will we be able to seize upon that thirst and consequently create those conditions — people, places, proposals — so that it is recognised, accepted, and possibly even quenched, at least with “a glass of water that breaks the thirst.

The change of era, then, is not a threat, but an extraordinary opportunity. During some visits to contexts where Christians are a minority — Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and agnostic countries — I saw firsthand an extraordinary sympathy for Don Bosco. A sympathy that is not superficial or emotional but deep, intelligent, emotionally healthy. It stems from an authentic search for the true, the beautiful and the good.

This is the novelty of our times. Forward then! We cannot miss this opportunity!! The measure of our passion for Christ will indicate the degree of our dedication to young people. Our fidelity will be the backbone of our prophecy. There are no other ways.

During the last Provincial Visitation I made, I had the gift of spending time with Father Thomas Uzhunnalil, who was held hostage for 557 days. His serenity, his spiritual depth, his life of prayer are living testimony. They are people you need to kneel before.

We have, thanks be to God, many Salesians like Father Thomas: confreres who have not abandoned lands marked by violence and suffering. They have remained, to testify that for Jesus Christ it is worth being Don Bosco for young people today. How could we forget the tormented Ukraine, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo? These brothers and sisters need our spiritual closeness. They are the martyrs of our time, silent and faithful witnesses of Christian hope.

This morning, when Fr Stefano put the decisive question to me, everything seemed to open up like an unpredictable story, almost an adventure. I confused every programme, not to mention the order at half past ten that you had prepared! But that’s okay. I was deeply moved, not so much by the personal esteem — which also honours me — but by the trust that the Congregation wanted to express. A trust that does not arise from an abstract idea, but from a shared journey. I say it freely: I do not deserve it. But this is our Congregation.

And this is the very spirit we would like to allow ourselves to be accompanied in the coming days. Serving means first of all **living** what is announced. It must be visible, credible. And this all starts with us, the General Council. We are called to be a sign of synodality, of communion, of fraternity. We are called to be fathers. We are here to **serve**. Nothing else.

Today, we are Don Bosco. Today, Don Bosco tells us once more: *courage!*

Over these days I was reading some pages from the second volume by Fr Pietro Braido, dedicated to the year 1875 — a year that we celebrate today on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the missions. Don Bosco, at that time, had many fronts open: the consolidation of the Constitutions, the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Cooperators, the missions, the opening in France, the difficulties with Gastaldi... Yet he went on, and on.

This is Don Bosco. And this is who we are today.

I ask you only one thing: **pray for me**. You have entrusted me with a burden. I was talking about it this morning with my spiritual director. He said, “*Keep going. The Lord is asking this of you. Go.” And go I will, but I am asking you: accompany me with prayer.* This is no human endeavour.

Pray also for those you will elect to the General Council: so that we be a community, so that we be brothers, so that we can really serve each other, listen to each other, dream together, to enter that sacred space where sandals are not needed, to be free in listening and ready to carry out the project of the General Chapter with joy and optimism.

**Long live Don Bosco!**