

2.1 ENCOURAGING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES (GC27 75.5)

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GC27 asked us to strengthen the consistency of the Salesian community and to make its internationality grow. After having offered in AGC 422 some orientations on consistent communities, let us now consider international communities, according to what the General Chapter itself asks: “*Encouraging international communities also through a worldwide redistribution of confreres and the promotion of missionary projects in the Congregation*”¹.

Not in all contexts is it possible to have confreres from countries other than one’s own. Where it is not possible to establish international communities, let us at least consider the possibility of having multicultural and multi-ethnic communities, i.e. communities in which there are confreres from different ethnic or tribal groups. Establishing international communities is the condition for offering a prophetic witness of “intercultural fraternity”.

The orientations that are now being proposed have been shared with the Rector Major and the General Council; they are intended to help the confreres and the provinces to take this capitular choice to heart and give it full and generous support.

1. Importance of International Communities

Today we live in an era of great *mobility of persons and peoples*. There are various reasons for this phenomenon: poverty, hunger, war, persecution, desertification, climate change, the rising of sea levels, globalization and, as a result, the search for security and better living conditions. The result of mobility is a mixture of people from every nation, culture, ethnicity, religion, lan-

¹ CG27, 75.5.

guage; this situation requires tackling problems of cultural adaptation, civil coexistence and social integration; it is a situation that now occurs in the majority of countries, both rich and poor, and in all continents.

Our Congregation cannot ignore the phenomenon of migration. Many young migrants find themselves without work and therefore without a future, excluded from society, exposed to crime and violence. In order to respond to their needs, the educative and pastoral communities are becoming more and more intercultural, even with the presence of volunteers coming from various countries; for this reason, the provinces feel the need to create international communities. It should be noted that among the young migrants of our educative and pastoral communities we are beginning to have vocations to Salesian consecrated life.

In the field of initial formation, since vocations have decreased and there are no formators, interprovincial and international formation communities have been established in various provinces. In addition to strengthening the formation communities, this choice enables confreres in formation to live a fraternity open to interaction, relationships and cultural diversity.

The growing needs of the missions also make it necessary to send missionaries, to strengthen existing communities or to found new ones; think, for example, of the new communities of Kuching in Malaysia, of Palabeck in Uganda for the care of refugees, of Kunkujang in Gambia which are made up of confreres from various countries.

Finally, we must not forget the communities that respond to the needs of the entire Congregation, such as, for example, the community of the headquarters, the Salesian Pontifical University, the Salesian places, the world formation communities, the communities of the Vatican and the Catacombs. These are international communities that need the contribution of confreres from different provinces.

In the Congregation, as you can see, there is already a considerable exchange of confreres. All the signs described above point

towards a greater internationality of the communities. For this reason, GC27, with a prophetic vision, asked for the promotion of international communities and proposed two ways of making this commitment a reality: the promotion of the Congregation's missionary projects and the global redistribution of confreres.

2. Availability to the Missionary Projects of the Congregation

According to GC27, one way of fostering the emergence of international communities is to make the confreres available for the missionary projects of the Congregation. It is therefore necessary to make these projects known, to grow the missionary spirit, to help the confreres especially in initial formation to have an open look at the life of the Church and of the Congregation; above all it is necessary to form to availability. In general, it is a matter of forming to obedience as availability and in particular to missionary availability; this task is the responsibility of provincials, formators and provincial delegates for missionary animation in synergy with the sector for the missions of the Congregation. Don Alberto Caviglia used to speak of the great development of the Congregation that had grown up with the availability of the "*I go*", which he considered the "Salesian motto". The missionary development was due to the availability of the confreres.

When Don Bosco wrote the Salesian Constitutions, he put *obedience as the first of the evangelical counsels*, overcoming the traditional order that considered first poverty, then chastity and finally obedience. After the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, the traditional order was introduced in our Constitutions. Vatican II then gave the first place to chastity and asked religious institutes to renew their Constitutions. For this task of revision, the Code of Canon Law of 1983 indicated that "All must observe faithfully the mind and designs of the founders regarding the nature, purpose, spirit, and character of an institute... and its sound traditions, all of which constitute the patrimony of the

same institute”². For this reason, in the final edition of the Constitutions, GC22 once again placed obedience in the first place.

Don Bosco considered religious obedience as availability to God for the mission, as readiness to do anything in whatever place was needed. Once, shaping his handkerchief into a ball, he passed it from one hand to the other. As the boys watched silently, he would suddenly exclaim: “If I had twelve boys as manageable as this handkerchief, I would spread our Faith not only throughout Europe, but far, far into the remotest lands”³.

Don Vecchi comments: “As though in response to such an invitation a tradition grew up in the Congregation encouraging confreres who felt themselves called, to make to the Rector Major a special offer of their availability for the missions *ad gentes*. Overcoming all geographical limitations, it makes them prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere, and gives to Salesian obedience a special worldwide dimension of totality. This availability for obedience... is proper to our tradition”⁴. In this way we have become a worldwide Congregation.

“The missionary dimension,” affirms the current Successor of Don Bosco, “is part of our identity”⁵. And he continues: “We Salesians of Don Bosco, even though we have a juridical organization which is expressed in Provinces, do not make our religious profession for one place, one country or one destination. We are Salesians of Don Bosco in the Congregation and for the Mission, there where there is need for us and where our service is possible”⁶.

When he was about to begin the missions of America in 1875, Don Bosco invited the Salesians to offer themselves freely. Today God’s call to the mission of the Congregation comes to his confreres through the General Chapters: GC21 started the Africa Project and GC26 started the Europe Project. The Rectors Major then repeat-

² Can. 578.

³ *MB* IV, p. 424. Cfr also III, p. 546; VI, p. 11; XIII, p. 210.

⁴ J. VECCHI, ‘*I have come to do your will*’, in ACG 375, p. 34.

⁵ A. FERNANDEZ, *Belonging more to God, more to the Confreres, more to the Youth*, in ACG 419, 2014, p. 22-23.

⁶ *Oc. cit.* p. 25.

edly addressed these missionary invitations to all the confreres, indicating some priorities. In his first letter to the Congregation, the current Rector Major also made an appeal to his confreres, indicating some missionary areas that are in need; he then renews his appeal every year on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Missionary vocations are a gift from God, but they need to be requested in prayer, raised up in the confreres, accompanied in their growth; they require discernment and are born where there is an atmosphere of availability. Therefore, it does not seem out of place to put the root of the missionary vocation in a life lived as obedience to God, as listening to the needs of the Church, of the Congregation, of the poor young people, as discernment and response. Obedience is not only availability to the requests of a Superior, but is above all a generous and available offer of oneself.

3. Global Redistribution of Confreres

According to GC27, a second way to foster the emergence of international communities is the global redistribution of confreres. This is more difficult to achieve; while the first way described above is based on the availability of confreres who offer themselves spontaneously, this second way requires the intervention of a Superior who, seeing the needs, asks a confrere for at least temporary availability to go to a province in need.

The problem of the equitable distribution of priests is very much alive in the Church. For example, in Malta there is 1 priest for every 337 inhabitants; in Cuba there is 1 priest for every 20,000 faithful; in some dioceses of the northeast of Brazil there is 1 priest for 35,000 faithful and even 1 for 45,000. These are borderline cases; however, it is known that the countries of Latin America, where 43% of the world's Catholics reside, have only 13% of the world's total number of priests; while the countries of Europe and North America, with less than 39% of the world's Catholics, have more than 73% of the world's total number of priests. These figures are

very eloquent about the imbalance between the north and south of the Church. In this light one understands the concern of Vatican II and the Popes to stimulate a more equitable distribution of clergy among the dioceses of the world, including also the request to religious Congregations to commit themselves to new frontiers or to the dioceses to temporarily send “*fidei donum*” priests.

Returning now to the life of the Congregation, missionary vocations “*ad vitam*” should certainly be encouraged, but the temporary transfer of confreres between provinces is also a valid help. Such transfers could last from three to five years; they could also lead to the maturation of a missionary vocation “*ad vitam*”. This requires a broader vision of the common good in the provinces and in the confreres, the maturation of a sense of solidarity and also the consideration of mutual advantage in favouring missionary availability.

In his first letter to his confreres, the Rector Major Fr. Ángel expressed the conviction that “a great richness of our Congregation is precisely its missionary capability”⁷. He recalled that differences and multiculturalism are a richness, that the identity of the Salesian charism is not monochrome and that it is necessary to prepare confreres with a global outlook. For this reason he asked for an exchange between provinces, recommending, in addition to the offer “*ad vitam*”, the temporary availability of confreres for the provinces in need⁸. He also indicated not to prevent young confreres from studying outside the province and to offer, especially to formators, the opportunity to attend international study centers and to have a missionary experience.

In the provinces there may be confreres in need of spiritual and pastoral renewal of an experiential type, which can sometimes consist of what Pope Francis calls “the way out to the peripheries”. Our Special General Chapter had already considered the

⁷ A. FERNANDEZ, *Belonging more to God, ...*, p. 24.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

missionary relaunch as “a thermometer of the pastoral vitality of the Congregation and an effective means against the danger of embourgeoisement”⁹. And when Fr Viganò launched the Africa Project in 1980, he wrote a letter in which he said: “The missions free us from the tendency to a soft and easy life, from superficiality in spiritual things and from genericism”.

In order to realize in the Congregation a global redistribution of the confreres, the growth of a mentality of solidarity among the Provincials is required, as well as the intervention of the Rector Major and the General Councillors to encourage temporary sendings.

4. Intercultural Experience as a Prophecy of Fraternity

In the Congregation there are different types of international communities: communities of mission “*ad gentes*”, of apostolic commitment among immigrants, of global services, of formation and study. The international and multicultural communities offer the possibility of a special witness of the prophecy of fraternity through intercultural experience.

The confreres, although coming from different countries, recognize themselves as brothers in Don Bosco; the communion among them is based on the bonds of religious profession and of the Salesian charism. By establishing relationships of esteem and friendship, with patience and humility they interact more and more and grow in mutual acceptance and affection. Progressively they consider the differences in culture, sensitivity and viewpoints not as an obstacle to good relations, but as an enrichment. This requires the ability to relativize one’s own way of seeing and building communion on elements of unity; in this way all are transformed by the experiences of others and grow in mutual donation.

Fraternity lived in the community, and especially in an international community, is the first and fundamental mission. When

⁹ SGC n. 296.

the youth and lay people see how we, although coming from different countries and cultures, overcome our differences, work in a spirit of mutual understanding and help, dedicate ourselves to the mission of youth, all this becomes a stimulus and inspiration for their lives. Fraternity thus becomes the prophecy of the Church, communion and service. The Apostolic Exhortation “*Vita consecrata*” asks consecrated persons to be experts in communion and to practice its spirituality. Communion is a sign for the world and an attractive force that leads to believing in Christ. In this way communion opens up to mission, it becomes mission itself¹⁰.

In order to establish international communities in the provinces it is necessary to be available to welcome missionaries, whether permanent or temporary, and to send confreres to other cultures. In addition, an operation of discernment on the part of the Provincials is necessary so that in the communities there are confreres from different backgrounds, ethnic groups and cultures and the richness and variety of differences are assured; on the other hand, it is not easy to build fraternity in international communities if the confreres are not trained or at least open to intercultural experience. It is also necessary for each confrere, in addition to his own language, to learn another international language. Provinces should offer this learning opportunity especially to young confreres.

5. Operational Conclusions

We now present as a conclusion, and as an example, some operational guidelines. With the contribution of all, we will be able to find other concrete choices in this promising field of international and intercultural communities.

It is up to the provincials to configure the Salesian communities with confreres belonging to different nationalities, cultures, languages and ethnic groups. This fosters intercultural experience, which is a sign of the prophecy of fraternity; it also re-

¹⁰ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 46.

sponds to the needs of the youth mission, especially in the case of migrations. The welcoming of young people and volunteers from other cultures and nations into the educative and pastoral communities also helps to give an international face to the communities.

The provinces are invited to send confreres to the formation communities and international study centers of the Congregations such as Roma Gerini, Jerusalem, Roma Testaccio, the Pontifical Salesian University, the Pontifical Universities of Rome. International environments favour the openness of the mind, the knowledge of other cultures, the interaction with different Salesian and ecclesial experiences, the study of Italian. Such an international experience is particularly important for the formation of the formators of the formation communities and the teachers of Salesian study centers.

It is useful for provinces to plan missionary experiences, for example during the holidays, especially for young confreres, formators and teachers in study centers. Even the study of an international language, besides one's own, needs planning and cannot be left to improvisation; this is a learning to be offered to the young confreres and formators of the community and of the international study centers. The study of Italian in particular is necessary when it comes to the world communities placed at the service of the Congregation.

It is the responsibility of the Provincials, the provincial delegates of missionary animation and formators, especially in the young confreres, to encourage discernment of the missionary vocation "*ad vitam*" and therefore the sending of missionaries available to the Rector Major. It is also important for the provinces to be available to welcome and accompany missionaries in particular situations such as Project Europe or in particular contexts of migration. Missions or chaplaincies for foreigners that require attention to the inclusion in projects and communities of the provinces are also to be cared for.

Among the provinces, also with the help of the General Councillors, the temporary transfer of confreres to the provinces that are poor in personnel and in need of help or to the formation communities should be encouraged. Such transfers need to be regulated by special agreements.