**29th General Chapter**

“**Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people**”

***living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically***

On 24 September 2023, the then Rector Major, Father Ángel Fernández Artime, after consulting the ninety-two Provinces of the Congregation in accordance with article 150 of our Constitutions, convened the 29th General Chapter with the theme “**Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people**” *living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically*, a theme for which he chose a quote from Mk 3:14-15 as inspiration: “So they came to him... to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message”.

The intention is that this theme be developed through three core areas which the RM considers to be of particular importance:

* “Animation and care of the true life of each Salesian”
* “Salesians, Salesian Family and lay people together ‘with’ and ‘for’ young people”
* “A courageous review and re-planning of the Congregation’s governance at all levels”

***It is clear that it all has to do with Salesian charismatic identity***, which could be the key to reading the entire GC29, but also the three parts proposed for developing the theme.

This is clearly apparent in the way the first core area is spelt out:

* “Animation and care of the true life of each Salesian”

*“Rekindle the gift of God that you possess”* (2 Tim 1:6)

* As believers conquered by God we fix our *gaze on the Salesian consecrated life centred in Jesus Christ.*
* Always taking care of our own vocation and that of others,
* Faithful to God, together as a community, in living *a common vocation, a fraternity that is authentic, evangelical and attractive.*
* Accompanying fully the different stages of our own life and that of the confreres; *taking care of initial and ongoing formation.*
* With the commitment to live evangelical fraternity in our religious communities and in openness to those who suffer experiences of exclusion in the world.

It is no less apparent in the first dot point in the third core area concerning the evaluation and re-planning of governance of the Congregation where it says:

* *For charismatic fidelity: an animation and governance that looks after people’s lives and the mission* to the poorest and knows how to modernise service structures.

And then going on to justify the choice of theme, the RM states:

As can be seen from the chosen theme, it refers to the **centrality of God (as Trinity) and Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, without ever forgetting young people and our commitment to them.** ***And what is offered as a subtitle captures our priority and concern at this time***, both in religious life in general and in our consecrated life in particular. (And the subtitle reads: “***living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically***”.) If fidelity and prophecy were lacking in our Congregation, we would be like the light that does not shine and the salt that does not give flavour. **We have expressed our concern during many General Council sessions about the lack of charismatic identity that we sometimes perceive.** In the letter that will be published in the Acts of the General Council 440, I address this very situation by taking stock of the achievements of these years and the challenges that I perceive are such because we have not been able to overcome certain weaknesses that make us more vulnerable.

Further on he adds:

In the Chapter theme we propose to focus on what it means for us ***to truly be Salesians who are passionate about Jesus Christ***, because without this we will offer good services, we will do good to people, we will help, but we will not leave behind much else worthwhile.

And in the light of the quoted text, Mk 3:14-15 *to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message*” he explains:

And we, from the moment of our profession, have opted for true companionship with Jesus, in a person-to-person relationship that totally involves us.” And from this involvement with Jesus, we feel urged in the direction of our young people. ...We have been consecrated by God to follow his beloved Son Jesus, but to truly live as *people conquered by God.* Therefore, once again, it is all about the Congregation’s fidelity to the Holy Spirit, living, in the spirit of Don Bosco, *a Salesian consecrated life centred in Jesus Christ*.

And before presenting ‘other tasks’, he concludes by making a summary of everything:

**...the theme focuses strongly on our Salesian consecrated identity**, with a real desire to grow in the fidelity and prophetic value of our life, as well as on the mission shared with the laity and the Salesian Family, but always taking the young and their families, so often poor and distressed, into our hearts. A continuity also in reference to issues concerning the animation and governance of the Congregation that were not addressed previously.

In his letter “**Where the Lord leads us**”, the Rector Major, offering us the status of the Congregation before resigning to be available for the mission entrusted to him by the Holy Father, writes:

Thinking about the content of this letter and what I intend to share with you, dear confreres, I am well aware that I am offering you in all honesty my point of view, ***my reading of what I have lived, believed, thought, prayed and formulated over these years.*** Many other interpretations are undoubtedly possible. I am presenting my view – very succinctly – from the knowledge of our Congregation and the Salesian Family acquired during my service.

And after a presentation of “this situation of ours, made up of contrasts, lights and shadows”... the Rector Major ends with these words:

All this leads me to say that there are aspects in us that, if they were overcome in faith and through genuine conversion – necessary always and for all – would make our Congregation a much more lively body capable of reflecting even more the light we are called to bear witness to and the good we are called to do, collaborating with the One Lord.[[1]](#footnote-2)

He then recalls the four elements that he considers are “of the utmost importance for the future direction of the Congregation.”

1. **“I am concerned about a certain weakness or fragility in the way of living the spiritual life and relationship with God. This is a factor found very much in all consecrated life, but also in ours, as Salesians, and which affects our own charismatic identity.”[[2]](#footnote-3)** And he concludes: “**Without a true experience of God, there will be no believers and – let me say it – even fewer consecrated men and women and even fewer Salesians of Don Bosco with a life totally spent for the young.”**
2. **“In all sincerity, I must share with you another concern due to the fact that there are many confreres who feel the need to leave Salesian life, the Congregation, for very different reasons.”[[3]](#footnote-4)** And he identifies the main causes: apostolic Prometheism, emotional void, difficulty with community life... In reality he is quoting Pope Francis “We can well say that fidelity is being put to the test at the moment; the statistics you have examined prove this. We are facing a ‘haemorrhage’ that weakens consecrated life and the very life of the Church.” This is something that we Salesians have not satisfactorily overcome over these ten years.
3. **“I am concerned when I encounter situations of community life in which the community serves for what it is meant to do: it is “functional” but it is not prophetic and, therefore, not attractive to young people.”[[4]](#footnote-5)**
4. **“Dear confreres, I am not yet satisfied with the attention given to the poorest children and young people.** **Our hearts should be madly in love with the poorest, as was Don Bosco’s.**”[[5]](#footnote-6)

Both the letter convening GC29 with its theme “**Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people**” ***living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically*** and the letter “***Where the Lord leads us***” with its perspective on the Congregation’s state of health make explicit and make it clear that the greatest challenge of the Congregation at this time is to recover the “centrality of God (as Trinity) and of Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, without ever forgetting young people and our commitment to them.”

Here, dear confreres, is why I have chosen the *perspective of the mysticism of our Salesian life* as the theme of our Spiritual Exercises, which will allow us to see our entire vocation in its dimensions (*mission*, *community*, *evangelical counsels*, *life of prayer*) “for young people, especially the poorest of them” (C. 2) in the light of our Constitutions. *It is there, in fact, that we find Don Bosco’s apostolic project that we are invited to make our own, and there that all our charismatic identity* resides, and we know well that *this is the result of our identification with it.*

Art. 196, with which the text of the **Constitutions** concludes, says:

“In response to the predilection of the Lord Jesus who has called us by name, and led by Mary, *we willingly accept the Constitutions as Don Bosco’s will and testament, for us our book of life and for the poor and the little ones a pledge of hope.*

We meditate on them with faith and pledge ourselves to put them into practice; they are for us, the Lord’s disciples, **a way that leads to Love.**”

This means that our Salesian consecrated life is *a way that starts from the Love of Jesus* who fixed his gaze on us, loved us, called us, seized hold of us. And it is also *a way that leads to Love*, as a sure way to reach the fullness of life in God. This means that ***the entire consecrated life is marked by love and must be lived under its banner***, so it cannot be lived except in joy, even in moments of trial and difficulty, with the conviction and enthusiasm of those who have love as the driving force of their life. Hence the serenity, brightness and fruitfulness of consecrated life, which make it enchanting, attractive.

It is pointless to have the best Constitutions, according to a testimony of the then Secretary for the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, Archbishop Jose Rodriguez Carballo, if we do not know them, do not love them, do not pray them and do not practise them. A faithful and prophetic charismatic identity, therefore fruitful spiritually, pastorally, vocationally, depends on our full identification with “*the Founder’s Apostolic Plan*” (C. 2).

I venture to say, as I told the RM after he told me the theme chosen for GC29, that the theme echoes the one for GC26 “**Da mihi animas, cetera tolle**” *Charismatic identity and Apostolic passion.* I wrote there:

The attainment of the objective of the GC26 will require in the first place a better *knowledge of Don Bosco*: he must be studied, loved, imitated and invoked (*C.* 21). We must know him as a master of life, whose spirituality we absorb as sons and disciples; as the founder who shows us the path of vocational fidelity; as the educator who has left us the precious heritage of the preventive system; as the legislator, because the Constitutions, which have come to us directly from him and then though subsequent Salesian history, provide us with a charismatic reading of the gospel and of the following of Christ.[[6]](#footnote-7)

With the passage of time the risk grows greater of breaking the living bonds that keep us united to Don Bosco. More than a hundred years have now gone by since his death. Dead are the generations of Salesians who were in contact with him and knew him close at hand. The chronological, geographic and cultural distance from the founder is increasing. The spiritual climate and psychological closeness which prompted spontaneous reference to Don Bosco and his spirit is beginning to disappear, as is even the simple display of his picture. What has been passed on to us can get lost. With increasing distance from the Founder, there comes a fading of the charismatic identity, a weakening of the bonds of his spirit; if we do not give new life to our roots we run the risk of having neither a future nor a right to citizenship.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

***Passionate about Jesus Christ and dedicated to young people***

This theme chosen for GC29 includes the spirituality of “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle”, which was Don Bosco’s inspiring motto and which he left us as “a programme of life.” (C. 4)

I would like to address it briefly starting from the subject of the ‘*passion of God’* in the Crucified Christ, an expression that means both the infinite, immeasurable love of Christ (‘passion’ as an expression of great love) and his immense suffering resulting from the betrayal of one of his own, the abandonment of all his own, the denial by the leader of the ‘twelve‘, the rejection by the people, the condemnation by the leaders of the people, the crucifixion at the hands of the Romans and God’s silence (‘passion’ as an expression of suffering for love). No wonder there is no better expression of the ‘passion’, in both senses, than the Crucified Christ.

The reason is very clear: only by knowing, feeling and wanting to be loved infinitely by the Father in Christ can we be conquered by him and be able to love others, the confreres, the young people, all the people who carry out the mission with us as he loves us.

It is precisely this ‘pathos’ of God that led Paul to confess: “*I have been crucified with Christ; And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,* ***who loved me*** *and* ***gave himself for me”*** (Gal 2:19-20).

This is precisely the mysticism of our Salesian life and what makes us who we are: people conquered by the love of Christ, transformed by him, people who, feeling the urgency of charity, are totally dedicated to young people, especially the poorest and most abandoned.

This means that, “man develops his humanity in relation to the divinity of his God”, as Moltmann would say.[[8]](#footnote-9) In other words, the human being tends to seek his own fulfilment and happiness starting from the image he has of God, of what he considers as the Absolute. It is man’s longstanding desire to “become like God”, which is not something negative or bad, since we are in his image and likeness. It could be said that the meaning we give to our lives springs from the image we have of God. That is why, **conquered by the passion** (love and suffering) of Christ, we become ***passionate*** (capable of love and total surrender with his own love).

But can God suffer? More than one person has wondered. Sure! Those who can love are also passible since they open themselves to the suffering that love entails. He does not suffer in his essence but in his relationship with us.

God takes man so seriously that he suffers under the actions of man and can be injured by them. At the heart of the prophetic proclamation there stands the certainty that God is interested in the world to the point of suffering.[[9]](#footnote-10)

And because loving is the acceptance of the other without looking at one’s own well-being, in the same way it includes the power of compassion and the freedom to suffer the otherness of the other. This relationship between the “pathos of God” and his people makes man capable of “sympathy”, of feeling and suffering with God and with others.

... in the situation of the divine *pathos* (man) becomes *homo sympatheticus*. The divine *pathos* is reflected in man’s participation, in his hopes and prayers.  *In sympathy* with the pathos of God he becomes open to what is other and new. It has a dialogical structure. In the divine *pathos* man is filled with the Spirit of God. He becomes a friend of God, he feels *sympathy* with God and for God.[[10]](#footnote-11)

While an impassive God leads man to be ‘a-pathetic’, the ‘pathetic’ God, whom we find in the incarnation of the Son of God until death on the cross, makes man ‘sympathetic’.

When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross also enters into the situation of man’s godforsakenness. In Jesus he does not die the natural death of a finite being, but the violent death of the criminal on the cross, the death of complete abandonment by God. The suffering in the passion of Jesus is abandonment, rejection by God, his Father. God does not become a religion, so that man participates in him by corresponding religious thoughts and feelings. God does not become a law, so that man participates in him through obedience to a law. God does not become an ideal, so that man achieves community with him through constant striving. He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion

The incarnate God is present and can be experienced in the humanity of every man and in full human corporeality. No one will have to pretend, to appear different from what he is to grasp the communion that holds him to the human God. He will be able to abandon all pretences and appearances, and in this incarnate God become what he really is. In addition, the Crucified God comes close to him in the state of abandonment suffered by each man.[[11]](#footnote-12)

And this relationship makes man reborn to the new life in Christ so that he can live in communion with him until his ‘deification’ without anything and no one, except sin, being able to erase it, as the beautiful baptismal catechesis of Rom 6 says.

Life in the communion of Christ is full life, led in the Trinitarian situation of God. Having died in Christ and risen to new life, as Paul states in *Romans 6:8*, the believer really takes part in God’s suffering in the world, because he participates in the passion of divine love. But he also takes part in the concrete suffering of the world, because on the cross of his Son God has made it his own suffering. The human God who encounters man in the crucified Christ thus involves man in a realistic divinisation (*theosis*). Therefore in communion with Christ it can truly be said that men live in God and from God and “that they live, move and have their being in him” (Acts 17:28).[[12]](#footnote-13)

The opposite of love is not anger but indifference, ‘a-pathy’. And this is a clear sign of the lack of experience of God, of God who is Love, of which instead we are called to be the ‘signs and bearers’ (C. 2).

***Conclusion***

Total dedication to the mission on behalf of young people, especially the poorest, most needy and at risk, helping them to overcome all the suffering caused by the sin of the world (injustice, misery, ignorance, etc.) is the most concrete way in which we can live Christian love in following Christ. This love will always imply self-denial, and will sometimes provoke “the hatred of the world” (Jn 15:18 ff.). This is the inseparable relationship between love (passion) and sacrifice (passion).

Seeking fulfilment and happiness outside of self-denial and total surrender to others that love implies will fail, a consequence of the structure of the human being: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24 -25).

Our work as educators and pastors of young people has, among the greatest tasks, to help those to whom we are sent to find the meaning of life and true happiness in learning not to keep life for themselves but to be people for others, in the way of Jesus and how Don Bosco educated his children in Valdocco.

But how to present all this? Certainly not by elaborating complicated theologies, but insisting on the root of all this, on its deepest core: God is Love because he is Community (Trinity) and he is Community because he is Love. And we were created in his image to become like him through love in community.

I hope that these reflections will help us to understand more deeply the motto that Don Bosco lived as an experience of the Spirit and inherited and delivered as a programme of life: “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”, and consequently help us to rediscover its novelty and how it is our true rule of life.

There we will find the answer to the great challenge that the Rector Major presented us with in the theme of the General Chapter: “*Passionate about Jesus Christ*, *dedicated to Young People*”.

1. A. FERNANDEZ ARTIME “*Where the Lord leads us* “He said to me: “*My grace is sufficient for you; for power is made perfect in weakness’* ” (2 Cor 12:9) Turin, 8 September 2023, AGC 440, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. pp. 18-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. pp. 23-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. pp. 27-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. pp. 29-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, “*Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco* ”, AGC 384 (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. AGC 394 (Da mihi animas). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. JÜRGEN MOLTMANN, *Il Dio Crocifisso, La croce di Cristo fondamento e critica della teologia cristiana*, 4ª edizione, Queriniana - Brescia 1990, p. 313. However, note that the book is also available in a 1974 English edition (The Crucified God...) available on archive.com. The page references that follow, from the Italian edition, include the page numbers for the English addition in parentheses. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. MOLTMANN, op. cit. p. 318 (271). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. MOLTMAN, op. cit, p. 320 (303). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. MOLTMANN, op. cit. p.324 ff (276-77). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. MOLTMANN, op. cit. p. 325 (277) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)