**Address by the Vicar of the Rector Major**

**Fr Stefano Martoglio**

**at the opening of GC29**

**Some words of greeting and welcome**

Most Reverend Sister Simona Brambilla,

Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life

Your Excellencies, Salesian Archbishops and Bishops

Dear Mother Chiara Cazzuola,

Superior General of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

Dear Leaders of Salesian Family Groups,

Mr Mayor and esteemed Civil Authorities

of the City of Turin and the Piedmont Region

Military authorities

On behalf of all the Chapter members, I would like to thank you for your presence and availability, as you seek to accompany the day of the official opening of the 29th General Chapter of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales (Salesians of Don Bosco) in this meaningful way.

Feeling that we are supported by each of you honours us and reminds us of the responsibility we have before the Church, the Salesian Family and especially before Don Bosco’s Congregation. All this encourages us to start work with a prophetic and hopeful outlook.

At the same time, I officially welcome the Chapter confreres from all the juridical circumscriptions of the Congregation: provincials, superiors of vice-provinces, provincial delegates, observers and guests.

Each of you is essential. In the light of the vision of faith that everyone carries in their heart, we are aware of one fact: it is the Lord who has gathered us here, through the “mysterious” ways of Providence, to experience a very important event. We find confirmation of this in the words of Don Bosco himself, words he spoke at the first General Chapter of our Congregation: “We now begin our first general chapter… It is of extreme importance for our Congregation.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Well then, today too we are called to a very special task and what will emerge in listening to the Spirit as the result of our GC29 will be of the utmost importance for our Congregation. We all profoundly believe this.

The right attitude of all of us will undoubtedly be decisive for the results of this Chapter Assembly.

1. **The GC29 of the Society of St Francis de Sales**

Don Bosco convened the first General Chapter on 5 September 1877 in Lanzo Torinese. There were twenty-three participants and the Chapter lasted three full days.

Other General Chapters followed, some of them right here in Valdocco. Therefore, it is no small matter to be celebrating a General Chapter in one or other place. Certainly, here in the “cradle of the charism” we have the opportunity to rediscover our origins and rediscover the originality that constitutes the heart of our identity as consecrated persons and apostles of young people.

Therefore, we entrust ourselves to the Lord and his Holy Spirit who continues to assist our Congregation. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by Mary Help of Christians, who “continues to do everything”, listening to the appeal that Don Bosco addresses to us in this holy Salesian place.

At the opening of the first General Chapter, Don Bosco said to our confreres: “Our Divine Savior tells us in the Gospel that where two or three are gathered in His name He will be there among them. Our sessions have no other purpose than God’s greater glory and the salvation of souls,

redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.”[[2]](#footnote-3) We can therefore be sure that the Lord will be among us and that he will conduct things in such a way that everyone will feel comfortable.

It is with the same conviction and with the same outlook of faith that I have wanted to highlight Don Bosco’s words: they are words that surpass us and remind us of the continuity of vision and journey in fidelity to God and to Don Bosco.

We read in our Constitutions: “The General Chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation’s unity in diversity. It is the fraternal meeting in which Salesians carry out a communal reflection to keep themselves faithful to the gospel and to the charism of the Founder and sensitive to the needs of time and place.

Through the General Chapter the entire Society, opening itself to the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, seeks to discern God’s will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service.”[[3]](#footnote-4) This is what we are all called to do and experience.

It is with this spirit of faith that we want and must face up to the important task that the entire Congregation entrusts to us in this GC29.

1. **Theme and goal of GC29**

The Rector Major, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, through his letter of 24 September 2023, convened the 29th General Chapter noting that the chosen theme had been identified by the General Council after an appropriate and widespread consultation of the provinces around the world, receiving a large number of contributions from them.

Despite the fact that the time for convocation and preparation were hastened, the Rector Major noted the profound motivation and great commitment on the part of the entire Congregation in this process.

It has been an unforeseen and unpredictable “five-year period”, given everything that has happened, and my heartfelt thanks go to the confreres of the Council and to all of you for having been able to cope with what has happened in recent years and that has brought us here.

The theme for reflection, which we all know, which we have prepared for in the Provincial Chapters and which we are called to further explore over these weeks, is as follows:

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

**Living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically**

and it is developed in three core areas:

* 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,

In the proposed theme, the centrality and primacy of God is evident. It is in this that we find the energy and motivation for dedication to the mission to the young, together with the members of the Salesian Family, the laity and the young people themselves.

Even the reference to the revision of our model of governance model is not something juxtaposed, but is part of the path that, in fidelity to our tradition and with an open look to the future, will enable us to better operate in the field of our mission as educators and pastors. It is an important and courageous point of obedience to reality.

Finally, the subtitle captures the current concern, both in religious life in general and in our consecrated life in particular, of the specific characteristic of religious life that is configured as “prophetic”. The journey that the Church is making under the guidance of Pope Francis urges us to be faithful to God and prophetic in our openness to the poverty of the world, according to the heart of Don Bosco.

As mentioned, this is the result of the work carried out by the General Council in tune and together with with the rich and convergent response received from the provinces in the summer 2023 consultation.

# Motivation for choosing the theme

With the theme proposed for GC29 we believe that the Congregation can concretely highlight the efforts and shortcomings which, instead of launching us forward on the path of fidelity to the Lord and in the prophetic witness of our lives, slow us down, limit us, make us or can make us unable to seize the many opportunities that the current context presents.

There are many positive things in the life of the majority of the confreres, of the provinces and of the Congregation, but this is not enough and cannot serve as a “consolation”, because the cry of the world, the great and new forms of poverty, the daily struggle of so many people – not only poor but also simple and hardworking people – rises strongly as a request for help. These are all questions that should challenge and unsettle us, instead of letting us remain undisturbed. These are all questions that require personal and institutional responses from us.

With the help of the provinces through consultation, we believe we have identified the main reasons for concern on the one hand, and on the other the signs of vitality of our Congregation, always expressed through the specific cultural traits of each context.

During the Chapter we propose to focus on what it means for us ***to be Salesians truly passionate about Jesus Christ***, because without this, while we will offer good services, will do good to people, will help, we will not leave a deep trace. Our identity as consecrated religious is at the heart of our being here.

The words of the gospel, “Jesus called those he wanted to be with him and sent them out to preach” (Mk 3:14-15), tell us that Jesus chooses and calls those he wants. We are among them. The Kingdom of God is present and those first Twelve are an example and a model for us and for our communities.

The Twelve are ordinary people with strengths and weaknesses; they do not form a community of the pure or even a simple group of friends.

At the time of our profession we opted for a true company of Jesus, totally involved in a person-to-person relationship. It is precisely this involvement with Jesus that urges us towards young people.

Jesus’ mission continues and is visible in the world today also through us, whom he has sent. We are consecrated to build broad areas of light for today’s world, to be prophets. We have been consecrated by God and placed in the following of his beloved Son Jesus, to truly live as conquered by God.

Therefore, once again the essential is played out in the fidelity of the Congregation to the Holy Spirit, living, with the spirit of Don Bosco, a Salesian consecrated life centred on Jesus Christ.If this is missing – and sometimes it is missing – we can offer services, have schools and vocational training centres, oratories and youth centres, reception homes for young people..., but if the essential thing is missing, namely our belonging to the Lord Jesus, we do not honour the mission received. Therefore, the call to fidelity to our consecrated identity constantly returns.

Several voices in the Congregation ask to address this reality of consecrated life and our way of living in the Lord with and for young people, especially the poorest. It is clear that greater authenticity is sought and desired.

And there is a strong desire and expectation that this is to be a courageous General Chapter in which things are said, without getting lost in correct, well-packaged sentences but ones which do not touch on life. There is a strong desire to give a boost to the future of the Congregation.

In general, the confreres desire a Congregation that is faithful to the Lord and to Don Bosco. One in which all of us, as Salesians of Don Bosco, have this intense passion for God and for the mission to the young.

It hurts a lot when we realise that we are not living like this, when there are varying paces in the journey of dedication and the gospel’s radical approach, and when the “grace of unity” is not lived in its entirety but reduced to intimism or activism.

This is what is at stake in GC29, provoked also – dare I say it – by the Spirit of God through many mediations including, first and foremost, the Holy Father himself with his decisions.

Dear confreres, I would like to recall one aspect that surely many of you have perceived. I am referring to continuity and harmony with the experience of GC28. In fact, the theme focuses strongly on our Salesian consecrated identity, with a true desire to grow in fidelity and in the prophetic value of our life, as well as focusing on the mission shared with the laity and the Salesian Family, always carrying the young people and their families in our heart, who are so often poor and troubled.

There is continuity also in reference to issues concerning the animation and governance of the Congregation that were not dealt with previously. I can assure you that almost all the provinces have asked to dedicate time in the Chapter Assembly – since it was impossible to do so in the previous one – to investigate these essential and vital situations.

Let me pick up on what has been said thus far, looking at the three core areas.

* **Animation and care for the true life of each Salesian:** as believers conquered by God, we fix our gaze on Jesus and are consecrated to him. This is safeguarded in each of us, every day, in caring for our own vocation and that of others, in faithfulness to God and to ourselves.

It is important to be faithful to God, as a community, living the experience of God together in a simple, concrete and evangelical fraternity.

It is a journey that accompanies our whole life without ever being interrupted: from initial formation to the final encounter with the Lord.

Our fraternity, open to the poverty of the world, makes us human and attentive to everyone, starting with the poorest and most excluded.

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

* **Salesians, Salesian Family and lay people together “with” and “for” young people: we are called to complete, in continuity, the reflection of GC28 and grow in the shared mission.**

Apostolic vitality, as spiritual vitality, is a commitment to older youth, youngsters caught up in the most varied forms of poverty. Therefore we cannot stop at offering educational services alone. The Lord calls us to educate by evangelising, bringing his presence and accompanying life with opportunities for the future.

We are called to seek new models of presence, new expressions of the Salesian charism in the name of God. This is done in communion with young people and the world, through “an integral ecology”, in the formation of a digital culture in the worlds inhabited by young people and adults.

We must therefore be careful to develop a model of economically sustainable goods, without excluding the poor.

*“One heart and soul” (Acts 4:32)*

* **A courageous review and re-shaping of the governance of the Congregation at all levels: obedience to reality requires us to be concrete, to look at and evaluate the forms of animation and governance of the Congregation, to evaluate and verify whether they are adequate for accompanying people’s lives – starting with the Salesians – and the mission.**

Faith makes us concrete: in the Provincial Chapters we evaluated the structures of animation and governance of the Congregation; we will do similarly and to an ever greater extent in this General Chapter. We have the task of developing and making courageous and forward-looking reflections on this activity. And evaluation of the institutional dimension is the concrete condition for the possibility of personal and community life, in the mission and in the different contexts.

All this, together with various juridical issues that we have addressed in the Provincial Chapters and that, as you well know, we are called to take up and complete as a Chapter Assembly.

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).*

**Conclusion**

Let me finish with a final reference to Don Bosco and our Mother the Help of Christians.

One day in 1875 Our Founder, aware that not everything would end with him, but that it would certainly be only the beginning of a long journey to be travelled, said to Fr Giulio Barberis, one of his closest collaborators: “You will complete the work that I begin; I shall sketch it, you will colour it… You see, I am now sketching a rough copy of the Congregation. I shall leave it to those who will come after me to perfect it.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

With GC29 that we are beginning today we will clean up other parts of the rough draft that Don Bosco left us, as has always been done in all the General Chapters throughout the history of the Congregation, confident that today, too, we can continue to be enlightened by the Spirit to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in fidelity to the original charism, with the faces, music and colours of today.

We are not alone in this mission. We know and feel that the Virgin Mary is a model of fidelity.

It is good to return with mind and heart to the day of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of 1887 when, two months before his death, Don Bosco said to some Salesians, all emotional, who looked at him and listened: “Until now we have walked on a sure path. We cannot go wrong. It is Mary who leads us.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

So then, it is Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco’s Madonna, who is guiding us. She is the Mother of us all and at this time of our GC29 it is she who is saying, as she did at Cana in Galilee,“Do whatever he tells you.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

May our Mother the Help of Christians enlighten us and guide us, as she did with Don Bosco, to be faithful to the Lord and never disappoint young people, especially those most in need.

Don Bosco very often tellingly reminded those who lived at or came to Valdocco, to the Motherhouse: if we are here it is because Our Lady brought us here.

We all strongly believe this in listening to the “do whatever he tells you” of Canaanite memory. And on this we rely, open to the wonder of the presence of God that we will experience in this crucial experience.

Thank you for listening.

*Turin, 16 February 2025*

*Fr Stefano Martoglio*

*Vicar of the Rector Major*

1. BM XIII, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *BM XIII*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. C 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *BM XI*, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *MB XVIII*, 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Jn 2:5.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)