

## 2. GUIDELINES AND DIRECTIVES

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### 2.1 LIVING THE PRIESTHOOD AS SALESIANS

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After having dedicated a letter to the topic of the Salesian Brother – “Renewed Attention to the Salesian Brother” (AGC 424) – it is only right to give attention also to the Salesian Priest.

We have not forgotten that the very first area of attention in the formation section of the plan of the Rector Major and his council for 2014-2020 was “to promote in the Congregation a better understanding of the Salesian consecrated vocation in its two forms” by “examining more deeply topics such as: the consecrated life, the Salesian priest, and the Salesian Brother.” (AGC 419 52) This was a way of responding to the fact that GC27 invited us to explore our charismatic identity more deeply and to become aware of our vocation to faithfully live out Don Bosco’s apostolic project, by focusing attention on four thematic areas: “*living our Salesian consecrated vocation* in the grace of unity and joy since this vocation is God’s gift and a personal project of life; having a strong *spiritual experience*, taking on the way of being and acting of the obedient, poor and chaste Jesus and becoming seekers of God; building *fraternity* in our communities of life and action; dedicating ourselves generously to the *mission*, walking with the young to give hope to the world.” (GC27 p. 89) GC26 itself had called Salesians “to give priority and visibility to the unity of our apostolic consecration, even though it takes two different forms,” and to “understand more deeply the original Salesian contribution to the ordained ministry and to make greater efforts to further promote the vocation of the Salesian brother.” (GC26 55)

We present these reflections and orientations on the Salesian Priest on the eve of GC28, in the hope that they might be a contribution to the process of reflection on the great question of

the Chapter: “What kind of Salesians for the young people of today?”

## **1. Some general considerations**

### ***Our Salesian consecrated vocation is a gift***

We begin by recognizing that our vocation is a gift of God. Fr Juan Vecchi, 8<sup>th</sup> successor of Don Bosco, reminded us that ‘gift’ is a fundamental category for understanding the true nature of consecrated life. This is a word that occurs very frequently in *Vita Consecrata* “with reference to the totality of the consecrated life, to each of its historic manifestations or charisms, and to many of its components or particular aspects: the vows, the community, and the service of charity.” (AGC 357 8-9) The many saints who have lived their religious consecration as priests, or who were priest-founders of religious families, are themselves wonderful gifts to the Church: Basil, Benedict, Dominic, Ignatius, Francis Xavier, John of the Cross, Joseph Vaz, Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, Don Bosco, Joseph Cottolengo, to name a few. In our own day we have been blessed with Pope Francis who brings the gift of his religious priesthood to the Church.

Our Salesian consecrated vocation is a gift from God to us, to young people, to the Church, to the world. We give thanks for it and rejoice in its beauty.

### ***Our religious consecration is our core identity in the Church***

Our religious consecration is our basic identity in the Church. Canon Law presents the People of God as consisting of the Christian Faithful, the Hierarchy, and the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. As religious, all of us, Salesian Priests and Salesian Brothers, are consecrated persons among the People of God. Belonging to the Institutes of Consecrated Life is

the source of our vocation and mission. It is where the Church places us and where it wants us to flourish.

Strangely, there has not been sufficient attention in the Church to the theme of the religious priesthood. Fr Egidio Viganò, 7<sup>th</sup> successor of Don Bosco, twice comments on this fact, the first time in his 1991 letter, “The Priest of the year 2000: A theme we have very much at heart” (AGC 335) after the Synod on Formation to the Priesthood, and then again in 1995, in “The Synod on Consecrated Life” (AGC 351). “It is unfortunate,” he says, “that no mention was made in the Synod of the delicate and complex problems associated with the *religious-priest*. Maybe the time is not yet ripe, and there is need for prior doctrinal research at a deeper level.”<sup>1</sup> The situation does not seem to have changed today. The new *Ratio* of the Church, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (2016) does not contain any special consideration of the religious priest – despite the fact that in 2016 there were 134,495 religious priests, making up 32.3% or almost one-third of the total number of priests in the Catholic Church.

For us, however, it is urgent to reflect on the identity of the Salesian who is a priest. A healthy and robust identity brings joy and unity to life and gives a sound direction to apostolic work. In this letter we will try to highlight the roots of the Salesian priesthood in our one consecrated vocation, drawing on a renewed understanding of the religious life as well as of the priesthood. Fraternal life, the evangelical counsels and the mission are not elements that exist alongside the ministry of Salesian Priests. They are rather the fundamental matrix and the vital root of our vocation. In the words of our *Ratio*: “The Salesian priest [or deacon] combines in himself the gifts of Salesian consecration and those of the pastoral ministry, but in such a way that *his particular manner of being a priest and exercising his ministry stems from his Salesian consecration.*” (FSDB 39)

<sup>1</sup> AGC 351 20.

## ***Priests and Brothers all share in the priesthood of Christ***

Theological reflection in the post-conciliar period is marked by an intense awareness of the link between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful. As C 2 reminds us, we are a community of the baptized. All of us, Priests and Brothers, share in the priesthood of Christ.

The priesthood of Christ is unique and absolutely original. In the other religions, and even in Judaism, the priest belongs to the sphere of the sacred. In the New Testament, instead, far from being a distinct religious expression of the sacred, the priesthood of Jesus stems directly from his life and the saving events of his Passover, and so touches the whole of human reality. Jesus' sacrifice is a sacrifice of obedience: it consists in offering himself completely and entirely to the Father, up to the final surrender on the cross. His life and death transform our resistance and the evil we carry within, opening the way to repentance and pardon, to the new life of Zacchaeus, Peter and Mary of Magdala, to the life of the resurrection. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Heb 10:14)

Thus, for us, there is only one priest and one sacrifice – despite the fact that, from the Jewish point of view, Jesus was a layman, and that his sacrifice took place not in the Temple but on Calvary and in a context that was not 'sacred.' "Such a way of being high priest is diametrically opposed to the old concept: instead of ritual separation, we find an existential solidarity; instead of being raised up above others, we find an extreme abasement; instead of a prohibition of every contact with death, we find the call to accept suffering and death."<sup>2</sup>

All those baptized into Christ are, in fact, called to unite themselves with him in offering their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. (Rom 12:1) This is the 'common

<sup>2</sup> ALBERT VANHOYE, "La novità del sacerdozio di Cristo," *La Civiltà Cattolica* no. 3541, no. 1 (1998) 16-27.

priesthood' of the faithful, and all of us, Priests and Brothers, share in this priesthood. This common priesthood based on our baptism is "the highest expression of human dignity... the historical way which makes it possible to feel involved in redemption and salvation." (AGC 335 19) *There is no dignity higher than that conferred on us by baptism.* For those of us who are accustomed to speak of the priest as an *alter Christus*, these words of St John Paul II might be a salutary surprise:

It was usual to say, as early as the era of the Fathers, "*Christianus alter Christus*" ("The Christian is another Christ"), meaning by this to emphasize *the dignity of the baptized* and his vocation, through Christ, to holiness... Saint Augustine... often repeated: "*Vobis sum episcopus, vobiscum christianus*" ("For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian"). On further reflection, *christianus* has far greater significance than *episcopus*, even if the subject is the Bishop of Rome.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The ministerial priest is ordained to serve***

The ministerial priesthood is totally at the service of the common priesthood of the faithful. Its only aim is to help the disciples of Christ share in his priesthood, overcome evil by love and forgiveness, and offer themselves totally to the Father. (AGC 335 18-23) The priest is called to have the heart of the Good Shepherd, and to have "an awareness and internal feeling that bind him inseparably" to those to whom he is sent. Pastoral charity leads to a constant immersion in the life of the people of God in the ongoing self-donation of service.<sup>4</sup>

"This pastoral charity," Vatican Council II reminds us, "flows mainly from the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is thus the centre and root of the whole priestly life." (PO 14) If in the Eucharist all

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, "'The Pope': A Scandal and a Mystery," *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, (Rome 1994). See <http://serony.com/ken/books-papers/crossing-the-threshold-of-hope/> (31.10.2019).

<sup>4</sup> S. DIANICH, *Teología del ministerio ordenado. Una interpretación eclesiológica* (Madrid: Ed. Paulinas, 1988) 324.

baptized persons are called to unite themselves with the offering that Jesus made of himself to the Father, with all the more reason those called to the ministerial priesthood are called to apply to themselves “the action that takes place on the altar of sacrifice” (PO 14), taking and offering themselves to the Father, breaking and giving themselves to their brothers and sisters, turning their lives into a Eucharist.

Pastoral charity is not a new element that comes in after ordination, identified with peculiar ‘pastoral activities’ reserved to the priest, but is, instead, at the very root of the vocation of Salesians who are priests. Pastoral charity is at the centre of our spirit, the driving force and motivation behind all we are and do:

Under the inspiration of God, Don Bosco lived and handed on to us an original style of life and action: the Salesian spirit.

It is summed up and centred in pastoral charity, characterized by that youthful dynamism which was revealed so strongly in our Founder and at the beginnings of our Society. It is an apostolic impetus that makes us seek souls and serve God alone. (C 10)

The Salesian Priest is a man who is driven by charity and ordained to serve. We can understand, therefore, why clericalism can have no place in his life. Fr Egidio Viganò anticipates in a surprising way Pope Francis’ warnings against clericalism:

If in fact there be a real harmful crust to be removed in an ordained ministry, it is that of a ‘clericalist’ mode of action... which make the priest act like a boss among the People of God; such an attitude has nothing in common with Christ the Good Shepherd, who is the ‘Servant of Yahweh.’ A priest behaving in this way would show very clearly that he had not understood the priesthood of the New Covenant. (AGC 335 21)

We would do well to accept Pope Francis’ beautiful invitation to meditate on “the incomparable grandeur of the gift” of the priesthood and our own littleness:

The incomparable grandeur of the gift granted us for the ministry sets us among the least of men. The priest is the poorest of men – yes, the poorest of men – unless Jesus enriches him by his poverty, the most useless of servants unless Jesus calls him his friend, the most ignorant

of men unless Jesus patiently teaches him as he did Peter, the frailest of Christians unless the Good Shepherd strengthens him in the midst of the flock.

Drawing a contrast between the annunciation to Zechariah in the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple and the annunciation to Mary in an unknown village of conflict-ridden Galilee, the Pope makes a fatherly appeal to priests:

None of us was called to an important post, none of us. At times, without wanting it, and with no moral fault, we get used to identifying our daily activity as priests, religious, consecrated persons, laypersons, catechists, with certain rituals, with meetings and conversations, where our presence in those meetings, at the table or in the hall is “hierarchical”. Then we are more like Zechariah than like Mary.

The Pope invites priests to return to Nazareth, “to step away from important and solemn places, and return to the places from which we were called, where it was clear that the initiative and the power was from God.” The secret is to “return to Nazareth” in order to renew ourselves as pastors who are at the same time disciples and missionaries. The need is to pray constantly with the prayer of our Mother: “I am a priest because the Lord has regarded my littleness (cf. Lk 1:48).”<sup>5</sup>

## **2. The Salesian who is a Priest**

We have been speaking about the baptismal priesthood as our highest dignity (even in the case of the bishop of Rome!), and how the ministerial priesthood is at the service of that baptismal priesthood. The Salesian who is a priest assumes completely the ministerial priesthood and lives it from within his Salesian consecration.

<sup>5</sup> Pope FRANCIS, Meeting with the bishops, priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons, seminarians, catechists and animators, Apostolic journey to Mozambique, Madagascar and Mauritius, 5 September 2019: see [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/september/documents/papa-francesco-20190905\\_consacraati-mozambico.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/september/documents/papa-francesco-20190905_consacraati-mozambico.html) (02.11.2019).

We find the same basic truth about our identity expressed in art. 3 of our Constitutions that is like a password for the entire constitutional text: “Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families.” It is not what we do in the great variety of our works that defines the missionary dimension of our life, but rather our very existence as consecrated Salesians. Indeed, “we are a mission.” As Pope Francis says, “[this] is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.” (EG 273) If this is true for every Christian, it is definitely so for those called to make their baptismal consecration the *raison d’être* of their life through their religious and priestly consecration.

If the mission I inherited with Don Bosco’s charism does not “set the tenor” of my whole life, I am neither a Salesian nor a priest, because the only priesthood that the Church recognizes in me when I am chosen to be ordained is the one spelled out in our Constitutions. Even the rite of ordination gives expression to this: it is the Congregation represented by the Provincial that guarantees the ‘credentials’ of the one to be ordained, and it is to the Provincial and Bishop together – to the Church and the Congregation at once – that obedience is promised. It is in fact always and only in the authority of the Church and the Congregation that the *potestas* of a Salesian Priest find its source and justification.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In Canon Law, the term used to express what is conferred in ordination (diaconal, priestly, episcopal) is *potestas*, which connects the authority in the Church to its source, which is ultimately the salvific mission of Christ. The English translation of *potestas* as *power* does not convey this important nuance. The *potestas* conferred in ordination is not a private power that I can exercise when and how I want, and that I can freely invest as if it were a personal patrimony, now in a religious congregation and now in some diocese, when I consider that more convenient. It is rather what the Church entrusts to me according to its mind, which in our case is represented in the Constitutions that the Church itself has approved.



As we will see, the mission is never generic. It is exercised in a specific area and in an original manner, with roots coming from above, as we profess in the first article of the Constitutions:

With a feeling of humble gratitude we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture but by the initiative of God. Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth, 'that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise'. The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving: 'I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys'.

Let us therefore put down a few points about the identity-mission of the Salesian Priest, without pretending to be either systematic or exhaustive.<sup>7</sup>

## **2.1. *The community***

As the new *Ratio* of the Church insists, the community is essential to the life of a priest, both in the stages of his preparation (discipleship, configuration, vocational synthesis) and in the ministry lived in an attitude of lifelong formation.<sup>8</sup> Fraternal life in community is essential to human and spiritual maturity, to growth in love. We grow as human beings only through bonds of love. Our brothers and sisters grow in their capacity to love and be loved in the bosom of the family; we, Salesian Priests and Salesian Brothers, do this in the bosom of the religious community and along with lay people in the educative and pastoral community.

<sup>7</sup> Many of these points may be found in AGC 335. After noting that the Synod on Priestly Formation had not dealt with the theme of the religious priesthood, Fr Viganò went on to say that in the Congregation, instead, we had already elaborated some reflections, especially when we reflected on the pastoral quality of our mission – in a reference probably to GC23 on Education to the Faith (See AGC 335 23-32).

<sup>8</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (2016) 51.

*As a religious, the ministry of the Salesian Priest is always mediated by the community.* The title of C 44 is explicit – “The mission is given to the community”:

The apostolic mandate which the Church entrusts to us is taken up and put into effect in the first place by the provincial and local communities. The members have complementary functions and each one of their tasks is important. They are aware that pastoral objectives are achieved through unity and joint brotherly responsibility.

For the Salesian Priest, this means that *apostolic individualism* has no place: his apostolic choices must be mediated by the community, they cannot be merely his individual choices according to his likes, dislikes or personal judgement.

We must keep in mind, further, that the Salesian religious community is characterized by an *essential complementarity* between Priest Salesians and Brother Salesians:

The significant and complementary presence of clerical and lay Salesians in the community constitutes an essential element of its makeup and of its apostolic completeness. (C 45)

“The Salesian who is a priest should feel a spontaneous bond of communion with the Brother in virtue of their common Salesian vocation, and the lay Salesian should feel the same towards his priest-confreere. Our vocation is essentially a community vocation; hence there must be an effective communion that goes deeper than mere friendship between persons.”<sup>9</sup>

The priestly dimension is not exclusive to the priest confreres and the lay dimension does not pertain solely to the Brothers. The Salesian community is not an artificial aggregation of two kinds of members who make an effort to live together. Both dimensions are present in the heart of each confrere, highlighted in different ways but intimately connected all the same, so that the Priest cultivates also the lay dimension of the common mission, while the Brother cultivates also the priestly dimension of that

<sup>9</sup> AGC 335 26.

mission. “Without the lay dimension we should lose the positive aspect of a healthy secularity characteristic of our choice of educational methods, and without the priestly dimension we should run the risk of losing the pastoral quality of the whole plan. By upsetting the complementary balance we could fall on the one hand into a kind of pragmatic social activism, and on the other into a too generic kind of pastoral commitment that would no longer be the genuine mission of Don Bosco.”<sup>10</sup>

Fr Viganò points out, of course, that the intensity of pastoral charity and the degree of holiness depend neither on the ordained ministry nor on the various services that we provide in our shared apostolic responsibility, but only on the interior vitality of the common priesthood, or, in other words, on the life of faith, hope and charity. He goes on to say something that still sounds surprising:

The life of grace (i.e. of pastoral charity), says St Thomas Aquinas, has a value which is of itself greater than all created things. We shall be judged on the basis of love: in the heavenly Jerusalem there will be no further need for the Bible, for bishops and priests, for the magisterium, for the sacraments, for coordination, or for the great many mutual services which are indispensable in our history. And so already, in the ecclesial community, the order of institutional, hierarchical and operational realities take second place (if we may put it that way; remember where the chapter on the People of God is placed in *Lumen Gentium!*) to the Mystery they serve and reveal to those who live the faith. Holiness is rooted in the degree of perception and communion with the life of the Trinity. We see the intensity of holiness reflected in Mary, and ministerial authenticity in Peter. Both were very holy people: but they show us very clearly that the degree of holiness is not to be identified with hierarchical and ministerial degree.<sup>11</sup>

The ministerial priesthood is not so much a special privilege as a service that is destined to cease, and that already now takes second place. Its glory consists in putting itself at the service of

<sup>10</sup> AGC 335 27. See also AGC 424 66-68: “Renewed Attention to the Salesian Brother.”

<sup>11</sup> AGC 335 28. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 773.

the people of God so that all – priests included – might reach the “dizzying heights” of holiness.

## 2.2. *The charism*

*As a Salesian, the priest confrere’s ministry is always mediated by his charism.* That is the reason behind Fr Viganò’s suggestion that we use the terms *Priest-Salesian* and *Brother-Salesian*, where ‘Salesian’ is understood as a noun.<sup>12</sup> The Salesian charism colours everything.

As a way of following Christ, the religious priesthood is very different from the diocesan priesthood. For the diocesan priest there is a clear *ministry* into which he pours out his life. The religious priest, instead, finds his rule of life in a *founder* and his original way of following Christ. Thus the Priest Salesian’s existence is completely marked by the charism originated by Don Bosco.<sup>13</sup> Don Bosco did not think primarily in terms of the kind of ministry he would have in the Church, like most young seminarians who look forward to being parish priests. He did not feel that he was called to carry out a ministry that already existed; he felt, rather, that he was called to concretize in works and institutions the new pedagogy of grace that was his way of being present among young people.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See AGC 335 24-25. We have, however, made the option to retain the common English usage ‘Salesian Priest’ and ‘Salesian Brother,’ while also sometimes resorting to ‘Priest Salesian’ and ‘Brother Salesian,’ as also to the circumlocution ‘the Salesian who is a priest.’

<sup>13</sup> See A. BOZZOLO, “Salesiano prete e salesiano coadiutore: spunti per un’interpretazione teologica,” in *Sapientiam dedit illi. Studi su don Bosco e sul carisma salesiano*, ed. A. BOZZOLO (Roma: LAS, 2015) 340 = A. BOZZOLO, *The Dual Form of the Salesian Vocation: A theological interpretation*, tr. Michael Smyth (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2019) 34.

<sup>14</sup> See BOZZOLO, *The Dual Form* 36-37. See also *ibid* 41-42:

In this sense, Balthasar sees in Peter the physiognomy typical of the diocesan clergy, while in John he finds the symbol of the religious clergy. In these two disciples, in fact, the relation between office and love follows a movement that goes

The priesthood assumed within the horizon of a particular charism gives the ministry of the religious priest a particular place in the Church that is not the same as that of the diocesan clergy. Thus, the diocesan priest is rooted in a particular territory, whereas the religious priest is characterized by a universal openness. The former is entrusted with the ordinary pastoral care of a parish and in a diocese, whereas the latter participates in a special mission that runs across ecclesiastical regions.<sup>15</sup> The diocesan priest is called to a general ministry to the whole of life, from conception to death. The religious priest, instead, has a vocation that is essentially a particular service to life codified in his charism. Saints Benedict, Anthony of Padua, Camillus de Lellis, and in more recent times, Maximilian Kolbe, Alberto Hurtado and others have been such great gifts to the Church and the world because of their faithfulness to the particular charism to which they were called, and to which the gift of their priesthood was perfectly attuned.

That is why a Priest Salesian's apostolic choices are always mediated by our educative-pastoral charism for young people, most especially for those at risk. Sometimes I hear young Salesian deacons or priests complaining that they have had no chance to

in opposite directions. Indeed, "the two were on opposite courses. Peter received an office and love was then bestowed upon him for the sake of the office – that he might accomplish it more perfectly. John was, from the beginning, the epitome of love... He received the office by reason of his personal dedication." [Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (1983) 287]

It is significant, in this perspective, that while Peter was certainly married, John remained a virgin: "As the virgin apostle he represented the 'religious priest' as opposed to Peter, the married 'secular priest.'" [Ibid.] The presence of John at the foot of the cross with Mary sheds further light on the special Marian bond of consecrated life and of the priests who belong to it. In them, in fact, the objective and ministerial priesthood seems to be associated in a special way with the subjective and existential priesthood of the oblation of oneself in the way required by the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In religious priests, therefore, the grace of ordination finds its place within the Marian space of obedience to God proper to their Order, within a characteristic form of realization of the Johannine love that Mary constantly teaches the great founders and their spiritual sons.

<sup>15</sup> See BOZZOLO, *The Dual Form* 47-48.

celebrate a baptism or preside at a marriage, and I ask myself: How many times did Don Bosco celebrate a baptism or preside at a marriage? And was he less of a priest for that? We have to remember that Don Bosco impressed a very concrete peculiarity on the figure of the Salesian Priest. Together with the Brother Salesian, the Priest Salesian is invited to a mission immersed in the world of the young and of the working classes, which calls for commitments of an educative and pastoral kind and is addressed to people who are often far from the Church or belonging to other religions.

The apostolic consecration of the Salesian Priest pours into the three *munera* of the ministerial priesthood.

Through the **ministry of the Word** (*munus docendi*) the Salesian who is a priest brings the word of Christ into a wide variety of situations and in different forms of preaching, help and counsel, illuminating the experience of the young, giving direction to their lives, and accompanying them in the transformation and transfiguration of their existence. (FSDB 39)

The charismatic identity emerges also in the fact that the ministry of the Word adapts itself to a wide variety of situations and contexts. The Salesian Priest is willing to use the most diverse approaches and knows how to meet the young at their present stage of freedom. (C 38) Adapting ourselves to the young and to their experience rather than expecting them to conform to our own level is the first and basic form of Salesian inculturation.

The figure of the Catechist that used to exist in many of our houses gives us an idea of the variety of forms in which the *munus docendi* can be carried out within a Salesian setting. The Catechist was usually a young and dynamic Salesian priest who cared for all that concerned evangelization, catechesis and Christian life within a Salesian house. He was responsible for planning the major liturgical celebrations and practices of piety, animating groups focussed on apostolic interests (such as the missionary group), and taking care of vocational animation and personal ac-

companiment of the young. This figure from our recent past gives us an idea of how the Salesian charism can merge harmoniously with the *munus docendi* of the priestly ministry within the mission entrusted to the community.

It is significant also that the ministry of the Word comes first, not that of sanctification. It would be a pity, therefore, if our young Salesians were to emerge from specific formation with a rather excessive and exclusive concern for the *munus celebrandi* rather than with a passion for the first proclamation that finds such strong insistence in *Christus Vivit*.<sup>16</sup>

The **ministry of sanctification** (*munus sanctificandi*) also can have many expressions for us, but the most significant of these consists in the service of initiation to life in Christ in liturgical prayer and the celebration of the sacraments, especially those of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. (FSDB 39) The Salesian Priest is a specialist in initiating the Garellis and the Magones of today to the sacramental life. He learns to meet the young at their level of freedom and in their experience of life (cf. C 38), striving to use symbols and language that make sense to them.

The Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment makes a strong appeal to the Church to renew herself in the ability to reach out to the new generations, natives of the digital world and living within social networks, with all the risks but also the immense potential that this involves. The Church has the right to expect the sons of Don Bosco to be on the forefront in finding new ways of initiation to the mystery of Christ within this new digital territory. “It is no longer merely a question of ‘using’ instruments of communication, but of living in a highly digitalized culture that has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others.” (CV 86) The

<sup>16</sup> CV 214, citing EG 165.

*munus sanctificandi* involves accompanying young people in their encounter with Christ with a creativity that emerges from deep within our own life of faith, hope and charity.

We must insist that the service is that of initiation, and not merely one of administering the sacraments. Preparing young Salesians for a passionate competence in this area is surely one of the great challenges facing initial formation, because it calls for far more than merely the insertion of a few extra courses on catechesis or sacramental theology into an already packed curriculum.

The sacrament of Reconciliation occupies a special place in the life of a Salesian Priest, as it did in the life of Don Bosco. For Don Bosco, this sacrament was perhaps the greatest means of initiation to the life of the Spirit, in which he invested so much time and energy, reaching out to his youngsters one by one, finding that “sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy’s heart”<sup>17</sup> from which new life could begin to unfold. Such a spiritual art was not improvised. We can think of the teenager John Bosco who learnt to cherish the sacrament during the years at the Moglia farm and then at the school of the good Calosso. We can look back at the young priest preparing himself under the wise guidance of Cafasso for the “confession examination” at the Convitto. We could well ask ourselves about the place of this sacrament, first in our own personal lives and then in our ministry. What kind of Salesian priests are we if we hardly frequent this sacrament and make ourselves available for this ministry?

<sup>17</sup> The *Biographical Memoirs*, after quoting several examples of how this sacrament was lived in the Oratory, summarize Don Bosco’s ‘reasoning’ as follows: “Just as there is no barren or sterile land which cannot be made fertile through patient effort, so it is with a man’s heart. No matter how barren and restive at first, it will sooner or later bring forth good fruit. It will begin by loving what is naturally good and ultimately advance to what is supernaturally good, provided that a zealous spiritual director will cooperate with God’s grace by prayer and effort. Even the most callous boys have a soft spot. The first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy’s heart, and take advantage of it” (MB 5:236).



The **ministry of animating the Christian community** (*munus pascendi*) is totally geared to the service of unity in the different communities – the religious community, the educative and pastoral community, the Salesian Family, the Salesian Movement, and society in general. (FSDB 39) Animation, with its root in the Latin *anima* (soul), consists in giving life and unity. It cannot, therefore, be a vertical affair. The ‘soul’ is that which is present everywhere and works from ‘within.’ The Church invites those entrusted with the *munus pascendi* to adopt a new way of exercising authority, one which gives emphasis to the dynamic of fraternity (NW 41).

It is interesting, in this regard, to see how authority is understood in the renewed orientations for the Salesian Rector and community approved by the Rector Major and his Council in June 2019:

The Preventive System fosters a style of leadership where trust and confidence are fundamental in the relationship between educator and young people, and equally between confreres within the Salesian community. The role of guidance and animation of those entrusted with a ‘service of authority’ is by no means diminished. On the contrary: when such a role and service is lived according to the Salesian spirit it acquires a greater authoritativeness, much more effective than what can be achieved only by recourse to ‘cold rules’ (*Letter from Rome 1884*).

It is interesting to find the same appeal to ‘authoritativeness’ in the final document of the Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment: “To undertake a true journey of growth, young people need authoritative adults. In its etymological meaning, *autoritas* indicates the capacity to promote growth; it does not express the idea of a directive power, but of a real generative force” [*Final Document, Synod on Youth, 71*].

To enable a Salesian to mature in this kind of *autoritas*, first of all as educator with the youth and then also in his service of leadership, much attention and care has to be given to his human and spiritual growth.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *The Salesian Rector: A ministry for the life and governance of the local community* (2019) 40.

What is needed, therefore, is a very precise formation and qualification: a great capacity for human relationships, vaccination against all forms of clericalism, a good theology of the laity, experiences of formation together with our lay mission partners. Fraternal life in community has to become a clear and indispensable element in vocational discernment and admission to perpetual profession.

Let us insist on this point: no priest, much less the Salesian Priest, can hold himself excused or find some way of diluting the ministry of communion. Jesus died that he might gather into one the scattered children of God. (Jn 11:52) Are there limits we can put to those who are children of God? Does not “Who is my neighbour” translate into “Who is my brother and my sister”? Can we who are passionate followers of the Lord allow ourselves to put limits to communion, excluding perhaps first Samaritans, and then also Jews, and eventually people of other religions, first the sinners and then also refugees and migrants and all those who intrude into our comfort zones? We are called to be prophets of fraternity, and there are no limits to fraternal communion: it expands in concentric circles to embrace the whole of God’s creation. It would be good to remember that Church communion is a theological reality before being a pastoral concern for us. “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the Church, which is his Body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (*to plērōma tou ta panta en pasin plēromenou*).” (Eph 1:22-23 NIV).

It is in the context of this love for the Body of Christ, in its totality as well as in its concreteness as the community into which we are inserted, that the service of authority finds its meaning and justification. The ministry of Pope Francis is a constant reminder of the evangelical way of serving the servants of God entrusted to our care, and our new Rector’s Manual can provide useful meditation and encouragement to those called to the service of authority, which in several areas of the Congregation today can often involve great personal self-sacrifice.

### **2.3. The sign**

As a consecrated person the Salesian Priest is an eschatological sign, a living memorial of the way of life of Jesus. In his celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, he is a sign of the life of the resurrection that Jesus offers everyone.<sup>19</sup> Don Bosco's insistence on the Last Things is perhaps a prophecy of this aspect of our identity – that we are in the Church, in a special way for the young, signs of the resurrection. The Salesian Priest is at all times and everywhere an educator-pastor, concerned about the total well being of those to whom he is sent, with a totality defined by the mission and person of the Lord.

So, like all consecrated persons, the life of a Salesian Priest will be marked by a *passion* for the Lord, translated into a joy that is often contagious (Salesian cheerfulness! see C 17) but always visible, “as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ” (Order of the Mass, Communion Rite).

When he celebrates the sacraments, the priest confrere knows he acts *in persona Christi* and that his actions have an efficacy (*ex opere operato*) that is quite independent of his personal worthiness. But he also knows that, like all Christians, he is called to

<sup>19</sup> AGC 342 21-22: Consecrated life is an important part of the sacramental nature of the Church. “In particular it openly proclaims the eschatological character of the People of God. Consecrated persons, with their total self-donation through the practice of the evangelical counsels, become a visible sign of the force of the resurrection; they strive to become experts in discerning the action of the risen Christ in history and bear witness to the commitments and joy of hope in preparing for the Saviour's return with the expectation of ‘new heavens and a new earth’.”

AGC 347 21: “Against the background of the sacramental character of the whole Church... the discussion moved to the symbolic and transforming function of consecrated life in its widely different charismatic forms, as though it were an ‘eschatological parable’ for the faith of all the People of God... Its significance, in this symbolic and prophetic role, does not raise it above the life of the other members of the Church as though it were of greater dignity, but distinguishes it and makes it ancillary to it because destined for a particular service. It proclaims some of the aspects of the multiform mystery of Christ, making the rich contents of salvation perceptible to people of the present day.”

join his offering to that of Christ, and that, as a consecrated person, he is called to live in such a way that his offering of his body becomes a *prophecy* and a *sign*.<sup>20</sup>

Like all consecrated persons, the Salesian who is a priest also takes his place at the *Marian heart of the Church*. Mary is the Woman that is the Church. The vocation of every member of the Church is to be, like Mary, a total Yes to God. We are the Spouse that anxiously awaits the arrival of the Bridegroom and with the Spirit says: Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:17) The vocation of Mary is the vocation of us all. Consecrated life takes its place at this Marian heart of the Church, because its role and task is to be a prophecy of this Yes and of the final communion of all human beings with God in the life of the resurrection.

Mary is at the same time also a concrete person with whom we have a very special relationship. This is what happened in the life of Don Bosco, for whom the Church not only had a Marian face but also the face of his mother, that wise woman who not only intuited the demands of the priestly vocation on the person of the priest but also knew how to recommend her son to Mary.<sup>21</sup>

The *affective maturity* of the Salesian Priest, lived within a clear sexual identity, is a limpid expression of his celibacy that takes on a particular importance in the context of the concern for the safety and well-being of minors, and here lies the profound validity and continuing relevance of Don Bosco's insistence on the

<sup>20</sup> "I am counting on you 'to wake up the world', since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: 'Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.'" (*Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 28 November 2014, 2). See also Bozzolo, *The Dual Form* 28: "Unlike the ordained ministry that has an institutional consistency that transcends the person of the minister, so that it remains valid even if the minister is unworthy, consecrated life consists entirely in the quality of the loving response of those who live it. There is no chastity if you are not chaste, there is no poverty if you are not poor, there is no obedience if you do not obey."

<sup>21</sup> See Bozzolo, *The Dual Form* 42-44.

virtue of purity. As a Salesian, the priest confrere is called to a particular imitation of the purity of Jesus. Jesus is the Pure of Heart in whose presence women, children and men felt safe. He is so completely Son of the Father that he was able to show himself to every man and every woman exclusively as brother. "Only as brother did he offer himself to the attention, the friendship, the tender affection of his sisters and brothers. His freedom on this point is total, limpid, divine. His celibacy, far from being renunciation and restriction, is the consequence of being completely Son and completely Brother."<sup>22</sup> The Salesian knows, however, that he is called not only to be a safe place for young people but also a resplendent sign that speaks to young people and allows him to educate them to love and purity. (C 81)

As a priest, the Salesian is called to the exercise also of spiritual fatherhood and to walk the fine line of being paternal but not paternalistic. The risk of a suffocating paternalism that borders on clericalism and abuse of authority can be reinforced by the way father figures could be experienced and understood in certain cultural contexts. In these situations we will have to make greater efforts to imitate the fatherliness of Don Bosco. However demanding this may be, we cannot lower the standards and compromise with this goal. The fatherliness of Don Bosco is the hallmark of his spirit and charism. "When we think of our Father we remember most especially his concern for the spiritual good, the kindness that inspired his relationships and the wise guidance given to individuals and groups: three points that characterized his fatherliness. These found expression in his actions and attitudes."<sup>23</sup>

*Amorevolezza* lies at the very heart of the Preventive System. It is Don Bosco's unique way of relating to young people, and the usual translation as loving kindness fails to convey its full meaning. This kind of pure love or loving purity that is at the core of our charism can be understood and absorbed only by osmosis. It

<sup>22</sup> F. ROSSI DE GASPERIS, *Sentieri di vita* (Milano: Paoline, 2007) 2.2:242.

<sup>23</sup> J.E. VECCHI, AGC 365 46.

matures and ripens along the years in the kind of transparent self-giving that we can contemplate not only in the life of Don Bosco but also in so many of his sons such as Srugi, Variara, Zatti, Cimatti and Sandor, to name only a few.

There is another field in which today our being 'eschatological sign' and 'living memorial of the way of life of Jesus' becomes a precious gift for young people, the Church and the world at large. Ecological consciousness is growing along with the unparalleled and unprecedented ecological risk we are running today. Being signs of the resurrection through the gift of our consecration, we are also signs of the value of creation and of the call to the eco-spiritual conversion demanded by *Laudato Si'*. The resurrection casts a new light upon life, lighting up our profound interconnectedness with the whole of creation.

If we reduce man exclusively to his horizontal dimension, to that which can be perceived empirically, life itself loses its profound meaning. Man needs eternity for every other hope is too brief, too limited for him. Man can be explained only if there is a Love which overcomes every isolation, even that of death, in a totality which also transcends time and space. Man can be explained, he finds his deepest meaning, only if there is God. ... We are invited, once more, to renew with courage and with strength our faith in eternal life, indeed to live with this great hope and to bear witness to it in the world: behind the present there is not nothing. And faith in eternal life gives to Christians the courage to love our earth ever more intensely and to work in order to build a future for it, to give it a true and sure hope.<sup>24</sup>

The more we grow in the consciousness of the everlasting destiny embedded in every human face, the more every other aspect of life is rediscovered in its immense value, as part of the one divine design where the created universe and the created freedom of each person mirror each other as mysteries beyond reckoning. As consecrated persons we are surely called also to bear witness to the marvellous interconnectedness of God's creation on its way to the *eschaton*, to the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

<sup>24</sup> BENEDICT XVI, General Audience 2 November 2011.

### 3. Vocational Animation and Formation

In the light of what we have been discussing, here are some suggestions that might help us deepen the Salesian consecrated identity in the priestly form today.

A *first* point is to deepen our awareness of **the beauty of consecrated life**. Vocational animation and initial formation are processes that work fundamentally by contagion: a consecrated person who lives his vocation with joy and passion is attractive and prophetic. In this context, it would be good to remember the booklets issued by the CICLSAL during the Year of Consecrated Life, all of which were centred on the Lord: joy in following the Lord (*Rejoice!*), the reading of the signs of the Lord's presence and the waiting for his coming that is at the core of the consecrated vocation (*Keep Watch!*), the beauty and splendour of the Lord (*Contemplate*), being witnesses of the Risen Lord among the nations (*Proclaim*).<sup>25</sup>

A *second* point is to **deepen our understanding of the priesthood itself**. The problem does not come from being too much priests, but from being too little priests: we tend to concentrate on 'doing priesthood' rather than on 'being priests.' The problem in the Congregation is that we have many priests but not enough priesthood.<sup>26</sup> We tend to be fascinated by priestly work – and perhaps by the kick we get out of it, the immediate returns, the appreciation of the faithful – rather than by the living out of the priesthood of Christ in its true profundity. There is so much to be gained by a renewed attempt to understand the beauty of the priesthood of Christ.

<sup>25</sup> CICLSAL, *Rejoice! To consecrated men and women from the teachings of Pope Francis* (February 2014); *Keep Watch! A letter to consecrated men and women journeying in the footsteps of God* (September 2014); *Contemplate: To all consecrated persons pursuing the Beauty trail* (November 2014); *Proclaim: To consecrated men and women witnesses of the Gospel among peoples* (August 2016).

<sup>26</sup> AGC 335 8.

In the *third* place, the Salesian Priest has to be formed to be attentive to the **constantly changing socio-cultural context** in which young people live. This implies at the same time a constant return to the charismatic inspiration that nurtures our Salesian identity and mission. We were born out of the experience of Don Bosco with the marginalized youth of Valdocco to whom he gave his life until his last breath. Our Constitutions embody this vocation and mission, and the Church asks only that we be faithful to such a heritage and mandate. In the variety of contexts and changes that condition the culture and life of people today, the charismatic experience of Don Bosco remains our lodestone. It is the permanent criterion not only for our works but also for our personal engagement in the mission among the youth as Priest Salesians and Brother Salesians.

Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.

As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works. (C 40)

A *fourth* point is that the Salesian charism must permeate all our efforts of **vocational animation**. While accompanying all young people in the discovery of their vocation, we must also courageously propose what is typical of our charism, involving them in our mission, community life, and the experience of the values of our spirit.<sup>27</sup> Within this presentation of the charism, we must learn to propose the Salesian consecrated vocation – first of all by joyful witness, and then also in more explicit ways. There will always be those who come to us with the intention of becoming priests. These must be helped to see if they feel called to embrace the Salesian charism with all their hearts. Such a ‘conversion’ to the charism is a *sine qua non* for further steps on the

<sup>27</sup> *Criteria and Norms for Salesian Vocation Discernment*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Rome 2000)



journey. Here is also the great task for all our provinces: to move clearly from recruitment to a true vocational culture.<sup>28</sup>

As far as the vocation of the Salesian Priest is concerned, certain criteria of discernment must be carefully followed: Salesian consecration (Chapter 2 of the Constitutions), the capacity to be a builder (and not a destroyer) of community, zeal for the salvation of young people, and so on.

A *fifth* point regards strengthening the processes of accompaniment in the **prenovitiate, novitiate and postnovitiate**. These three phases form a unit among themselves and are vital for growth in the Salesian consecrated identity in its two forms. If it is true that about 80% of our candidates speak about a true discovery of personal spiritual accompaniment only in the prenovitiate, these phases become even more critical.<sup>29</sup> Personal spiritual accompaniment in the context of community accompaniment is an indispensable instrument in the personalization of the values of our vocation. Every province needs to invest courageously in the preparation of formators, as individuals and as teams, so that they become guides who are able to win the confidence (*Strive to make yourself loved!*) and touch the hearts of Salesians in initial formation. We cannot afford to have situations where badly handled authority gives rise to dynamics of fear and suspicion that ruin the process of accompaniment and of formation in general.<sup>30</sup> In addition, formators and especially those offering the service of personal spiritual accompaniment must be able to help deepen most especially the charismatic and community dimensions in the context of the overall goal of configuration to Christ.

<sup>28</sup> GC27 75.1.

<sup>29</sup> M. BAY, *Young Salesians and Accompaniment: Results of an international survey* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2019) 494. See *Young Salesians and Accompaniment: Orientations and Guidelines* (2019) 46. We keep in mind that 54.42% do speak of being accompanied by a 'soul friend' in the years before the prenovitiate.

<sup>30</sup> See BAY 545-546 (8. Unhelpful elements/features or difficulties in the experience of personalised spiritual accompaniment) and *Young Salesians and Accompaniment: Orientations and Guidelines* (2019) 53-59.

A *sixth* point concerns strengthening the processes of accompaniment and discernment during **practical training** and in **preparation for perpetual profession**. Our Constitutions describe practical training as a phase of intense lived experience of Salesian educative and pastoral action.<sup>31</sup> Given its proximity to the perpetual profession, this phase becomes even more critical in terms of a final discernment of the Salesian consecrated vocation, both on the part of the individual and of the community. Would it not be worth investing in better and more efficacious forms of accompaniment in this vital phase, so that it truly becomes a “learning by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation” (C 98)? The Rector Major has been insisting that provincials send practical trainees only to communities that have demonstrated the ability to accompany them. It might be useful also to promote a renewed reflection on the criteria for admission to the perpetual profession.

The transition from practical training to the next stage of initial formation – a move that normally takes place close to the preparation for perpetual profession – can offer good opportunities of discernment to both confrere and community. A process of overall evaluation of the confrere’s Salesian experience since the novitiate, and especially during practical training, is a good basis for exploring motivations as well as orientations towards the future. The choice to begin specific formation in order to become a Salesian Priest needs solid roots and sound ‘positive signs’<sup>32</sup> emerging from Salesian life experience. The *Ratio* invites us, in fact, to carry out an overall evaluation of the practical training experience:

When one finishes his practical training, it is appropriate that there be an overall assessment – on the part of the Provincial and the community, and on his part as well – of his entire experience and of the progress he has made in his vocation. (FSDB 439)

<sup>31</sup> C 115. The Italian text speaks of a “confronto vitale e intenso con l’azione salesiana in un’esperienza educativo pastorale.”

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Criteria and Norms* 39; 42-43.

At the conclusion of practical training, there should be an overall assessment of the whole experience carried out by the Provincial, the community and the confrere himself. (FSDB 444)

Nothing prevents us from expanding this evaluation to the complete arc of Salesian experience since the novitiate, and to make a projection towards the future. Some provinces combine this kind of overall evaluation with the 'declaration of intent' required for beginning specific formation towards priesthood:

The specific formation of the cleric confrere requires from each candidate a clear intention to embrace the priestly life. Therefore, at the time of his acceptance for this phase of formation, a declaration of intent is required of him in this sense. The way in which this declaration is made may vary: for example, it may be through a request to the Provincial to undertake the study of theology, or a request to begin the preparation for perpetual profession with a view to becoming a Salesian priest (FSDB 482).

Good practices like these would help give much more value to the crucial passage from practical training to specific formation and perpetual profession. Evidently, they call for the best dispositions and also involvement both of the confrere concerned and of those who accompany him at that moment of his life.

A *seventh* point concerns **specific formation in preparation for the Salesian priesthood**. This phase, also because of its length, has a formidable impact on the Salesian consecrated identity in its priestly form. The FSDB could not be clearer in its formulation of the objectives of this phase:

"Our living Rule is Jesus Christ... whom we find present in Don Bosco who devoted his life to the young." [C 196] This statement of our Constitutions *sums up our Salesian vocation: we are to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ and spend our lives for the young, as did Don Bosco*. All our formation, both initial and ongoing, consists in acquiring and actualizing this identity in individual persons and in the community. To this end are directed the efforts of every candidate and every confrere, the activity of the animators, and the entire formation enterprise.

For this reason, our Salesian identity is the basis of unity and of belonging to the worldwide Congregation. It is *the heart of all our formation*,

the fountainhead of our formation process and its constant point of reference. It is also the determining criterion of vocation discernment. (FSDB 25)

The Salesian priest [or deacon] combines in himself the gifts of Salesian consecration and those of the pastoral ministry, but in such a way that *his particular manner of being a priest and exercising his ministry stems from his Salesian consecration*. As a sacramental sign of Christ the Good Shepherd, from whom he draws his pastoral love, he works within the framework of his community in his bid to “save” the young (FSDB 39).

It is time to rethink the whole process of specific formation so as to give our Salesian consecrated identity the centrality that belongs to it. It is by no means enough to guarantee that the plan of studies corresponds to the academic requirements in view of ordination to the priesthood. We need to identify and promote the methods that would favour the ongoing attainment of that charismatic synthesis that is the core of the vocation of the Salesian who is a priest. As Cardinal J.J. Hamer had insisted during the 1990 Synod on Priestly Formation, major superiors have the responsibility to ensure a perfect harmony between formation to the priesthood and formation to the religious life according to the particular identity and charism of his institute.<sup>33</sup> During the study of theology, we would need to make a concerted effort to read the theological treatises in the light of our charism.

There are in particular two kinds of relationship that have a tremendous impact on future ministry, and that therefore must be the object of special attention. The first is the lived experience of the *religious community*: a clear sense of belonging and the ability to give of oneself in generous service are extremely important positive signs. Problems in community life after ordination often have their roots in poor community experience during initial formation. The second is the ability to live the *Salesian spir-*

<sup>33</sup> Cited in AGC 335 14. Jean Jérôme Hamer, OP, STD (1916-1996) was a Belgian Cardinal who was Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (1985-1992).

*it and mission as shared with the laity.* This kind of conviction and ability will not emerge automatically after ordination; it must be the object of particular attention during the processes of initial formation.

In general, we need to ensure that specific formation is not reduced to its necessary intellectual dimension, much less to merely “passing examinations.” Aspirants to the Salesian priesthood must be helped to enter more deeply into their specific identity of confreres called to live the priesthood *within the Salesian vocation and mission*. This would require, as we said, a thorough revision of formation processes and instruments (community and personal formation plans, community, group and personal accompaniment), an expansion of the agents of formation to include lay men and women and married couples, and a far better preparation of formation guides in general. All this would have to be done in a participatory way that ensures that the young confreres are actively involved as the first ones responsible for their formation.

In the *eighth* place, there is the period of the **quinquennium**. The importance of this phase could not get greater endorsement than the one coming directly from the life of Don Bosco. It is in the first five years of his priesthood, which coincide with the time between his ordination and the establishment of the Oratory at Valdocco, that the Salesian mission was born. Our founder’s personal experience is an equally strong testimony to the importance of being accompanied during the crucial period of full insertion into the pastoral life: without Cafasso at his side we cannot even imagine the Saint John Bosco we know and follow. It is, of course, the responsibility of the Provincial to assign confreres to communities where they can be mentored and accompanied, as it is up to the confreres concerned to accept the need for such mentoring and accompaniment. No less important at this time is the support coming from the peer group. There are very valuable experiences of quinquennium meetings and mutual support at provincial and interprovincial levels that are worth learning from

and imitating. And then there is study, which Cafasso used to define as the eighth sacrament for a priest. It would be a tragedy if Salesian priests were to stop reading, reflecting and studying soon after ordination. If we are to be educators and pastors rather than functionaries or mercenaries, we have to certainly take care of the reflective and contemplative side of our vocation. The best example here is Don Bosco himself – the Don Bosco who had a room reserved for him at the Convitto to which he would retire every day in his early years as a priest, in order to read and write.<sup>34</sup>

*Ninth*, given the large number of **parishes** in the Congregation and the huge formative impact of this particular form of pastoral service on our Salesian life and on our perception of priestly ministry, it would be important in the forthcoming six-year period to foster processes of listening, study and reflection on this topic, to be carried out jointly by the Youth Ministry, Mission and Formation departments, involving also confreres and communities engaged in Salesian parish ministry.

*In the tenth place*, the Salesian Priest, along with the Salesian Brother, will work out ways of actively promoting the ecclesiology of communion that expands in concentric circles to embrace the whole of humanity. This means moving beyond the boundaries of our own religious and educative-pastoral communities to network with other religious, the diocesan community, the human community in which we are situated, and with all those interested in caring for our common home and in uplifting the lives of the young, especially the most marginalized. The priesthood of Christ embraces the whole human family and, indeed, every form of life in God's magnificent creation.

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<sup>34</sup> See G. BUCCELLATO, *Notes for a 'Spiritual History' of Father John Bosco* (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti, 2014) 77. See also the vast body of publications by Don Bosco, now easily available at <http://www.donboscosanto.eu/>.

As we learn to take better care of the identity of our priest confreres, we will see an improvement also in the pastoral quality, spirituality and shared responsibility of the subject of the mission that is the community. Ongoing growth in these aspects is a challenge for the Salesian religious life in its two forms, so that all of us, Brothers and Priests, might grow in faith and humanity and render more fruitful service to young people and to those to whom we are sent, with all the energies and resources at our disposal.