

WHAT KIND OF SALESIANS FOR THE YOUTH OF TODAY?

Letter convoking the 28th General Chapter

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Turin, 24 May 2018

My Dear Confreres,

During the plenary session of the General Council we have reflected on the next General Chapter the title of which and the preparation process we have already told you about. Immediately afterwards I devoted some of my time to going over the contents of the more recent General Chapters: from 1972 with the celebration of the Special General Chapter (GC20), which marked an historical conclusion to the process of renewal of our Congregation after Vatican Council II, until the last which took place in 2014. They were therefore forty two years in the life of the Church and of the Congregation during which eight General Chapters took place.

Here we are now at the point of the announcement and the preparation of the GC28 which without doubt will once again be «the principal sign of the Congregation's unity in diversity», as our Constitutions point out.¹

With the specific characteristics of each General Chapter we shall come together as Salesian confreres from the whole world to face the challenge of reviewing our fidelity to the Lord, to the Gospel and to Don Bosco, sensitive to the needs of times and places, open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so as to know the will of God at this moment in history.²

1. CONVOCAATION OF THE GC28

¹ C. 146.

² *Ibid.*

On the day of the Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians, from Turin, with great joy I send you this letter in which **I convoke, according to article 150 of our Constitutions, the GC28.** It will have as its theme: ***What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?*** The Chapter will be held at Valdocco (Turin), to where we shall return, sixty-two years after the last General Chapter was held there, in the same holy Salesian place where Don Bosco lived and founded our Congregation. It will be a *special gift* to meet our Father Don Bosco and to feel ourselves truly at home in the place where charismatically-speaking we were all born as Salesians of Don Bosco.

The General Chapter *will begin on Sunday 16th February 2020*, with the solemn Concelebrated Mass in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. We are hoping that it *will conclude on 4th April 2020*, the eve of Palm Sunday. The General Chapter therefore will last seven weeks.

As *Moderator* I have appointed *Fr Stefano Vanoli*, who is generously taking on the responsibility of accompanying the preparation and the carrying out of our General Chapter.

1.1. Choice of theme

The theme chosen is the result of an extensive and profound reflection undertaken by the General Council, which has taken into account the current indications of the Church and of Pope Francis, especially the celebration of the two Synods of Bishops on the family, and the preparation of the one to be held in October 2018 on “Young people, the faith and vocational discernment.”

The General Council has also highlighted some questions that have emerged from the ever greater knowledge of the Congregation that has been acquired during the Team Visits and the Extraordinary Visitations, as well as from the overview that each Councillor has been able to have of the situation of the Congregation and that I myself have arrived at following study and the visits I have made so far to sixty-three Provinces.

This overview of the Congregation has enabled us to identify, as I shall explain more fully in the course of this letter, *the need to focus our attention on the **individual Salesian** who as a man of God, a consecrated person and an apostle needs to be capable of being fully in tune with today's teenagers and young people and their world, and to educate them, to evangelise them, prepare them for life and accompany them in their meeting with the Lord.* At the same time, we are operating *with the firm conviction that we are not the only ones with responsibility for the mission, nor are we able to carry it out without the collaboration of others.*

There is just the one theme which is divided into three points:

Priority of the Salesian mission among today's youth

Profile of the Salesian for today's youth

Together with lay people in the mission and in formation

1.2. Other tasks

In addition to the proposed theme, which will certainly give us a great opportunity and be a time of grace and hope for our Congregation, the General Chapter will need to consider some issues of a juridical nature which are important for the life of the Provinces such as, for

example, an assessment of the Secretariate for the Salesian Family which was established during the previous General Chapter.

Another task will be the election of the Rector Major and of the members of the General Council for the six year period 2020-2026. The members of the General Chapter will be providing this service for the sake of unity and fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco, and no doubt the confreres from all parts of the Salesian world with their prayers will be accompanying this occasion so important for our Congregation.

The “technical commission,” appointed according to article 112 of the Regulations, has already been working with the Moderator during the session of the General Council and the following days to prepare a *timetable* of work for the Provinces so that everything proceeds in the most suitable manner both with regard to the timescale and to the contributions that can be offered.

In all probability, as a result of the replies of the Provinces regarding some features of their life and some juridical aspects connected with them, at the GC28 itself there will need to be further consideration of some of the structures of animation and central government of the Congregation and of the Regions.

1.3. Fundamental aim of the theme

The fundamental aim of the theme of the GC28 is that of helping the whole Congregation to closely examine, as far as is possible, what is and what ought to be the *profile of the Salesian capable of responding to today's youth*, to all young people especially the poorest and most in need, those excluded and rejected, the weakest and those deprived of their basic rights. And this *in a world ever more complex and going through rapid changes*.

Today's situation needs Salesians, consecrated-apostles prepared and ready to live their lives with the mind and heart of Don Bosco, in this Church and in this society, willing to share, to give of themselves, and to give their lives for the young people in the world today, with their languages, their own views, their own concerns. We can find many of these young people in Salesian centres: but many more are living in other “playgrounds” in the world.

What the SGC said in its own day when speaking about the unity of the vocation of the Salesian today sounds like a prophecy: «From the rediscovery of this vocational unity will dawn the light of our Salesian “identity” and the possibility of that new type of Salesian required today by the signs of the times.»³

This “type of Salesian required today by the signs of the times” will also underline what was considered at the GC24 but which was not sufficiently assimilated. The fact that hundreds of thousands of lay people are now part of the Salesian presence throughout the world demands from Salesians a new openness of mind and heart for the benefit of the Salesian mission in the world. Only by *sharing the mission* will we be able to provide the best answers without disappointing the teenagers and young people of today and of tomorrow who have so much need of us.

1.4. Some questions that we can ask ourselves

There may be confreres who think that if we all have the Gospel as our way of Christian life and Don Bosco as the Father and Founder of our Congregation, and if we profess the same

³ SGC, 127.

Constitutions in which the Salesian mission is clearly defined, then perhaps there is no need to ask ourselves what ought to be the profile of the Salesian that the Holy Spirit wants nowadays for an authentic mission among and with the young, in a world that is so new and changeable. However, we do need to recognise honestly, as is appreciated in many Provinces, that the current situation is far more complicated and diversified than we imagined. This situation is not the same everywhere nor is it simple. It is for this reason that we are finding contrasting situations which are forcing us to move in the direction of a more radical approach, of greater courage, greater clarity and even greater purification in the light of the Gospel and of the fidelity of our Congregation to the charism received from the Holy Spirit in Don Bosco.

In this complicated and diversified situation there are confreres, and they are the majority, who are living with total dedication and in tune with the young people, their world and their situation. There are others who feel that this world of youth and the young people themselves are no longer accessible to them.

Most of the confreres live with a very clear and decisive option for the poor and needy, with a firm commitment to those who every day experience their dignity being trampled underfoot and violated; other confreres seek refuge in life situations that are easy and comfortable.

The majority of the confreres live the ministerial priesthood like Don Bosco, who, for his boys and youngsters was a priest always and everywhere; while other confreres are greatly influenced by a strong tendency towards clericalism, which does so much damage to the Church herself and from which we are not exempt.

Many confreres live their lives with total selflessness, sobriety, austerity and generosity in their service of others, in particular regarding those to whom we are especially sent; while there are other confreres who lose their identity and freedom as consecrated religious becoming involved in processes of power-seeking, which quite often are linked to looking for money and to other ties.⁴

Most confreres, with genuine passion and affection, are living lives that reflect in everyday situations what John Cagliero declared : «Friar or no friar I am never leaving Don Bosco»⁵; other confreres, however, as the consequence of a great lack of Salesian identity, ask to leave the Congregation in order to live not as consecrated religious apostles, Salesians of Don Bosco, but simply to exercise their priestly ministry in dioceses where they think they will be happy or simply be accepted.

There are confreres who have understood and are living the shared mission with lay people seen as a great gift to the mission. On the other hand, there are many others who still show great reluctance or even refuse; they are quite happy to see lay people as our dependants but they refuse to share the mission side by side on the same level with them, and all that this implies,

Most of the young confreres in the stages of formation dream of committing all their energies to the young people to whom they will be sent.⁶ preparing their hearts and minds and pursuing their intellectual formation with this aim in view; and on the contrary there are other confreres who dream of appointments, responsibilities that may give them authority and “a certain position”.

⁴ EG, 55 and 57.

⁵ BM VI, 181.

⁶ Cf. C. 24.

This situation of ours made up of contrasts, lights and shadows, is asking from us the same things that Pope Francis, with his lively and direct approach asked from the whole Salesian Family. Today I feel the words: *not to disappoint the deep aspirations of the young* are in a special way addressed to us. This is what the Pope says: «“May Don Bosco help you to not disappoint the deep aspirations of the young: their need for life, openness, joy, freedom and the future; their desire to collaborate in building up a more just and fraternal world, in fostering the development of all peoples, in safeguarding nature and the living environment. Following his example you will help them to experience that only in the life of grace, that is in friendship with Christ, does one fully obtain the most authentic ideals. You will have the joy of accompanying them in their search for a synthesis of faith, culture and life at moments when they take weighty decisions or attempt to interpret a reality that is complex.»⁷

2. THEME OF GC28

2.1. Priority of the Salesian mission among today’s young people

Reflection on the history of our General Chapters is deeply rewarding and each General Chapter, with the light of the Holy Spirit that we need to accept with docility and openness of heart, is like an *invitation addressed to our freedom of action* today, since we must not imprudently and almost rashly rely on past glories. Almost without realising it we can be «resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 7,51), or else we may «suppress the Spirit» (cf. 1 Thes 5,19), running the risk that the Salesian mission that has been entrusted to us may one day be given to others.⁸

For this reason, when we propose as the theme of the Chapter for the whole Congregation that of undertaking a careful reflection on the profile of the Salesian for today’s youth, we are doing so from an urgent need to move ahead in freedom and with great honesty along the only path that really counts: fidelity to the Lord in Don Bosco, and fidelity to the young, many of whom are waiting not to be abandoned to their fate or left shipwrecked because we have been incapable of seeing their needs or hearing their calls.

Like Don Bosco and in fidelity to the Spirit, we need to commit ourselves to giving absolute priority to the Salesian mission with the young people of today in order to be as he was, «signs and bearers of the love of God for young people especially those who are poor.»⁹ This priority or special concern for the most needy teenagers and youth in today’s world, that in a certain sense is different from the world of previous decades, objectively conditions our mission. We can say as on other occasions that this is not something optional, something we can neglect because we do not want to accept its demands. On the contrary it is something essential a constitutive part of our charismatic identity.

At present three quarters of the world’s population of young people are living in countries afflicted by poverty or in those slowly developing, especially on the outskirts of the large cities in the so-called “emergency camps.” They are the victims of progress and of

⁷ FRANCIS, *Like Don Bosco with the young for the young. Letter of Pope Francis to the Rector Major of the Salesians*, LEV, Vatican City 2015, 9.

⁸ Cf. SGC, 18.

⁹ C. 2.

development itself, which of its very nature leads to growing social inequality and poverty. This situation continues to be a sharp reminder for us and for our Congregation. Today more than ever with the same sensitivity of Don Bosco we have an original charismatic mission to offer to the Church and to the world, to all young people and to all those boys and girls, teenagers and young people who are excluded, marginalised and thrown away.

The new General Chapter will be an opportunity to courageously undertake a discernment process to see whether our houses, our works and our activities are at the service of the poorest young people¹⁰; whether they find a place in our hearts and are the centre of our concerns and interests; whether we are concentrating our energy and our efforts on them.

A heartfelt dream I have is that of being able to confidently believe that one day throughout the world on hearing the word *Salesians*, or sons of Don Bosco, everyone will know that they are speaking about us consecrated persons, who always and in every place or situation opt for the young, all young people *the boys and girls who are the poorest, the vulnerable, those deprived of their dignity*, because they ***need us and are waiting for us***. Who are these young people? According to the words of Pope Francis they are above all the outcasts, the “left overs”: «We have created a “throw away” culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new...The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”»¹¹

And for us Salesians those who need us and are waiting for us are:

- the really poor and the “cast offs” in the world
- child migrants, refugees who have arrived alone in foreign countries
- street boys and girls in various continents
- children and young people whose human rights and dignity are violated every day
- young people refused entry at frontiers because of their lack of documents and of opportunities and forced to do anything in order to survive
- children and young people caught up in networks and in some way slaves to various forms of dependence or subjected to real slavery and the loss of their freedom
- young people in the world of work and of technical and occupational formation
- young people from totally dysfunctional families severely lacking in human and affective relationships
- the young, finally, from all races and all cultures in all circumstances who do not know Jesus Christ.

In short, the Chapter will need to be a strong call to return once again to the truly poor in the world and to continue to firmly commit ourselves to them in the places and the centres where we are already at work.

The Chapter will also be a strong appeal to us to be on the same wavelength as so many teenagers and youths who ask us not to leave them to themselves but to accompany them: young people from good or from broken homes, who need the presence of an educator and of a friend in their own lives and in that of their families.

This priority of the youth mission today ought to make us open our eyes and make us sensitive to the needs of teenagers and youths who in their language, their points of view, and their awareness belong to the digital world. Others are concerned about the care of and respect for the environment and nature. There are young people concerned about the social dimension in which there is the possibility of helping and of serving, young people who seek an opportunity for voluntary service. There are also young people who want to make a

¹⁰ *Reg.* 1.

¹¹ *EG*, 53.

genuine and profound faith journey. This same priority enables us to understand, nowadays more than ever, that when the young people have a family, this journey can only be undertaken together. This is also what the Church and the Pope are urging. All of this and much besides is challenging our fidelity as Salesians today and demands from us reflection on what to do, on how to do it and how to prepare ourselves so as to have something important and significant to say, to offer and to share.

2.2. Profile of the Salesian for the youth of today

Speaking about the Salesians of today and of tomorrow demands that we all turn our gaze towards Don Bosco because he is our model. As GC21 already wrote, Don Bosco «for us is not just a memory of the past, but a charismatic living presence, active and stretching out to the future. In him we reach a better understanding of ourselves and we find the true sense of what it means to belong to the Congregation.»¹²

2.2.1. With Don Bosco as the model

Having Don Bosco as his model the Salesian discovers:

Don Bosco “the man of God”, whose most wonderful characteristic was the combination of his personality, his life and his work¹³. The splendid harmony of nature and grace he showed in such a magnificent manner in his own person helps the Salesian to realise just how faith can richly illuminate the whole of human life and how life finds its fulness in faith. In fact Don Bosco knew how to interpret the circumstances in which he was living and which surrounded him in an extraordinary manner through the eyes of faith. For this reason *saying Salesian nowadays ought to be the same as saying a man of profound faith.*

At the centre of his life we discover “da mihi animas cetera tolle”, as an apostolic passion fully motivated and full of dreams for his boys. But the source of all of this are the Gospel and the person and the heart of Christ the apostle of the Father. And it is in Don Bosco that we can see how the Holy Spirit is the inspiration behind a certain “Salesian way” of knowing intuitively the face and the heart of Jesus the Good Shepherd and his mission, in a project of life that is firmly unified, in which the human and the divine aspects are closely united and directed towards a single mission: the salvation of youth¹⁴. On this account *saying Salesian nowadays ought to be the same as saying an apostolic passion for youth.*

In imitating Don Bosco the Salesian discovers God’s infinite paternal love and tries to live in the presence of the Father with a heart filled with joyful gratitude and trust. He feels that his mission as educator and pastor culminates in revealing the Father to the young, and he comes to understand Don Bosco much better in his union with God and his extraordinary sense of paternal love. And since he recognises that Don Bosco’s supreme model is Christ, the Salesian has the opportunity to become ever more aware that «the real world has a pressing need to discover this true face of God and this vocation to sonship that every man has.»¹⁵ For this reason *speaking today about a Salesian ought to*

¹² GC21, 163.

¹³ Cf. SGC, 83 §1.

¹⁴ Cf. C. 26.

¹⁵ SGC, 90.

be the same as speaking about a son of God who knows that this is what he is and who feels that he is a father to the young.

Being Salesian is our way of being deeply Church. «Any kind of dualism between Salesian life and the life of the particular or universal Church is unthinkable. The same Spirit who animates and unifies the Church has inspired our Salesian vocation. »¹⁶ Fidelity to Don Bosco today asks us as a Congregation to be attentive to the signs of the times, attentive to the “cry” of the young people we are speaking about, without losing ourselves in anything that could disfigure our *charismatic identity*. For this reason, as our Constitutions say already in the first version by Don Bosco published in 1875, we need to have at heart the passion for being evangelizers of the young, and the more so if they are poor, and to pay special attention to apostolic vocations, of being educators of the faith for the working classes particularly by means of social communication, and proclaiming the Gospel to those who have not yet received it,¹⁷ since the passion of “*da mihi animas*” does not know frontiers. For this reason *saying Salesian nowadays ought to be the same as saying charismatic identity in communion with the Church.*

Affirming Don Bosco as our model and affirming fidelity to the charism means for us also *the return to the genuine spirit of Don Bosco of the Oratory*¹⁸, not so as to do **what he did** but certainly to imitate **the way he did it**, discovering a Don Bosco who was always flexible in so many ways but firmly rooted in his own mission for the young. Clearly we are not talking about the Oratory so as to limit ourselves to one particular activity among the many that Don Bosco himself undertook. Rather we want to grasp that spirit that moved and guided him constantly: his energy, his educative passion and his creativity, his dynamism and his flexibility, always accompanied by that clarity of vision and that steadfastness of spirit that he possessed and that for us today represents a magisterial lesson in *dynamic fidelity* to his specific apostolic vocation. Don Bosco shows himself to us therefore as a true model of docility to the original charism; docility to the call and to the mission that was entrusted to him together with an openness to the real situation, to the times and to the various demands. For this reason *saying Salesian today ought to be the same as saying apostle of the young always faithful, always flexible and creative.*

Having Don Bosco as a model means for the Salesian of today having a mind and heart filled with the values of the *Salesian spirit* and of the *spirituality that is our hallmark and our characteristic*. In this Salesian spirit love is the means and the fundamental method of its apostolate: untiring affability and friendliness are the Salesian names for charity among the young. A welcoming attitude, the ability to take the first step, appreciation shown towards every individual, optimism and joy, the family spirit ..., ought to be the distinctive and specific features of our Salesian DNA. For this reason *saying Salesian nowadays ought to be the same as saying always an educator always a friend.*

2.2.2. *Vocation and formation*

¹⁶ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco. A Guide to the reading of the Salesian Constitutions*, S.D.B., Madras 1987. 131.

¹⁷ Cf. C. 6.

¹⁸ Cf. C. 40.

Saying *vocation and formation* is always one way of replying to the question: «What kind of Salesian for the youth of today?». The profile of the Salesian will undoubtedly emerge from the work of the Chapter and this certainty is a source of great hope.

To assist with future reflection, I suggest three factors that need to be taken into consideration:

- a) The Salesian must live with the realization that his is a call and a consecrated vocation to which he must respond day after day.
- b) The mission is carried out together and formation ought to help us to live it this way.
- c) To respond appropriately to the demands of formation and of the mission today, we certainly need to invest in high quality formation teams capable of assisting in the formation of Salesians so that they may be genuine educators and apostles of today's youth.

a) Formation as a permanent response to God's call

Formation, understood and lived in faith leads each Salesian, together with his confreres, to respond to God, the one who takes the initiative and calls him to follow Christ more closely. It is God who consecrates us and sends us to the young as we express it in our religious profession.¹⁹ Vocation is not something abstract. It is God who always calls at some particular moment in time, in a specific family, social, religious, cultural and economic context. It is a call of love and of grace which we receive with gratitude and humility, not as a right or something we merit. The young Salesian, a son of his own time needs to respond to this specific call of God, and the task of formation is to help him in his journey towards maturity and in the complete abandonment of himself to God in his following of Christ.

In any case this process of growing to maturity cannot be accomplished outside the real situation in today's world, with its diversity and perhaps complexity. A combination of the needs and of the aspirations of the time²⁰ strongly marks a vocation.

Don Bosco had great sensitivity in being able to read and to interpret the situation and the needs of his time. With this sensitivity he gave life to the Salesian Congregation and overcame the difficulties. The first Salesians were formed in this spirit and we can say that today there is *an urgent need to acquire this characteristic in the area of formation*.

In societies like those of our times, with very rapid and serious changes, the Salesian will need to be able to remain open to such changes, overcoming the natural reluctance one feels when faced with things that are new, unknown situations: he will have to become accustomed to seeking new solutions when necessary, without hiding behind: "it has always been done like that"; he will need to be ready to learn the new and to face up to it, ready for an open discussion, capable of distinguishing between what is permanent and what can be changed, in fact able to live as a religious in these situations.

There is nothing strange in thinking, as the Congregation has already said on various occasions, that formation structures need to be adapted to the needs of the times, places and people: that they need to be varied, decentralised, flexible and functional. The young Salesian will need to be formed in contact with the circumstances of the place in which he is living: the families, the young people of the same age, real Salesian life with its own apostolic activities. He will be formed, as many people are through their efforts, sacrifice, temperance, austerity, far from any kind of *status* or privilege or élitism. All of this should always make

¹⁹ Cf. C. 24.

²⁰ Cf. GS, 4-10.

us reflect with flexibility on the formation of the Salesian in today's world for the youth of today.

Certainly formation ought to lead us to assimilate the typical features of the Salesian character with a *style of spiritual life*²¹ centred in God the Father and in Christ the Saviour, based on a practical faith that helps the Salesian to recognise the presence of God in everyday life, in history and in human events. The spirit will be that of charity inspired by the sweetness of Saint Francis of Sales, as Don Bosco wanted. With Don Bosco as his model, the Salesian will need to stand out for a hope that is the source of optimism and joy even in difficulties. And he will be sustained by a sincere Eucharistic and Marian piety.

As a son of Don Bosco the Salesian will need to stand out for a *human maturity* that ought to be a feature of our relationships full of good humour, sincerity, understanding, a capacity for friendship and real and mature affection. All of this enriched by a style of fraternal and educative relationships typical of the *family spirit that is our distinguishing feature*.

Naturally this journey cannot be pursued without **intermediaries**. These are varied. At the beginning of the journey people have to meet the first guides. Thinking about today's Salesian, real *discernment and accompaniment*²² are necessary and ever more urgent. The role of the community, of the laity in the educative pastoral community and of the confreres in their own Province is certainly important but above all, especially in the first years, the effectiveness of the *whole of the formation renewal* will depend to a large extent on the atmosphere we have described, on true discernment, on an accompaniment that is constant, and on the ability of the formation personnel. They need to be very much aware that the formation of the confreres will be influenced by their way of thinking and acting. For this reason it is necessary to identify the best way to obtain the *best teams of formation personnel, stable teams that are not improvised, prepared for this service*. Formation personnel with different and complementary personalities, but very stable in their being Salesians.

We know very well – and this is undoubtedly a great challenge throughout the Congregation – that formation ought to be the result of the actions of all the confreres, of the formation communities, but also of the communities involved in the active life in every Province. They all ought to feel themselves in some way *formation communities*, which through daily life communicate to the young confreres the authentic values of the Salesian vocation and the joy of living them as such.

As we think about the profile of the Salesian for today's youth and at the same time think about his formation, we shall be faced with some familiar challenges²³ and with situations and convictions that we will have to correct:

A formation understood as a series of successive stages that conclude with perpetual profession or priestly ordination, without the certainty of having completed a personal and profound process of identification with the vocation.

Formation understood first of all and principally as the acquisition of academic knowledge of a philosophical, theological, pedagogical and psychological nature.

The Salesian vocation sometimes falsely identified with a personal project which relativizes the evangelical counsels and forgets the importance that evangelical fraternity

²¹ Cf. C. 11, 12; SGC, 667; GC25, 191; GC27, 67§3.

²² Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment*, 2017, 39-52.

²³ Cf. GC21, 47.

has for us, and which ought to be the distinctive feature of each and every community in the Provinces.

The poor quality that we come across in the “formation personnel”, who are not always capable of transmitting in a clear manner the values of consecrated and ministerial life and who do not know how to accompany or to guide the discernment process.

A certain lack of joy and of life in the apostolic communities where there is a short supply of dialogue, of fraternal affection and of the sharing of one’s own daily experience of God.

b) Mission and communion

We note with a sense of responsibility and concern that on not a few occasions there is a lack of direction and of purpose in the formation processes. Too easily formation is thought of as a stage in Salesian life that finishes with the conclusion of studies. To this is erroneously associated the idea that with the award of a diploma or of a licence the objectives of formation have been achieved. With humility we have to recognise that in the Congregation there is not always the clear awareness and the subsequent practice that people are formed *for and in* a mission and formed *for and in* a community: whether that is the religious Salesian community or the pastoral educative community.

On the other hand when formation is understood as a permanent response for the whole of one’s life to the God who calls us to be *at the service of young people and prophets of fraternity*, then the direction and the purpose are clear in all the processes of formation; and both the mission and life in common have a clear direction and that purpose.

Here are some factors that highlight the risk that formation may depart from the mission and from the value of fraternal life and therefore from the true formation of the *Salesian profile for today’s youth*:

The tendency to identify “mission” and “work”, forgetting that our mission in the Church is that of being signs and bearers of the love of God for the young and of bringing them close to Christ, going far beyond the social services that we may provide.

Confreres who do not consider the accompaniment of the young and vocational discernment as an essential part of youth ministry.

Proposals for the formation of our young confreres that give secondary importance or none at all to pastoral experiences among the young, especially the poorest. This is very far from the ideas of Don Bosco, who believed that the Salesian should not be formed without contact with real life not even during the novitiate.

Programmes of formation in which there is a lack of reflection on the pastoral experiences of those in formation and an absence of accompaniment in their pastoral ministry.

Programmes of formation in which the staff are seen only as teachers and not as educators: this tells us something about the need to have true educators and not just teachers.

Situations where practical training is simply reduced to a period of work in a local community, but which for the Salesian in initial formation does not represent an important stage in which the experience lived is accompanied and assessed, and during which he can count on the help and on the witness of the whole community.

Formation communities that are living on the fringes or which are indifferent to the enormous and crucial missionary challenges of the Church and of the Congregation.

c) High quality formation teams²⁴

The formation of a Salesian for today's youth needs formation teams that are convincing in terms of quality and quantity acting in harmony and united. "Quality" means that the formation personnel need to "be living the values of the Salesian vocation" in order to then accompany the lives of the young candidates and of the Salesians. "Quality" demands educators who are living their consecrated Salesian vocation with joy and who know how to transmit that joy; formation personnel who have learned the art of discerning the voice of the Spirit in everyday life and know how to recognise the presence of God in the life of young people. Genuine and upright formation personnel, although not perfect, with a good measure of patience and respect. "Quality" requires formation personnel who know how to accompany lived experiences: the experience of community life, of prayer, of the apostolate, experience of the evangelical counsels. "Quality" also refers to the formation personnel who know how to work in a team together with the Rector or with the one responsible for the specific phase of formation.

When we speak about formation personnel we are also thinking about the presence of lay people, men and women, and of the presence of families during the period of formation. When these people belong to the Salesian Family or have had a Salesian formation, they become a valuable resource for the formation of young confreres.

Naturally as with the previous topics, we need to have the necessary clarity of vision in order to perceive the weaknesses that we discover, enough humility to recognise them and a willingness on the part of the Congregation to take the necessary steps to overcome them.

Some problem areas and dangers that we encounter are:

The frequent situation of complex works with few confreres available for initial formation and formation teams with few members.

Confreres trained to be teachers of philosophy or theology in the first stages of formation, but not trained for formation and spiritual accompaniment.

The presence of confreres, formation personnel in the houses of formation incapable of communicating with the young Salesians.

Formation personnel who do not show that they have a passion for God and for the young.

The difficulty of a "vertical" model of formation that does not touch the heart, motivations, attitudes and convictions.

The situation of formation personnel with little pastoral experience and a Provincial pastoral ministry more linked to single activities than to processes is a real weakness.

In some Provinces, countries and cultures a strict separation is maintained between confreres in the formation houses: formation personnel and those in formation with a great distance separating them, very far from the family spirit that Don Bosco wanted and the atmosphere of the oratory that he loved so much and of which he personally took care.

2.3. Together with lay people in the mission and in formation

²⁴ It is of interest to know what the Salesian formation personnel are saying in a recent study carried out after a large and wide-ranging enquiry undertaken among those in formation and the formation personnel throughout the Congregation: M. BAY, *Giovani, salesiani e accompagnamento. Risultati di una ricerca internazionale*, LAS, Roma 2018, 377-420.

After many years of sharing the mission with lay people in the educative pastoral community, the Congregation feels the need to evaluate the process undertaken, the results achieved and also the forms of opposition that have been met with. The mission shared with lay people clearly appears, especially since the GC24, as a real process of rediscovering charismatic identity, and nowadays as the only way to carry out the Salesian mission in a complicated world and in the diversity of contexts in which we find ourselves.

Another element for reflection is the subject of the mission itself that cannot be limited to the individual Salesian or just to the religious community as the animating nucleus. Nowadays the mission has to be considered as the integration of Salesians and lay people, and for this reason they also work together in formation.

2.3.1. Achievements and forms of opposition in the mission shared with lay people²⁵.

In the journey undertaken by the Congregation in these years the reality appears to be very diversified. There are countries and Provinces in which a large part of the route opened up by GC24 and by all the previous and the successive teaching of the Congregation has been followed. The results are manifold and prove that the discernment of the various General Chapters as well as the guidelines issued by the Congregation are not only possible, but in some parts of the world represent the only solution capable of ensuring the charism of Don Bosco on behalf of the youth who have need of us. We have learned much, we have gathered many fruits and the Congregation needs to show the results obtained for the benefit of the mission.

Nevertheless with regard to the progress of the educative pastoral communities, it is necessary to recognise that in some parts of the world and in some Provinces forms of opposition to the mission shared with lay people have emerged and even more opposition to the idea of a common formation in view of a common youth mission. This fact clearly shows that the process undertaken, its speed and the measures adopted are so different and varied as to make this the priority subject when speaking about Salesians and lay people together.

Pastoral models exist linked to the mission that are very different, which can lead to confusion and sometimes to an inadequate appreciation of the Christian states of life and to an inadequate evaluation of the consecrated person and of the lay person within a Christian view that is correct and synergical.

There are still some erroneous and ambiguous management models which in some cases make us feel “owners and proprietors”, “chiefs” who are quite willing to flaunt their “power”; there are also other pastoral models which are correct from a charismatic point of view in which we are “guides”, companions and educators in the Salesian educative pastoral system. Sometimes we feel encouraged when translating this model into reality; while in other cases it seems that there is a certain weariness that makes us move from the synergy of communion to a style of “power sharing” without effort and without any educative pastoral vision.

Sometimes it is an issue of serious forms of opposition which strike directly at the model of the “Church of communion” proposed by Vatican Council II; a model that the Church herself is seeking to promote in coming to an understanding of herself: a Church of which, naturally we are a part.

²⁵ Cf. GC24, 19-21, 30-31, 36.

These serious forms of opposition require from us that we stop and examine ourselves, and undertake a courageous examination of the successes and the difficulties encountered in daily Salesian life, and this we intend to do at the GC28. This examination is necessary because these situations of opposition are not always in the open or recognised for what they are and they end up being considered as something normal and an unchangeable “status quo”.

2.3.2. *Reciprocity in the relationships between Salesians and lay people*²⁶

In relationships between Salesians and lay people there come into play *common elements* such as the sense of belonging to the same educative pastoral communities, sharing in the charism of Don Bosco, in many cases the same Christian faith, confidence in the effectiveness of the practice of the preventive system. The more common elements there are between Salesians and lay people the stronger the relationship and the common educative pastoral approach which becomes not only easier but more fruitful.

We are aware of the *differences* there are between Salesians and laypeople: the difference of vocation, the difference of the state of life, ... Such differences make their own specific contribution; they are a treasure; they can and should contribute much more to building harmony rather than separation or division. Even among the lay people present in Salesian centres in the world we find important differences: Christian believers, those belonging to other religions or to none; members of the Salesian Family; lay people with a real sense of being co-responsible for the mission and others who feel themselves to be “simply” dependants; young people fully caught up in the charism and young people who are distant or indifferent within the same work; volunteers and paid workers; families close and distant ... Recognising the great diversity and the many differences is the starting point for imagining, dreaming and building a common pathway in our educative pastoral communities, with the broadest participation and the greatest contribution possible, appreciating in a unique and positive manner the contribution that also comes from the specific condition of being men and women; certainly the educative presence of women and their contribution need to be better recognised²⁷.

Another essential element in the relationship between Salesians and lay people in the shared mission needs to be emphasised. It is *reciprocity*. Reciprocity helps to overcome distances, the lack of harmony, an imbalance that arises from the different functions and from the sense of superiority that is sometimes expressed. This reciprocity has to be built up without cancelling the differences: the Salesian always has to preserve his own identity as a consecrated person and not “act as a layperson” and viceversa. Reciprocity is a help in living out fraternal and friendly relationships full of humanity and of maturity, respectful towards people without “betraying” the uniqueness and individuality of each one.

This reciprocity is a fact and it bears its best fruits when it avoids falling into some temptations. As regards the Salesians, on some occasions a “proprietorship” mentality predominates rather than that of service towards everyone. We are all servants in the same mission in the Church and in the world, and our common gaze ought to be always turned towards our young people especially to those most in need. When someone has the right understanding and assimilation of the charism, it is obvious that lay people are not our servants nor simply our “employees” even though for most of them, apart from the volunteers, the relationship is always regulated by a work contract. But much more can be done.

²⁶ Cf. GC24, 106,117.

²⁷ Cf. GC24, 25,33,74,166,177-179.

We have to be very aware of this temptation as also of the danger of “clericalizing” lay people. Clericalism, far from giving impetus to various proposals and contributions, little by little extinguishes the prophetic fire to which the Church is called to bear witness among the people. It is right to recognise in this fault an over-simplified and partial or even distorted view, and a conscious non-acceptance of the ecclesiology of communion, that requires the recognition of the equal dignity of all vocations.

At the same time the strong temptation felt by some lay people is that of wanting to gain the control and authority for which they reproached the Salesians themselves. It may be one way of saying consciously or unconsciously: «Our time has come! Now we can command and we can have the “power”». No good can come of all this, since it is to betray both the charism and co-responsibility on behalf of those to whom we are sent.

The only possible way will be that of charismatic identity that should always be guaranteed and ensured, and that shared *leadership* which depends as much on the capacity of the people and on the circumstances, as on formation in which are developed a system of accompaniment between Salesians and lay people, and a system for the control and monitoring of the management of the works, of the various roles, and of the financial arrangements.

2.3.3. *Joint Formation of Salesians and lay people*²⁸

Starting from the GC23 each Province was asked to have a Lay Project. The GC24 asked for the drawing up of a Salesians-Lay People Formation Programme²⁹ with contents, definition of roles, interventions of the Provincials and of the various structures of provincial guidance.

In the last twenty five years many Provinces have developed a variety of plans for the specific formation of lay people (and sometimes for Salesians and lay people together), according to their own needs in relation to the mission. The formation of lay people engaged for the first time in a Salesian work (teachers, educators, tutors, service personnel, social workers...) has been seen as a real challenge. In some places, in the face of the complexity of some Salesian centres, a systematic formation process has been developed for those people who have to provide a service of guidance and coordination: lay directors, coordinators of pastoral work, administrators, ...

It has been pointed out in various interprovincial meetings or during some of the team visits that great differences exist in the quality and in the progress made in this area. The differences have been ascribed to the lack of any “central point of reference” at the service of the whole Congregation, to which the Provinces could turn. In the last General Chapters the issue was not dealt with definitively even though the problem was raised on several occasions. The next General Chapter will provide the possibility of saying something about this or of taking some decisions, if it considers this appropriate.

On the basis of the model of the missionary communion of the Church enriched by the diversity of the charisms and by greater knowledge of them, we accept the basic principal that each one needs the other, to exchange the gifts of each specific vocation whether lay or consecrated. Mutual enrichment requires from everyone the humility to learn, the spirit of listening and a readiness for better preparation and a programme of high quality formation in the sharing of the Salesian charism and in the practice of the preventive system; and this both

²⁸ Cf. GC24, 43,55,101,103,138,140.

²⁹ Cf. GC24, 145.

in the Salesian houses and in the families themselves since their positive influence crosses many frontiers that are more theoretical than real.

2.3.4. *Works that are shared or entrusted to lay people*³⁰

The GC24 considered this issue looking at some «new situations», offering some guidelines and criteria³¹, but as usually happens, life during these last twenty-two years has taken us along some pathways that at that time were not even thought of.

The current situation is very varied:

With regard to the *areas covered*: it is a question of schools, social works, oratories...

With regard to the *collaboration of the Salesians* in works under lay management: some have a Salesian who is there every day; in others a Salesian is present several hours a week; in others the Province representative is there several times during the year..

With regard to the *way they operate*: in some works an educative pastoral community with its council has been established; others have a council of the work composed solely of lay people, and others again have a council of the work composed of lay people and a single Salesian.

With regard to the *connection with the Provincial plan*: some works have a Salesian community to which they relate; for others the Provincial and his Council are their point of reference; others are grouped together according to their location and have a Salesian as their point of reference.

With regard to the *management model*: there are works under lay management which report directly to the Provincial and his Council; others have their own particular and unique *status*, while others form part of a group of works which are regulated by a particular statute for that group of houses.

With regard to the *model of accompaniment of the works*: some have a Provincial Visitation by the Provincial himself. Others have a Visitation by the Provincial's Delegate, either the Vice Provincial, or the Provincial Councillor for Schools, or some other person given that responsibility. Others do not have a Provincial Visitation and control is limited to that exercised over economic and financial management by the Provincial Economist and to some kind of assessment of pastoral animation by the Provincial Delegate for Youth Ministry.

As regards the *services offered by and the presence of Salesians* in the works entrusted to lay people there are different views and some particular trends:

Surprisingly in some Provinces it is thought that once the lay management of a work has been established, the consecrated Salesians should no longer be involved in it; that is to say it is considered that their presence is no longer necessary.

In others the Salesians are only involved in directing the liturgy and for the accompaniment of the young people.

In others again a Salesian is a member of the educative pastoral community.

In this variety of situations, as you can see, the Provinces have tried to put into practice what was indicated by GC24 as they have considered it appropriate, on the basis of local circumstances, the demands, the needs and the various contexts. Everything seems to indicate that we have to harmonize reflection and practice so that in the future the *profile of the*

³⁰ Cf. GC24, 39,44-47, 180-182.

³¹ Cf. GC24, 180-182.

Salesian for today's youth and the mission shared by Salesians and lay people can ensure the one important thing: being a response that is vital and worthwhile, charismatic and faithful to our service to the youth of today. This requires on our part **a vision**, a capacity for *reflection and decision making*, because otherwise, the pressures of life will lead us along unforeseen paths.

In all probability, also on this issue the GC28 will have something to say in view of the decisions to be taken, especially in those cases where the statistics tell us that in some Provinces in the Congregation the works under lay management are so numerous as to reach almost half the number of those places where there is a Salesian community. The other important process that can certainly be further developed, since it is in its early stages, is that of the mission shared with some group of the Salesian Family (of the 31 groups within it) or that of the total entrustment of these centres ensuring the charismatic identity and the service to the local Church and to society.

3. THE "HOUR" OF THE 28th GENERAL CHAPTER

Dear confreres, I can assure you that the General Council, and in a very special way I myself have great hopes for this General Chapter, that it will certainly continue along the chosen path that our Congregation has followed in the last eight General Chapters in pursuance of the commitment to the renewal of consecrated life promoted by Vatican Council II.³²

The GC28 can be a Chapter in which rather than focusing its attention on an issue of ecclesial or religious life that we think is not sufficiently explored, we will be called to discern with realism, courage, and determination the direction of the path to be followed in this XXI century, at a very special time of renewal and purification in the life of the Church.

We are being called:

1. To give priority and centrality, in practice, in our decisions to the Salesian mission for the poorest and most needy teenagers and youngsters, for those who because they do not have a voice need our voice and our options on their behalf. Also to give priority to the accompaniment of so many thousands of teenagers and youngsters in this digital age who are moving in "another world" from which we cannot detach ourselves and who are asking from us an affective and effective presence and accompaniment for themselves and also perhaps for their families.
2. To continue, all of us, to form ourselves and above all to accompany the formation of the young Salesians of today and of tomorrow, so that the desire in their hearts will be to become "another Don Bosco today" filled with passion for Christ, for the human family so often suffering, and for its young people. Salesians in a constant process of fidelity, committed to highlighting and to eradicating any temptations of superficiality, banality, ostentation, clericalism, power and comfort. Today's youth, who are those who will save us from all these things, need above all a Salesian educator-pastor, friend, brother, and father, who precisely because he is living full of God, is life-giving without seeking his own interests.

³² Cf. AGC 394 (2006), 28-31.

3. To continue with “giant steps” using all the apostolic potential that we have, Salesian and lay, in the shared mission; being bold in identifying what until now has not allowed us to develop to the full the prophetic vision that our Congregation has had and which will be decisive for the development of the mission, of the pastoral impact of the Congregation and of the quality of the consecrated life of all Salesians, as consecrated persons “more free from” and “more free for” just like the Lord Jesus.

I am convinced that in the large majority of the confreres there is a strong desire for greater human authenticity, for great spiritual depth and for a more radical vocational coherence. Let us ask the Holy Spirit that the 28th General Chapter may be an opportunity to take this step forward as we ask ourselves: *What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?*

I conclude this letter convoking the General Chapter inviting you to call on the Lord through the intercession of Mary his Mother,³³ she who is Mother of the Church and of our Family, the Mother around whom Don Bosco wanted to build his communities and his works as true families.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You gave to Don Bosco
your own most holy Mother
to be his Mother, Teacher and Helper;
and through her you showed him his field of work
and inspired him to found our Society.

Continue to look kindly on this your Family,
and grant that we may always be aware amongst us
of the living and active presence of Mary,
«Mother of the Church and Help of Christians».
Entrusted as we are to her and under her guidance,
may we always be for young people
witnesses of your unbounded love. Amen.

Ángel Fernández Artime

³³ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco, op. cit.*, 148.