

## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### **“EXPERTS, WITNESSES AND CRAFTSMEN OF COMMUNION”<sup>1</sup>**

#### **The salesian community – animating nucleus**

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Rome, 25 March 1998

*Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord*

My dear confreres,

The year 1998 sees all the provinces engaged in preparing and holding Provincial Chapters. This is a grace from the Lord generously offered to all of our ninety-one circumscriptions, which will have its effect on the life of the whole Congregation. We do not see these Chapters as legal formalities nor as merely deliberative assemblies. For us they are experiences, celebrations and occasions for re-launching the communion which unites us in our religious consecration and our mission to young people.

The Provincial Chapters will reflect and manifest working methods for lay participation in the salesian charism and hence for the greater responsibility for animation which is being shaped for us. In this way they are called to make a contribution which will be indicative for our future.

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<sup>1</sup> “Religiosi e Promozione Umana” 24, in *La vita fraterna in comunità* n.10.

This Congregational event fits into a process within the Church which can be clearly seen in the six synods which precede the Jubilee: the visible and practical fulfilment of communion according to the new horizons of the Church and the world. I had personal experience of this in the American Synod in which I took part with others.

It was this which suggested the theme for this letter which I offer you as a stimulus to reflection rather than as a complete treatment of the topic, given its breadth and complexity.

My recent visit to Africa for the erection of two new Vice-provinces,<sup>2</sup> has been a new proof, if proof were needed, of the potentialities inherent in “salesian” fraternal life, i.e. life according to the spirit and style of the origins, codified today in the Constitutions and Regulations: potentialities for each one of us, for our mission, for the young people in our environments, for those disposed to work with us, and for people in general. It is therefore only right to give them special attention at this juncture.

## **I. A new phase in our community life.**

### **1. Strong expectations.**

Recent General Chapters have formulated guidelines and organic indications for educating young people to the faith<sup>3</sup> and for involving lay people in the salesian mission.<sup>4</sup> The fulfilment of such proposals requires the creation of some realities closely connected with them: the establishment of the educative and pastoral community, its animation on the part of the group of Salesians, the understanding of the current situation and mentality of young people, and the formulation of an educative pastoral plan. All this constitutes the “model” for pastoral ministry, which we intend to follow with practical proposals to deal with the current situation while remaining faithful to the principles of the preventive system.

Reading these guidelines, even cursorily, one immediately becomes aware that the possibility of putting them into practice depends upon an element that is considered sound and almost taken for granted: the **salesian community**.

The community, in fact, is invited to recognize the challenges which the young people pose and to think about what suggestions to offer them so that their faith may mature. The community is called to live and communicate a spirituality, without which efforts to put the young people in contact with the mystery of Jesus would be

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<sup>2</sup> Tropical Equatorial Africa (ATE) and French-speaking West Africa (AFO).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. GC23.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. GC24.

ineffective. It is to the community that the task is given of bringing the lay people together, getting them involved, giving them responsibilities and training them.

The presence of the community is always presumed in the guidelines, even though not always mentioned explicitly. To its members the indications are primarily addressed. To them the project is entrusted.

There is constant reference to it in meetings and documents in which the situation of our vocational fruitfulness, of our impact and our renewal are studied. After considering what can be done about some problem, and deciding how to do it, when it comes down to *who* should do it, there is the constant refrain: *“it needs a community which...”*, and then come the requirements.

To which community do these expectations refer? To the local community, to the provincial community or to the world community? The three levels which work together and in harmony are always understood, as the Constitutions indicate: “Local communities are a living part of the provincial community”;<sup>5</sup> “Religious profession incorporates the Salesian in the Society, making him a participant in the communion of spirit, witness and service that is its life within the Universal Church”,<sup>6</sup> i.e. in the world community.

Looking more closely, however, at the deliberations of the last two General Chapters it becomes clear that the focal point, from which one starts and to which one returns is the local community. Assigned to it are the greater number and the more specific tasks. The Province is asked to ensure that conditions are such that the local communities are able to function, to plan the mission in the whole area, animating, giving support and encouragement and setting up enriching contacts between the local communities.

There is no question about the identity, the organization at world level, the guidelines which ensure our unity, or the creative possibilities for the individual provinces. The amount of encouragement, directives and aids produced by Chapters and by the General Council is not only abundant, but faithfully reflects the renewal in the Church and appears suited to the time in which we live.

What we look at in the first place, and use as a yardstick, is the vitality, the ability to respond of what we might call the cells or the basic organisms of the Congregation: the local communities, and in reference to these, the provincial communities.

It is not difficult to see why. The local communities are the places where we are at work every day: where we live out our consecrated lives and express the quality of our commitment to education. They are

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<sup>5</sup> C 58.

<sup>6</sup> C 59.

in direct contact with the youngsters and the people: they experience their situations at first hand and have to think of bearing witness by their lives and of finding apostolic initiatives to respond to the needs. It is in the local communities that guidelines are tried out and tested: to see whether they are valid and practicable in our current situations.

There is another reason too. Only by involving the local communities is it possible to bring all or at least most of the confreres into the task of rethinking a method of faith education and a new community approach. Few confreres are involved at provincial and world level, even though their roles are of great importance and influence.

The community, therefore, in which we live our daily life and especially if it is directly exposed to the public gaze, is the place where the greatest expectations regarding significance and apostolic effectiveness are to be found.

The expectations in this regard are well stated in the theological expressions which abound in both the document "*Fraternal life in Community*",<sup>7</sup> and the part of the Apostolic Exhortation *Consecrated Life* entitled "Signum fraternitatis". They are pages to be meditated on in order to find in them ever new spiritual and practical guidance: the image of the Trinity, a sign of communion with the Church, a prophetic expression of following the call, a school of Christian love, the place where one experiences God.

"Salesian" expectations have also been expressed in notions which immediately give the idea of the requirements and the results: the community is a *family* and is built up as such; it becomes a *sign, a school and an environment of faith*; we think of it as a *special place for ongoing formation*.

In line with these ideas the GC24 drew out very forcefully one which corresponds to the phase of renewal in which we are at present engaged; it is in fact its keystone, its driving force: the **animating nucleus**.

It is on this that I want to concentrate in this letter, and from this standpoint to consider other aspects of the community.

## **2. Animating nucleus.**

This is already a familiar expression in our vocabulary. It represents a benchmark in our current way of understanding pastoral activity, intimately connected with others no less important, such as the participation of lay people in the mission, the development of the educative community, the formulation of the project, the sharing in pedagogical style, and the communication of salesian spirituality.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Fraternal Life in Community*, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life etc. Rome, 1994.

With these it becomes a “system”, which would not be possible for them alone without the action of the animating nucleus. Similarly, it is not possible to understand the purpose and the practical meaning of the expression itself in separation from the whole “system”. Article 5 of the General Regulations puts it well, when it inserts it among the guidelines for our pedagogical and pastoral practice. “The application of the plan requires that in all our works and settings we establish the educative and pastoral community, whose animating nucleus is the salesian community”.<sup>8</sup>

The frequent use of the expression in GC23 and GC24, the hopes expressed regarding its understanding and its functioning, have rightly drawn the confreres’ attention to it. They have come to understand that it is important to set about putting the Chapter declarations into practice. And being still at the stage of sorting out the idea, they raise questions about both the concept and its application.

I consider as perfectly justified the many requests for clarification made to me and to the members of the Council when we have the opportunity to meet. I willingly respond to some of these questions noting, however, that the answers do not provide immediate and universal solutions. Rather they are useful as points of understanding, as some experiences already realized, as an encouragement to continue the research, the experimentation and the codification of practice.

What do we mean by “animating nucleus”? It is a group of people who identify themselves with the salesian mission, educational system and spirituality, and together take up the task of assembling, motivating, and involving all those who are concerned with a work, so as to form with them the educative community and to carry out a plan for the evangelization and education of the young.

The reference point for this group is the **salesian community**. That means that the Salesians, all of them, are a permanent part of the animating nucleus. Each one, young or old, directly engaged in a working role or retired, makes the contribution which his preparation or his situation permits.

This also means that the lay people are part of it in accordance with the circumstances already mentioned.

It even means that the local nucleus could be formed principally by lay people, always having behind them adequate support, on the spot or within the province, from the Salesians. This happens in places where recently we have had to animate through a guardianship, patronage, or legal requirement.

It needs to be emphasized that the “salesian” community, its spiritual heritage, its educational method, its brotherly relationships,

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<sup>8</sup> R 5

and co-responsibility for the mission, provide in each case the guiding model for the pastoral identity of the animating nucleus.

The type we are dealing with here, which ought to lead to the implementation of provincial plans for relocation and redimensioning, is one in which the salesian community is present in sufficient numbers and in quality to animate, together with some lay people, an educative community and project, accepting that this allows of a variety of styles of implementation depending on the number of confreres and roles.

The other kind, the one in which only lay people make up the immediate animating nucleus is complementary: it is a possibility which could answer certain particular problems of either personnel or initiatives, and always looks to the “salesian nucleus” as the inspirational model to inspire it and in which to find support.

### **3. The goal.**

In the light of the above indications, it has been asked whether it is a matter of necessity or choice. It must be said that the process of the Church, the changes that have taken place in society with their repercussions in the field of education, our own periods of rethinking and verification, have coalesced in the concept of *community – animating nucleus* through force of evidence. There is now no longer any question about convictions or orientations in this regard; it is now a matter of its concrete realization and our ability to bring it about.

It may be helpful to recall, albeit briefly, the motives underlying the options; they may suggest useful attitudes.

Nowadays educative and pastoral initiatives have become open and are based on criteria of participation. Numerous lay people are at work in this field, and their numbers have increased in recent years to such an extent that they now constitute a numerical majority; they include parents and collaborators; they are linked with civil organisms and other educational agencies; they are open to the locality and linked with a network of friends and supporters: it is a complex world of management in which not everything can be done directly and there is need of complementary responsibility and skills of various kinds.

While traditional educational environments are acquiring new dimensions, settings for reaching the young with programs to meet their different situations are becoming more numerous and diversified. On the one hand there are requests to take on the management of ever bigger, more complex and intricate works; and on the other there is a call for new educative fields provoked by the present needs and prevailing poverty. This has led and is still leading to the demand not only for more personnel, but for personnel with specific qualifications

and for linkages in all directions in line with the complex nature of society.

But all this is only the beginning of the matter. The decisive reason which has led us to conceive the community as an animating nucleus is the new season through which the Church is living. It reveals an acute awareness of communion with God and among men, and sees communion as the principal way for the realization of man's salvation.

This is bound to bring about notable modifications in pastoral practice. Everything acquires its meaning and dimension in the light of communion. Ecclesial communities become solidly subjects of the mission. Within them the vocations of the religious, the ordained ministers and the laity are turned to account, in line with the specific gift given by the Spirit to each one. Their respective experiences interact to their mutual enrichment and become committed together in evangelization, which becomes "new" also because of this fresh element: the ecclesial subject which accomplishes it, and in this the importance of the laity emerges at the present day.

The process has not been a short one by any means. The travail in the pre-conciliar period, the reflections in the Council itself, the efforts to set up in a new way both ecclesial life and pastoral work after the Council, the doctrinal synthesis and praxis which have matured in these years leading up to the Jubilee, the Synods (on the laity, ordained ministries and consecrated life), and the Apostolic Exhortations which followed them, have clarified how the different vocations complete each other, enrich each other, and are coordinated; indeed, they could not have an original identity apart from mutual reference within ecclesial communion.

For our part, we see this form of being religious and of working for the young from the very beginnings of the Salesian Family. From the outset Don Bosco involved many persons through his witness and the novelty of his work, and gained support from both ecclesiastics and lay people; he attracted to his work both men and women who helped him to teach catechism, to build schools and workshops, to animate playgrounds, to obtain work for needy boys with upright employers. With them he started up groups and occasional forms of cooperation.

When he saw the need to provide a home for some of the boys, he created a family with the collaboration of Mamma Margaret, with whom he shared the running of the house. His aim was to unite all good people and extend their collaboration to the maximum. He dreamed of their collaboration, suggested it to them, and set about realizing it by word of mouth, friendship and through letter-writing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Braido P., *Il progetto operativo di Don Bosco e l'utopia della società cristiana*, LAS Rome 1982, p.11.

Soon he became convinced of the need for consecrated personnel: and this not only because the continuity of the work called for persons available full-time for the young, but because the religious quality of the education he had so much at heart needed to have a priest in charge of it. It was not just a matter of rescuing the youngsters from a situation of economic poverty, or preparing them for life through study or the learning of a trade, nor even of educating their religious sense or conscience, but of bringing them into contact with the living Christ through the grace of faith, the efficacy of the sacraments and participation in the ecclesial community.

Vocations to a consecrated life were to be found among the youngsters themselves. And so he began to gather some of them together and invited them to form a Society; he asked them to stay with him permanently, to commit themselves full-time and with all their strength to a work of charity, to dedicate their whole life to following the poor, chaste and obedient Christ in a faithful service to God and the young.

Our charism therefore was born in a context of communion of a family and educative kind, animated by an almost unlimited openness in collaborating in doing good to various groups, with the specific aim of creating cooperation, solidarity and communion.

#### **4. The present moment.**

In recent times a great deal of reflection has been given to the consecrated community.

Of interest is the quality of fraternal life with reference to the lawful demands now emerging in communities, to the conditions of life they call for, and to the new possibilities of rapport and communication which arise as a consequence of culture, of renewal in the Church, and of present personal sensitivities.

Of interest too, and very much so, is the service to human and Christian communion which consecrated communities are called upon to provide in today's Church (evangelization, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue) and the prevailing world climate (peace, communication, reconciliation, ethnic conflicts, the intercultural character of society, and globalization).

The two levels are intertwined; they are interdependent: we become experts in community through an experience of brotherhood in Christ. And so one leads to the other; both have to be reawakened and renewed in a stage in which the community must come to terms with *certain conditions*.

One of these is its *present composition*: the number of members in the individual communities is falling and in some cases can go no



lower. As well as being greatly reduced in number, there is sometimes a preponderance of those who are aged or at least getting on in years. This is not always a disadvantage, especially if seen in a positive manner as making it possible to give greater responsibility to individuals because of the smaller numbers, or as an opportunity for exchange and charismatic experience between generations if the aged are in the majority. Such a composition, nevertheless, requires a new ability for relationships and adaptation of various kinds.

A second element to be considered is the *relationship being created between the community and apostolic work*. In some places we no longer have exclusive responsibility for the work; not all the members of the religious community are involved in it; often they are distributed over several sectors with little communication between them. One feels a disproportion between the religious personnel and the dimensions of the work. A consequence of this is that there is an abundance of exchanging of ideas and sharing of responsibility between the religious who are still active and the lay collaborators, but much less with the members of the religious community. In many cases too, many confreres become so overburdened by their various duties that they cannot follow the regular rhythm of community meetings.

A third element is the *greater insertion* of the community into the dynamics of the Church and a greater openness to the social context. Consecrated life is seen not as a withdrawal from questions which concern man, but as being inserted in them with an original contribution and specific mission. As a result there is a multiplication of relationships and exchanges with what is external. The time available for community matters is cut back and is less tranquil and protected, more invaded by the complexity of life and stimulus from the neighbourhood. The complexity, events, trends and images penetrate through the ever more individualized means of social communication, and challenge not only the quality and frequency of relationships but also the community's ability to make judgements in line with the Gospel.

But the most important fact concerns the *change from insistence on life in common to that of brotherhood* determined by the circumstances of work and of the new demands of the individual.

The two terms, *common life*, and *fraternal life in community* convey the idea immediately, and it is not difficult to distinguish between their implications. "Common life" means "living together in a particular and lawfully constituted religious house", and performing the same actions (praying, eating, working, etc.) in accordance with the same norms. For common life it is important to come together physically.

“Fraternal life in community” means primarily acceptance of the individual, quality of interpersonal relationships, friendship, the possibility of real affection, the joy of being and working together, the active participation of everyone in the life of the group. Nowadays we are more concerned about the union of persons, the depth of relationships, mutual help and support, making the most of each one’s capabilities and active role, and the convergence of intents and objectives.

Common life and fraternal life are linked. “It is clear that ‘fraternal life’ will not automatically be achieved by the observance of the norms which regulate common life; but it is evident that common life is designed to favour fraternal life to a great extent”.<sup>10</sup>

A balance has to be found: not purely communion of spirit which would do away with all manifestations of common life; but not such great legal insistence on common life as would make subordinate the more substantial aspects of fraternity in Christ: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples”.<sup>11</sup>

Our Constitutions help us to understand and establish this balance and fusion of the two aspects. They tell us of the moments we have in common: they characterize the family spirit,<sup>12</sup> they tend to create a mature rapport among us, to open us to communication, to make us able to share “joys and sorrows (...), apostolic plans and experiences”.<sup>13</sup>

Good order and balance between the two elements brings about the desire and need to form true communities, in line with the conditions of each group and individual aspirations; deeply renewed communities, be they small, medium-sized or large, which have to animate traditional works or be inserted in more lively fashion among the people, must nevertheless be always able to help individuals to grow from both a human and religious standpoint, to express with greater transparency what they believe, and stir up the desire to become members: in other words, communities with vocational ability.

## **5. Our community model.**

All forms of religious life have an indispensable element in the community. But each realizes it in its own way which differs from that of others.

Our community life is in the first place a reflection of that lived by Jesus with the Apostles. He chose them “to be with him, to be sent out

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<sup>10</sup> *Fraternal life in community*, n.3.

<sup>11</sup> Jn 13, 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. C 51.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons”.<sup>14</sup> From this moment onwards, and by virtue of this call, they formed a solid group in fidelity to the Master and his cause. Together they enjoyed familiarity with Jesus, and heard from him exclusive explanations about the mystery of the Kingdom. Together they were direct witnesses of certain episodes and participants in central events of Jesus’ life. Together they learned from him how to pray in solitude and in contact with men; they were given as a group the task of getting the crowd arranged at the multiplication of the loaves, and all of them were sent (albeit to different villages) to prepare for the arrival of Jesus and to proclaim the Gospel. They gathered round Christ to report on their adventures, and even had some brief discussions on the nature of the Kingdom and their participation in Christ’s cause. Jesus taught them the attitudes necessary for following him and for building unity among themselves: service, forgiveness, humility in their needs, not judging others, selfless generosity. Together with the preaching of the Gospel and “so that the world may believe”,<sup>15</sup> he commanded them to live in unity; he prayed for them “that they may all be one”.<sup>16</sup> Together, with Mary, they received the Spirit and began to set up the community, animating it by the word, the Eucharist, and the service of authority.

This apostolic model is mediated for us through the charismatic experience of our beginnings. Don Bosco, following Christ the Good Shepherd, gathered young disciples around him who grew fond of him as they shared with him the service of the oratories. He asked them to stay with him and devote themselves full time to wholehearted work for the young. With them he extended his gaze to distant places which led to the expansion of the Congregation and refined the spiritual traits which gave a characteristic physiognomy to his family.

*It is a community not only for the young but with the young:* it shares their life and is adapted to their needs. The presence of the young determines the timetable, the style of work and the manner of praying. Staying with Don Bosco means staying with youngsters, offering them all we have and are: heart, mind and will; friendship and work; sympathy and service. In this relationship and environment the identity of both the community and its individual members matures.

*It is a community highly charged spiritually,* characterized by “Da mihi animas”. Don Bosco shaped his first collaborators, with simplicity and tangibility, according to the program: work, prayer and temperance. He asked them to carry out a “work of charity” for the benefit of their neighbour. Love of Jesus Christ and trust in his grace was what lay behind his concern for the good of the boys, beginning

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<sup>14</sup> Mk 3,14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Jn 17,21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

with their human and spiritual needs. Even the most abandoned were helped to make contact with God and the Church, and those who showed particular dispositions were led explicitly towards holiness. The nearness of God and the presence of Mary most Holy were almost sensibly felt.

The community was in no way extraordinary; it was formed of youngsters long on enthusiasm but short on experience, some with outstanding qualities and others with normal and even quite modest endowments, but it was a community led by Don Bosco, with his understanding of each one's capabilities, in a "mission" felt by all to be unique and one in which they were all involved. There were different roles, tasks and work to be done in widely different ways; but there was a definite and general sense of membership of the oratory and belonging to Don Bosco. It was in no way diminished or obscured by the variety of roles or commitments, or the dimensions of skills and settings.

Despite the moments of tension and difficulty that we know of, the Valdocco community appeared *united around a plan of action and the person of its director*, something Don Bosco considered fundamental for its apostolic efficacy. He made every effort, therefore, to foster creativity and involve everyone through spontaneous or established forms of participation, so as to ensure unity in activity, harmony among individuals and consistency of criteria.

In this way the community became the soul of an environment which attracted and won over the hearts of the youngsters: it produced a climate of familiarity, which encouraged spontaneity and led to confidence; it expressed that "pedagogical charity", the kindness which gives rise to loving attachment and arouses a parallel feeling.<sup>17</sup> Don Bosco presented it in his Introduction to the Rule in these words: "When this brotherly love reigns in a community towards one another, and all rejoice in another's good just as though it were their own, then that house becomes heaven itself".

The youthful oratory community was neither closed nor isolated. It had relationships with persons of significance, various religious and civil associations, and with the general context of the city. From the beginning Don Bosco's idea was that it should be linked with the Cooperators' Association as being two branches of the same tree. And so he wrote in the Regulations for the Cooperators: "*This Congregation, being definitively approved by the Church, can serve as a sure and stable bond for Salesian Cooperators, In fact, it has for its primary purpose the carrying out of works for the benefit of youth upon whom rests the good or bad state of future society. By putting forward such a proposal, we do not mean that this is the only means for*

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<sup>17</sup> cf. Letter from Rome, 1884.

*providing for such a need, since there are hundreds of others which we highly recommend, for they are doing good work. We on our part propose one, and it is the work of Salesian Cooperators”.*<sup>18</sup>

At the centre of that lively and open world that was Valdocco, Don Bosco, led by the Lord, wanted consecrated persons who would pull in other apostolic forces involved in the same project, a guarantee of development and of the continuation of the mission.

The *mission*, carried on with the same spirit of Valdocco, provides our communities with the criterion for resolving tensions that may arise. This does not lessen any aspect of fraternity but, in fact, gives it its concrete form. If the meaning of our educative mission to the young were to fall away, our own fraternity would lose its originality and force of communication. It would no longer be the hive of activity that the oratory was, but only a fixed reproduction of it.

The mission, on the other hand, is not an individual insertion from which one returns to the community only occasionally or to pray and rest: we share its life and also the responsibility for its apostolic work: “to live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation”.<sup>19</sup>

The salesian mission is of its nature a community one. The Constitutions say so with great clarity,<sup>20</sup> with the force of a definition: the mission is entrusted to a community, provincial and local.<sup>21</sup>

It is a mission to youth: it aims at the growth of young people in line with the energies God has given to each individual and the grace Christ has communicated to the world. The preventive system, which is a synthesis of its content and praxis, requires a family atmosphere and hence a network of relationships. We are not tutors of individuals, nor specialized coaches: we work in and through a community and try to create broad youthful environments. The ensemble of content and experiences which educational praxis recognizes as adequate for the human development and growth in faith of the young, calls for a convergent synergy of interventions which cannot be realized by a single person working alone.

We may add, moreover, that youngsters must be guided towards maturity in relationships and social life with all its implications; and that the process of faith which we suggest has as its objective the leading of them to an experience of Christian community lived in line with its characteristic dimensions.

Communion and fraternity therefore, the community and family, are the condition, process and substantial part of the mission. This is

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<sup>18</sup> Bosco G., *Regulations for Cooperators*, quoted in *Regulations of Apostolic Life*

<sup>19</sup> C 49.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. SDB C 44; FMA C 51.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. C 44.

something that prompts us to make of it an authentic experience and to become its expert craftsmen.

## **II. A community process for becoming an animating nucleus.**

The above reflections give rise to further questions: How does the salesian community become competent as the animating nucleus of a large group of individuals, who are frequently professionally prepared? What does being an animating nucleus call for from the community? What weight does religious consecration have in the animation of an educative community?

We shall try to respond by analyzing certain perspectives more deeply and exploring some other possibilities. We shall concentrate our attention not only on the reality of animation as already presented by the GC24, and on the manner, methods and content of animation which have been frequently repeated, but also on what renders the animating nucleus competent for carrying out its service.

### **1. Redesigning the mission.**

A qualifying element for the community in its animating role is the reshaping of the mission and its proper place in it, against the broad background conceived by Don Bosco and as expressed today in the Constitutions: in the Salesian Family, “by the will of the Founder, we have particular responsibilities: (...) to foster dialogue and fraternal collaboration”,<sup>22</sup> we bring about in our works the educative and pastoral community (...), so that it can become a living experience of Church and a revelation of God’s plan for us”.<sup>23</sup> To be well set up from a community aspect, considering the educative community and its components as the first objective of our activities in favour of the young, and taking up together theoretically and practically the work of animation, will lead to the clarification of the salesian and pastoral value of such work.

Around us there are adults linked with Don Bosco in various ways: through empathy, commitment, spirit; and to them we are “sent” by virtue of our vocation. Our service to them is not something of little importance: it is one of spiritual and salesian animation.

We are called not only to give dynamism to a group of educators or collaborators by suitable methods; we are called to give rise to “an experience of Church”, to give rise to and extend a vocational reality.

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<sup>22</sup> C 5.

<sup>23</sup> C 47.

It is not only a matter of making better use of the resources we have available, the laity for example, but of communicating the faith and the salesian spirit.

In this way *animation comes to be a primary part of our mission and an original manner of living our communion*, to which we must dedicate more than spare time or mere 'functional' attention.

Don Bosco's charism is concentrated to a particular extent in the SDB community; it was moulded by him directly through the force of consecration, through the daily sharing of the charism with others, through the plan of life called for by salesian spirituality, and through total dedication to apostolic work.<sup>24</sup> Such concentration is not an end in itself; it is there to communicate and spread the particular gift of the Spirit to the Church which is the salesian spirit.

We are not a welfare society or an educational organization which has as its final objective specific material or cultural realizations; we are charismatics. That means giving life to a work which raises questions, gives motives for hope, brings people together, prompts collaboration, and gives rise to an ever more fruitful communion for the realization together of a plan of life and action in line with the Gospel.

Ours is a collaboration with the Spirit. He animates the Church and the world. He opens them to the Word, excites the desire for unity and the will for agreement, and renders efficacious efforts and commitments for the transformation of the world in accordance with God's design; he distributes charisms and sows the seeds of good in humanity, so that they may strengthen in themselves the elements of peace and communion.

Constituted as we are by the Spirit in consecrated communities, we become mediators of his animating activity: we help people to accept and welcome his interventions, we create the conditions needed for his gifts and inspirations to strike home in reality, so as to give full and ample realization to the mission to which he has called us.

The tasks of animation, particularly in the EPC, aim at making available to all what the Spirit has given to us: faith in God's loving plan for every individual, love of Christ expressed in total dedication to the salvation of the young, the pedagogical wisdom we learn from the Good Shepherd, and conformation to Christ through the model of Don Bosco.<sup>25</sup>

Only this way of thinking of the mission will render adequately effective in the community the experience of the Spirit, who is to be found in the primacy given to the meaning of God, in the following of Christ, in the pastoral charity with which we place ourselves completely

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. GC24, 236.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. GC24, 159.

at the service of the young with our salesian educative and spiritual heritage.

To be animators therefore of the activity of persons involved in Don Bosco's mission and spirit is not an extra function for particular occasions: it is a *vocational trait* forming part of the identity of the consecrated individual Salesian or community, and a main part of the pastoral praxis.

"Every SDB is an animator, and strives always to fulfil the task more efficiently".<sup>26</sup> There is no need for special qualities beyond those that correspond to the salesian vocation. It is a matter of living the gift inherent in the community style with the young people and laity who manifest the same sensitivity and join forces in the same educative initiatives.

## **2. A way of life for communicating a spirituality.**

The various adjectives associated with the term 'animation' are well justified, because they reveal doctrinal bases, processes and objectives of various kinds. Ours is a *spiritual* animation, not in a limiting sense but in a descriptive one. It does not exclude other aspects of animation, but brings them all together in a particular perspective.

To become an animating nucleus we have to live our spirituality with awareness and conviction, and express it with joyful spontaneity. In the congress of young religious which took place in Rome in September 1997, the pious idea was expressed that not only individuals should be canonized but whole religious communities as well, as a subject which had lived in a solid and exemplary manner the ideal of evangelical life. It was added that a vocational handicap is inherent in the fact that the young see and are attracted by individual models without seeing a corresponding community life behind them: solitary saints, in communities which seem extraneous to their sanctity.

At Valdocco Don Bosco created a school of spirituality which found expression in the environment, in the work of everyday, in the quality of fellowship and in prayer: simple in outward appearance, but substantial and authentic. He invited his youngsters and anyone who wanted to collaborate with him to follow him in the same spirit in line with their own possibilities and circumstances. "At Valdocco", the GC24 reminded us, "there was a particular kind of atmosphere: holiness was built up together; it was shared and mutually communicated, in such a way that the holiness of some cannot be explained without the holiness of the others".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> GC24, 104.



To build and enjoy this climate of *shared holiness* is something to which consecrated persons are committed. The religious community is the setting for an experience of God. Everything is thought out with this in mind and with a view to this end. “The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the Families of consecrated life... Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment”.<sup>28</sup>

The GC23 indicated this as an adequate response to the challenges of educating young people to the faith. It invited communities to become a “sign” of faith giving gospel transparency to their lives so as to become also a school of faith. Faith, in fact, cannot be communicated unless it be lived as the great resource of one’s own existence. “Spiritual and pastoral renewal are two aspects which mutually compenetrates and are interdependent”.<sup>29</sup>

To be animators as a community, i.e. to be an animating nucleus, is to accompany the educative activity we share with others by that breath of the Spirit which can give meaning to the advancement of the person and to the efforts for changing society: the experience of God’s love, the light that comes from Christ, and the vision of man which emerges from the Word of God.

As with the apostolic community after Pentecost,<sup>30</sup> it is like having the ability to “go out” towards the others, to attract, unite, convert and create community with new criteria in the light of the risen Christ. “The first duty of the consecrated life is to make visible the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world”.<sup>31</sup>

The experience of God which is at the beginning and is also the objective of our life-plan must be reawakened, relived and deepened in line with the characteristics of our spirit. We can in fact be led to reduce life to efficiency, to believe that the various elements of our religious life are there as functions of their educative results. This in turn can lead to a progressive internal emptying, to a fading of even the deepest motivations and, as a consequence, to a certain delusion or loss of confidence in our interventions, in those we are working for, in the community and in the laity.

The capacity for spiritual animation, of our kind, supposes and requires the *experience of prayer*: the personal prayer, which comes as a grace and is assiduously learned and practised; and community

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<sup>28</sup> VC 93.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. GC23, 216-217.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Acts 2,1 ff.

<sup>31</sup> VC 20.

prayer, felt and shared at prepared moments, calm and free without haste or dispersion.

Prayer gives back to us the taste for being with Christ and the meaning of the mission. Don Bosco reminds us that “just as food nourishes and preserves the body, so do the practices of piety nourish the soul and make it strong in time of temptation. As long as we observe our practices of piety, we shall live in harmony with everyone and we shall see the Salesian cheerful and happy in his vocation”.<sup>32</sup> Are not those words: “living in harmony with everyone, cheerful and happy in his vocation” just about the truest representation of the animator?

Two signs seem important to me in this matter of expressing the spirituality of the community through the diligence and quality of its prayer. The first concerns the Word of God which we can consult and share when it is a question of enlightenment in our personal and community life, the situations of the youngsters and the challenges of culture. The Bible recounts the religious experience of humanity: the attitudes, trials and reactions of those who lived in this world in accordance with the sense of God, and indeed in accordance with the covenant they had made with him. It is a story of spirituality lived right in the heat of events.

And then the Gospel not only provides us with the teachings and examples of Jesus but puts us in contact with him personally and with his mystery. Only evangelical discernment can give us a Christian mentality at the present day, and help us to maintain a vision of faith, an attitude of hope and a criterion of charity.

The second sign is *the participation of the young and our collaborators in our prayer*, our ability to introduce them to prayer and give them a taste for it. We are not short of examples in this regard, and what we have begun we should continue. Let us not limit ourselves to extraordinary and stimulating celebrations, but accompany the young in a journey of prayer so that they come to want it and it becomes an attitude, a habit, and even a need.

Our youngsters and collaborators often come to know us as workers and as friends who are close to them, generous and available, and desirous of their good, but they do not discern the deeper motivations which underlie our life and constitute its originality. And so they do not understand the implications of consecrated life, and do not feel a desire to follow our own chosen path, even though they remain good friends with us.

To bring others to share in an experience of God, to set up a pedagogy of prayer leading to a personal relationship with Christ, and

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<sup>32</sup> *Introduction to the Rules and Constitutions*, Turin 1885.

open to youthful sensitivities in line with our spirituality: this is the form of animation more befitting a religious community.

As well as offering occasional experiences, rather like samples to attract people, we are called to be educators and masters in spirituality. If that sounds over-ambitious, let us say that we want to be companions and authoritative witnesses, leaders and guides in the ways of spirituality. More than a few of the laity and young people are looking for a spiritual experience. They want something with internal sense and meaning to balance all the external agitation and disturbance. The GC24 puts spirituality at the centre of our effort at sharing. “We are called to share in the Salesian Family with all the lay people, not only in the carrying out of daily work but primarily in the salesian spirit, to become sharers in the responsibility for the mission, in our works and beyond them”.<sup>33</sup> The goal of formation, of and with the laity, is a shared holiness,<sup>34</sup> on account of which “spirituality is called to be the soul of the educative and pastoral community, the core of the formative journeys we have to make together in an atmosphere of the exchange of gifts”.<sup>35</sup>

It is the same task that the Church entrusts to those who are consecrated. “Today a renewed commitment to holiness by consecrated persons is more necessary than ever, also as a means of promoting and supporting every Christian’s desire for perfection. To the degree that they deepen their friendship with God, consecrated persons become better prepared to help their brothers and sisters through valuable spiritual activities. The fact that all are called to become saints cannot fail to inspire more and more those who by their very choice of life have the mission of reminding others of that call”.<sup>36</sup>

The principal mediation for the fulfilment of this task is our daily life, inspired by faith and close to the young and the laity, which diffuses a style of life as though by osmosis or contagion; it is the educative environment in which values appear concretely realized, with significant attractive models, with proposals that involve, and with motivations which shed light on behaviour.

It will also be necessary to accompany individuals making use of communal occasions which lend themselves to sharing and communication, and to make ourselves available for personal dialogue. It all certainly requires both attention and purpose.

### **3. Making the salesian community a “family” able to give rise to communion around the salesian mission.**

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<sup>33</sup> GC24, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. GC24, 104.

<sup>35</sup> GC24, 241.

<sup>36</sup> VC 39.

It has frequently been noticed that the community responds not only to proposals for religious perfection and efficacy in work, but also to deep desires and aspirations of the individual: for deep and authentic relationships, for communication, for personal enhancement, for friendship and affection.

The need is experienced for authentic adult fellowship and an attraction is felt towards it. Although we may have opportunities for individual relaxation of various kinds, and at the present day we are not lacking in sources of information, personal encounters and experience of friendship, the sharing of sentiments and situations remains in a class by itself.

In the society of communication, which is still of the “mass” variety even though made individual through the receiving apparatus, difficulty is experienced in communicating in depth, and there is still a feeling of isolation and loneliness.

You can spot this particularly between young people and an environment of a religious kind tinged with subjectivism and tending to provide immediate satisfaction for sentiment. They listen willingly to personal stories; they look for encounters where they can be courteously received and welcomed without rigid norms or conditions; they go for human relationships which make them feel free and help them to express themselves; they form groups in which they feel good and create solidarity through communication of proposals, desires and realizations.

What gives meaning and effectiveness to religious associations and communities, their force of attraction, does not lie so much in what they have and do, in their operations and work, as in what they live, their style of relationships, their unity.

This is why the first Christian communities caused such an impact. The external sign of the news of the Resurrection, immediately clear to everyone and even those without any knowledge of the content of faith, was the solidarity of the group of those who were assiduous and in agreement “in listening to the teaching of the apostles and in fraternal union, in the breaking of the bread and in prayer”; a group which “had all things in common” and there was no difference among the members. The power of conviction it unleashed made the group esteemed by the people and considered reliable and even desirable. “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved”<sup>37</sup> – it appears to be almost a consequence!

For Don Bosco too fraternal charity, manifested in the family spirit, was the immediate sign the Salesians should offer to the young, to the collaborators and to people in general. “Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, and do not be carried away

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Acts 2,42-47.

by either envy or rancour. Let the good of one become the good of all, and let the troubles and sufferings of one be regarded as the troubles and sufferings of all, and let each one strive to banish or at least to mitigate the sorrows of others”.<sup>38</sup>

The Constitutions have many references to this thought of our Father with its double emphasis on the communal style and its impact on the young. One of the places where our communal life is presented is in art.51: “The family spirit is the hallmark of the salesian community and inspires every moment of its life: work and prayer, meals and recreation, meetings and other encounters. In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship we share our joys and sorrows, and we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences”. Art.16 recalls another point of emphasis; it refers to the educative and vocational effect we have so much at heart: “This is a witness that enkindles in the young the desire to get to know and to follow the salesian vocation”.

When we wonder how in the present situation we can move towards this ideal and express it without ambiguity, there comes to our mind the “grace of unity” which leads us, who are Salesians, to cultivate harmoniously and simultaneously the three notions of consecration, mission and fraternity,<sup>39</sup> giving to each of them its proper weight and combining them in a style of life and plan of action.

The first is precisely **fraternal life**. This presupposes that we have the time available and the energy necessary to cultivate and render communion visible as a gift to be offered to the young; it supposes the asceticism which develops in us the capacity for loving, and the experience which prepares us for a mature rapport with our collaborators. Many are the attitudes and manifestations of this kind of fellowship. “Every day, communities take up again their journey, sustained by the teaching of the Apostles: ‘love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour’ (*Rom 12,10*); ‘live in harmony with one another’ (*Rom 12,16*); ‘welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you’ (*Rom 15,7*); ‘I myself am satisfied... that you are... able to instruct one another’ (*Rom 15,14*); ‘wait for one another’ (*1 Cor 11,33*); ‘through love, be servants of one another’ (*Gal 5,13*); ‘encourage one another’ (*1 Thess 5,11*); ‘forbearing one another in love’ (*Eph 4,2*); ‘be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another’ (*Eph 4,32*); ‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (*Eph 5,21*); ‘pray for one another’ (*Jas 5,16*); ‘clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another’ (*1 Pet 5,5*); ‘we have fellowship with one another’ (*1 Jn 1,7*); ‘let us not grow weary in well-doing..., especially

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<sup>38</sup> Don Bosco, Souvenir for the first missionaries.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. C 3.

to those who are of the household of faith' (*Gal 6,9-10*)".<sup>40</sup> I will dwell on two elements which emerge at the present day: *interpersonal relationships and communication*.

*Relationships* are one of the indications of the maturity of an individual: perhaps, indeed, the main parameter reflecting each one's quality and limitations. Their quality, the way they are set up and managed, manifest how far love, the first energy and first commandment, has progressed in us and to what extent we have been able to evince it.

For this reason we pay particular attention nowadays to relationships in work and in formation: not only from a formal point of view, but with an eye to the internal and substantial aspect. In fraternal life relationships are needed which are able to overcome weariness and habit because they are renewable, and are not broken off because we are capable of daily reconciliation. They must however be deep and internal, and not merely functional with respect to work; they must lead to a maturing in friendship and growth in the Lord, and in solidarity in the mission; above all they must be inspired by self-sacrifice and self-giving and not selfishly centred on oneself and one's own concerns.

It is a common opinion among observers of groups and communities that the greater part of internal difficulties that arise and which seem to concern work or ideas are in fact linked with problems of badly set up interpersonal relationships which come to light in work or in ideas.

On the other hand difficult relationships, situations of conflict which have not been suitably healed through reconciliation, act within a person, blocking the maturing process and creating difficulties in the way of the calm and joyful self-donation to the mission and to God. The sadness and distress which can follow are harmful in every sense. Internal bitterness wears the person down. It is a great service to help to loosen these knots, to clarify their roots, to see them as personal limitations and face them calmly, instead of remaining bogged down in them.

We need to educate both ourselves and others to rapport, even by a word, by support or encouragement. Relationships need animation with the creation of opportunities for their expression and growth. It is an aspect of the charity of all, and particularly of the Rector and the Provincial through whom the unity of the community is built up.

No one can expect to be only a receiver in the community, as though it were an environment made primarily and independently by

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<sup>40</sup> *Fraternal Life in Community*, 26.

his own contribution. On the other hand it is necessary to make up for the shortcomings of some by a greater capacity for giving on the part of the others. In communities there are always limits of communication, timidity, and excessive regard which put a brake on familiarity. The Lord compensates for such limitations through those confreres who are willing to put a bit more into the conversation, into the preservation of proximity, union and joy, so that the level of community life may not decline as regards mutual affection and family environment. "A fraternity rich in joy is a genuine gift from above to brothers and sisters who know how to ask for it and to accept one another, committing themselves to fraternal life and trusting in the action of the Spirit".<sup>41</sup>

The preceding comment may seem unusual for a circular: too particular, almost technical. I picked it up from the document *Fraternal Life in Community*, which says: "It may be useful to recall those qualities which are required in all human relationships: respect, kindness, sincerity, self-control, tactfulness, a sense of humour and a spirit of sharing".<sup>42</sup> It was also suggested to me by the GC24 which spoke of our relational spirituality: a spirituality which not only loves with internal charity but (as Don Bosco had already taught in dealing with boys) is able to establish adult relationships conforming to the environment of life and prevailing sensitivities. And it was suggested too by the importance that attaches nowadays to relationships established almost specifically as objects for study and training in all forms of human activity. Finally it was inspired by the thought of St Francis de Sales, in whom "gentleness" was translated part and parcel into personal relationships even to the extent of constituting a distinctive trait of his personality.

Relational spirituality has as its source the charity which makes a person able and willing to create, heal, reestablish and multiply rapport. Such charity becomes 'pastoral' when it is exercised within the ministry of ruling and guiding an ecclesial community.

In addition to relationships and included in their dynamic is *communication*. Today the desire in communities is that this be not limited to what is merely functional, but should include vocational experience as well; that there be exchange of news not only from the media or happenings at work, but also considerations, requirements and intuitions concerning our life in Christ and the way we understand our charisma. It is to this that such practices as the revision of life, community verification, exchange of prayer tend, as well as the discernment of situations, projects and events.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 27.

The present time has rendered communication in religious communities more necessary, and has modified its manner and criteria: it has become looser and more widespread. The complexity of life is such that we have to exchange views about tendencies, criteria and events of a family kind, and about external matters too: we either succeed in understanding them and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, or we remain excluded from the life and movement of the world.

The habit of assessment has become necessary, as also has the elaboration of common criteria for the process. It frequently requires the application of a method of trial and error. We must be ready to express ourselves with simplicity, be ready to modify judgements and positions, even only for the purpose of fraternal and practical convergence: mediation of this kind always helps the community, provided that essential values be not compromised.

Communication is necessary also because of the positive pluralism of visions and gifts existing in the community: there are rich qualities of intelligence, of spirit, of fantasy, and of practical skills that can be passed on. And moreover there are so many themes in consecrated life on which communication can take place with profit: the apostolic project, spiritual experience, challenges of the mission, guidelines of the Roman Congregations, and the tendencies of the Church.

*Communication calls for learning, practice and also animation.* We would say for spiritual learning to a greater extent than the technical kind. When we communicate we lay ourselves open to some extent. A certain reserve has to be overcome, which makes us unwilling to talk about ourselves; there is also confidence in the other person which has to be consolidated, and which will reassure me that he will accept what I say with maturity and in a positive manner.

Experience shows that not everyone has the courage to do this. We need a measure of learning also to receive communication, without judging the other person, without cataloguing him in a specific category on the basis of what he has said, without any lessening of esteem and expectations in his regard because of the difference of views.

As well as learning practice is needed too. If you neglect the capacity for communication it gets rusty. You lose the taste for it and its facility. Practice leads to the use and understanding of different kinds of language suited to various situations, which range from gestures and attitudes to calm and relaxed conversations, all of it inspired by charity and not technical calculation. We may recall Don Bosco with his hand placed lightly on the head of the boys, with his ready smile, the word in the ear, his 'good-nights', the kind of



conversation he had with Dominic Savio, the way he asked for his boys' opinions and discussed with them. And the effort, so typical of the preventive system, to make his affection perceptible and free it from a generic attitude or from enclosure in a cold exterior. In the practice of communication too we need to learn the value of active silence and capacity for solitude. These are aspects which have almost been destroyed by the 'Babel' of conversations, messages, music, festival and plain noise.

A valid communication is always prepared and controlled by reflection, discretion and the ability to withdraw.

Learning and practice is needed therefore on the part of all, but animation too is needed by those who are directing matters so as to create a suitable atmosphere for calm and relaxed communication. Providing opportunities; a style of direction which makes it easy to express opinions, to ask for and prompt such opinions, to be pleased at a multiplicity of contributions, to make it clear that no one is going to be judged by what he says in the cut and thrust of a debate.

In addition to attention to fraternal life, the enhancement of community experience requires an **improvement in our way of working together**. The religious community is the place where the change takes place from *I* to *we*, from *my* work or sector to *our* mission, from the pursuit of my methods and objectives to a convergence on the evangelization and good of the young. This calls for a patient running-in period to overcome whatever holds us back or separates us through an individualized view of work and ill-regulated autonomy in initiatives which makes us little disposed to build with others. Many initiatives could be rendered more powerful merely by bringing together items which are similar but juxtaposed, by linking together those which are complementary, and converging times and personnel in specific areas.

The Constitutions and Regulations provide opportunities for understanding, coordination and convergence. Councils and community assemblies tend to come up with the same kind of statement of the situation in the light of the Gospel and of our original vocation, to project in integral form the great aspects of pastoral work, such as the orientation of the education of young people to the faith or the formation of the laity.

The weekly 'community day' has provided a new opportunity for a useful exchange of thoughts and ideas.

In a period in which the tendency is towards linkage, synergies and networks, we have to learn that fragmentation and watertight compartments are unproductive and do not form us as men of communion. In those communities which include certain sectors which must have a certain autonomy for various reasons, it is desirable that

there be at least some occasions for common programming and orientation.

From the beginning the salesian community has lived cheek by jowl with the young, participating fully in their life, and vice versa the young have shared the daily life of the Salesians. Today many boys and young men want to see and take part in our fraternal life and join in our work. Our community life, therefore, has to be structured in such a way that it is possible for us to pray with the young, share moments of fellowship and programming with our lay collaborators, and even welcome some of these youngsters and lay people to experience with us a period of community life.

#### **4. Giving to our educative activity and to that of the EPC the missionary dynamism of “Da mihi animas”.**

The pedagogy developed by Don Bosco and passed on by him to his first Salesians was born of pastoral charity, able to understand and make allowances for the youth situation, and to start up initiatives designed to meet it. It was not just a matter of being active on their behalf, staying in their midst, and devoting his energies to them. Underlying all this was the desire to lead them to faith in Christ, the way truth and life, making himself a sign and witness of Christ’s love. That was the fundamental experience which manifested the unique nature of salesian spirituality. The GC23 expressed it in a text which some have called the “salesian credo”.<sup>43</sup>

This is the experience we must communicate and help our collaborators to live, animating a style of pedagogy centred on *personal relationship between the educator and the pupil*. When this develops more deeply and becomes confidence, it provides the opportunity for revealing the predilection of Jesus Christ for each one of the youngsters.

We shall try to create a family atmosphere,<sup>44</sup> with plenty of suggestions and initiatives covering all the needs and interests of the young, which sparks off their participation and gets them involved in their own formation; an atmosphere which has its high-spots in the celebrations which form an introduction to the mystery of life and grace associated with the transforming force of the sacraments, especially those of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.

Of this style and program we are called to be reminders and stimulus. We must manifest with tranquility, but nonetheless with missionary courage, that faith in Jesus Christ brings light and a new

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. GC23, 94-96.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. GC24, 91 ff.

energy to education: it is the image of the man apparent in Jesus, the confidence in life passed on to us by the Resurrection, the consciousness of a filial rapport with God; it is the transcendent horizon, the revelation of love as the secret for the realization of the individual and of civilization.

*Our life is a prophecy* in the area of education: it manifests the meaning and the goal towards which human values must be developed: the liberating force of the personal relationship with God, the historical fruitfulness of the beatitudes, the ability to get the best out of the poorest individuals and groups, neglected and rejected by others.

In a context trying to do without God, we bear witness to the fact that his love brings an unusual lucidity and happiness; in face of the quest for pleasure, possession and power, we are able to say that “the need to love, the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one’s whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour”.<sup>45</sup>

If our commitment to education is not a temporary service but an original contribution, we must “bring to bear on the world of education a radical witness to the values of the Kingdom, proposed to everyone in expectation of the definitive meeting with the Lord of history”.<sup>46</sup> It must be said that it is to this that all our efforts of preparation tend; it is true that they have a professional dimension, but it is leavened and motivated by a deeper dimension still, the pastoral dimension. The latter must not be played down, nor must the former be made a watertight compartment. We educate by evangelizing.

“Because of their special consecration”, *Vita Consecrata* reminds us, “their particular experience of the gifts of the Spirit, their constant listening to the word of God, their practice of discernment, their rich heritage of pedagogical traditions built up since the establishment of their Institute, and their profound grasp of spiritual truth (cf. Eph 1,17), consecrated persons are able to be especially effective in educational activities and to offer a special contribution to the work of other educators”.<sup>47</sup> And it goes on to add: “In this way they can give life to educational undertakings permeated by the gospel spirit of freedom and charity, in which young people are helped to mature humanly under the action of the Spirit”.<sup>48</sup>

At the present day the service of education is requested and reappraised to cover extension of formation to the entire existence, but also with a vision that decisively overcomes the ‘unidimensional’ temptation so as to take up the person in his integrity and take into consideration the individual character of each one.

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<sup>45</sup> C 62.

<sup>46</sup> VC 96.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

And so educative service is asked to “assist” every individual in the development of all his capacities, to communicate a vision of life open to his neighbour, to generate in each one the ability to live in freedom and in truth in accordance with his own conscience enlightened by experience and by faith.

As a religious community we are the animating nucleus of an ensemble of educators who intend to communicate these values and put forward this vision of life.

The task supposes that we ourselves make the effort to become:

- **persons** capable of living our own lives with confidence and joy, with an attitude of understanding and dialogue with the young and their world, with attention to culture, and with the will to collaborate with all who are working for a more just, free and more cohesive world;

- **educators** who are competent, who make of their service to the young and the poor a commitment for the Kingdom; for the animation of an educative community and other apostolic forces; good will by itself is insufficient; *improvisation does not pay* when it is a matter of the Christian promotion of an environment on a long-term basis;

- **animators** willing to share a formative process with lay collaborators,<sup>49</sup> in the life of every day, in communal moments of particular formative value, duly prepared and qualified, such as the elaboration of the PEPS, the verification of the EPC, the discernment in the face of practical situations, and similar occasions;

- **leaders** who have made their own the value of participation and of sharing responsibility, and are able to animate by creating and renewing opportune circumstances;

- **Salesians** who manifest a particular sensitivity for the education of the very poor and become promoters of a culture of solidarity and peace: this sensitivity constitutes one of the most effective of apostolic signs and seems able to bring many people together.

## 5. Fraternal life and pastoral work for growth.

Fraternal life (with its communication and relationships) and a good set-up of the work, help us not only to feel better but also to grow; they are enriching from a cultural, psychological, social and especially spiritual point of view.

There is *cultural* growth, because in listening to others and collaborating with them we receive information, new view points, facts and interpretations of a wide range of realities. Nowadays rapport and

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<sup>49</sup> cf. GC24, 144.

communication with competent persons are considered indispensable and are much sought after. There are people of this kind living in our own communities, everyone of them indeed probably has something to offer us. They can be found also among the laity.

There is *psychological* growth because easy relationships are developed, the ability to welcome persons of different mentalities; we become more capable of self-giving, of overcoming frustrations and internal hang-ups, fixations on ourselves and our success.

There is *social* growth, because the capacity is strengthened for insertion in working groups, in teams for participation and in various settings, with freedom and sincerity; we become able to handle social anxiety, that first feeling we get of unease and being an outsider when we find ourselves in a context or group we do not know or with whom we are not familiar.

And finally, at the head of all the rest there is a *spiritual* or comprehensive growth, because the attitudes and aptitudes set out above are part of an effort to respond to the Lord in a way in keeping with the charism and a manner for fulfilling the mission.

Experiences of ongoing formation, carried out away from our own community do produce benefits, such as a rethinking, a new synthesis, doctrinal updating, a new vocational enthusiasm; but when we get back to the community and daily life, that renewed vision of life and work that we glimpsed in those extraordinary conditions of time and environment, can be translated into practice only with difficulty. The customary rhythm takes over again and the “ordinary” common and human context dilutes the exemplary experiences of prayer, mutual exchange and study. And so the course of ongoing formation remains an isolated incident in the run of life, even though its beneficial effects cannot be denied.

Four variables therefore have been introduced into the concept of ongoing formation, in line with formational sciences. They concern place, time, matter and method.

The preferred *place* for ongoing formation is the local community. It is more realistic, because that is where we learn to manage our life and react as salesian religious in face of the daily round.

The *time* best suited and most continuous for ongoing formation is that marked out by the alternation of work, study, comparisons and meetings with people. The remaining time is useful for support and backup.

*Material or content:* it is true that a systematic exposition on the Church, Jesus Christ and the community is helpful, because it provides motivation, light and fresh orientation. But all this is subsequently found distributed, fragmented, and to some extent watered down in

daily life. The community, in which we have to read in real terms what has been explained to us, is the one in which we live side by side with our confreres, who have their own ideas, are marked by their past experiences and have their limitations, even though they have also many rich qualities which we must be able to discover and accept.

The same can be said of the ecclesiology we have heard expounded, of the youth ministry we have heard explained, of the deeper aspects of the preventive system: they are frames of reference which are useful because they are enlightening. But they must then be transferred to the particular concrete circumstances of an ecclesial community and its specific conditions, to our own field of pastoral work and the youngsters to be found in it, to the salesian environment in which all we have heard about the preventive system has to be applied. This latter, i.e. the concrete manner of applying visions and frames of reference, or dealing with particular cases, forms the particular matter for the ongoing formation which takes place in the local community. There we submit it to reflection and verification to see what kind of response we are making to the demands of our vocation and work. I would say that ongoing formation has more in common with the model of a well-made practical training period than with that of the studentate.

Finally, but linked with what we have already said, a word is needed about the *means* or most efficacious way of setting about ongoing formation: certainly there is reading, study, attention to spiritual life, and theological updating. But art.119 of the Constitutions and art.99 of the Regulations both speak of fraternal communication: listening calmly, noting and synthesizing with care, adopting evaluations and criteria, moving in well-weighed directions. All this will certainly be endorsed and relaunched through the use of the so-called special times and a personal habit of reflection.

Relationships, communication and programmed work, therefore, result in processes of formation and growth. At present not everyone understands this. No blame for this attaches to anyone, because in formation praxis in the past communication had neither the weight nor the possibilities it has today. But while not blaming anyone, we must know how to create and multiply opportunities for communication, deal with the matter of rapport, be aware of the kind of platform needed for these things and foster them as a practice of pastoral charity towards confreres and communities.

**Conclusion.**

I bring this letter to an end on the feast of the Annunciation, two years after the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*. Community life aims at being a reflection of the life of the Trinity, as far as that is possible for man: a relationship of love which generates the unity in which distinctions are founded, summed up and expressed. It appears as a sign and exemplary realization of ecclesial communion. Through the multiple graces it brings with it, through the support it gives to the confreres, through the benefits found within it and the asceticism it calls for, it is a path which leads us to a purified and authentic love.

Of this love Mary shows forth the three greatest manifestations known to humanity, and we express them in the three titles: Virgin, Spouse and Mother. Such is her relationship with God; such the dimensions which make her an image of the Church. We are sure, in line with Don Bosco's words, that she is part of our community as she was with Jesus' disciples at Cana and in the Cenacle. To contemplate her and invoke her will help us in our communion.

This is my hope and prayer for each community and every confrere that, with Mary's help, we may express all the richness of the communion which is the fruit of Christ's death and resurrection.

Juan Vecchi.