

2.4 RENEWED ATTENTION TO THE SALESIAN BROTHER

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The publication of *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life at the end of the Year of Consecrated Life is a good occasion to give renewed attention to the vocation of the Salesian Brother. GC27 asks us to “continue to reflect both on the aspect of consecrated life and on the specific nature of the Brothers with regard to fraternal life and the mission.”¹ Interestingly, as we will see below, reflection on the Salesian Brother opens up, in fact.

1. The journey made so far

While almost all our general chapters have taken up the theme of the vocation of the Salesian Brother, let us begin with the significant document of GC21 (1978), “The Salesian Brother: A lay religious vocation at the service of the Salesian mission.” Fr Viganò’s famous letter, “The lay dimension of the Salesian community” (AGC 298, 1980) was an authoritative comment on this document of GC21. In 1984 GC22 gave us the definitive text of the Constitutions, and in 1986 there followed *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*. In 1989 we have another fruit of the decisions of GC22: *The Salesian Brother: History, Identity, Vocation Ministry and Formation*². In 2001, Fr Vecchi wrote “The Beatification of Salesian Brother Artemide Zatti: A Startling Precedent” (AGC 376), and accompanying this was a letter of Frs Nicolussi and Domenech, “A renewed and extraordinary

¹ GC27 69.7, and also 28.

² Dicastero per la Formazione, *The Salesian Brother: History, Identity, Vocational Apostolate and Formation* (Rome: Editrice SDB, 1989).

commitment to the vocation of the Salesian Brother.” In 2003, Fr Cereda published “Care and Promotion of the Vocation of the Salesian Brother: A concrete commitment for the whole Sexennium” (AGC 382). GC26 presented a vision of our same consecrated vocation in its two forms, ministerial and lay, highlighting what is common along with the specificity and the reciprocity of the two forms. Finally, in 2013, the Rector Major with his council approved the revision of certain parts of the Ratio referring to the formation of the Salesian Brother³. From this journey of reflection on the Salesian Brother, certain themes can be seen to emerge: community, mission, consecrated identity.

1.1 Community

GC21 situated the Salesian Brother and the Salesian Priest squarely within the Salesian **community**: “it will not be so much the individuals who will perpetuate his [Don Bosco’s] ideals as his communities, ‘formed of priests and laymen,’ closely united to each other by deep brotherly ties.” For this reason, the chapter went on, “the clear precise dimension of each Salesian can only be studied and evaluated adequately in the context of a brotherly and apostolic community.” (GC21, 171) The chapter speaks, in fact, of the “Essential mutual relationship between the Salesian brother and the Salesian priest.” (GC21, 194-196)

This great intuition of GC21 was corroborated and deepened by subsequent developments in the ecclesiastical magisterium. Thus *Christifideles Laici* places the different states of life within “the Church that is Communion,” and notes that they “are linked among themselves in such a way that they are ordered to one another,” different yet complementary, each with its unmistakable character and yet related to one another and placed at each other’s service (CL 55). In the three documents on the states of life within the church – *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, *Christifi-*

³ Available at www.sdb.org.

deles Laici, and *Vita Consecrata* – we have an emergent “theology of sign.” What is specific to each state really belongs to all, but is embodied in that state so as to serve as a sign and a prophecy to the other states. Thus, for example, service is not the mark of the deacon in an exclusive way. The whole church is called to serve; the deacon is an icon of service, a reminder to all in the church of our common vocation. In like manner, the lay state bears witness to the sacredness of created realities, and the religious state is a sign of the eschatological character of the whole church, reminding us all of our vocation to be so united one day with God that there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage. (CL 55)

Thus when GC21 tells us the **lay dimension** is the specific characteristic of the Salesian Brother⁴, it is clear that this must be understood in relation to the community and to the Salesian priest. Fr Viganò understood this very well: in his letter soon after the chapter, he pointed out that the Salesian Brother is an embodiment of the lay dimension and “secular slant” that characterizes the congregation as a whole, and that the clarification of the vocation of the Brother is a test for the clarification of the lay element in our Society⁵. The Salesian Brother, we might say, is an icon of the lay dimension of the congregation. In the words of GC24: “To his consecrated brethren he recalls the values of creation and of secular realities,” inviting them to collaborate with the laity and reminding them that the apostolate goes beyond strictly priestly and catechetical activity; “to the laity he recalls the values of total dedication to God for the cause of the Kingdom. To all he offers a particular sensitivity to the world of work, attention to the local environment, and the demands of the professional approach associated with his educative and pas-

⁴ “The lay dimension is the concrete form in which the Brother lives and operates as a Salesian Religious.” (GC21, 178)

⁵ Egidio VIGANÒ, “The Lay Element in the Salesian Community,” AGC 298 (1980), section 5. See also section 4 where Viganò distinguishes three meanings of “laicità” and notes that the Salesian Brother is not “secular” in the sense in which laypeople within the church are, but that his vocation has nonetheless a real connection and a certain congruence of thought and activity with the first two levels of “laicità.”

toral activity.”⁶ To the religions of the world, we might add, he is a prophecy of the beauty and sacredness of created realities.

But the Salesian Brother is an icon also of **communion** and fraternity, as suggested by *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*. This document has occasioned surprise because of the way it focuses rather exclusively on the religious brother as a sign of communion and fraternity. Fraternity, however, cannot be a marginal point for us who believe that God is a mystery of communion and of love. For Pope Francis, the central question before the church today is communion. The consecrated life is *confessio trinitatis*, and in his letter introducing the Year of Consecrated Life the pope reminded us that consecrated life is not meant to be shut up within itself: its vocation is to expand communion in ever-widening circles, in an expansion that knows no limits.

So the Salesian Brother has a very special place within the Salesian community, the educative and pastoral community, the ecclesial community, and the human community: always and everywhere he is an icon of fraternity. As GC21 had said: “He [the Brother] lives in constant fidelity to his specific vocation and becomes, together with his confreres, a sign of that new and permanent brotherhood established by Christ” (GC21, 176).

1.2 Mission

A second point that emerges in the reflection of the congregation is the charismatic centrality of **mission**. GC22 (1984), in its elaboration of the definitive text of our Constitutions, chose to centre all the elements of Salesian life and work explicitly around mission. This may be seen not only in the contents of the articles but also in the structure: “Sent to the young in communities following Christ.” So it is in the light of mission that we

⁶ See GC24 154, and Pascual CHÁVEZ, “Il Salesiano Coadiutore,” San Benigno Canavese, 19 March 2005 (unpublished) (<http://www.Coadiutoresalesiano.net/index.php/2002-14-chavez>).

have to ask about the identity of the Salesian Brother and the Salesian priest.

A study of the Index of our Constitutions reveals that we have only two articles on the specific identity of the Brother and the Priest: C 45 and C 116 (and, interestingly, 6 articles on the priest that regard authority). Unfortunately, the Index does not mention an article of great importance, one that indicates to us, clearly and synthetically, the identity of the Salesian, whether Brother or Priest: C 98, *the formation experience*:

Enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel, lived according to Don Bosco's spirit, the Salesian commits himself to a formation process which will last all his life and will keep pace with his maturing in other ways. He learns by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation at the various moments of his life and accepts the ascetical demands it makes on him.

With the help of Mary, his Mother and Teacher, he gradually becomes a pastor and educator of the young in the lay or priestly state which he has embraced.

Pastor and educator of the young: this is our fundamental identity, the supreme genus, that which is common to every Salesian vocation. Only after this comes distinction: "in the lay or priestly state which he has embraced," and this identity-in-difference becomes concrete, in the initial stages of Salesian life, through a formation that is basically equivalent (C 106), and always through the effort to learn by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation (C 98), to discern the voice of the Spirit in the events of daily life (C 119). It is within the educative pastoral community that we manifest our common identity as educators and pastors, along with the specificity and reciprocity of the two forms of our vocation. Within this community, it is important today to ensure greater visibility to the Salesian Brother.

Mission is not, of course, simply work. Our mission as pastors and educators consists in revealing God. We are called to be epiphany, as was Jesus: signs and bearers of the love of God for the young, *vultus misericordiae*.

1.3 Consecrated identity

But the Salesian mission belongs to all the members of the Salesian Family. We Salesians share in it **as religious**. As Fr Cereda notes in his letter of 2003, there is need to talk also about the dimension of consecrated life. Especially in the light of the insistence on the sharing of our mission with the laity, the clarification and appropriation of our consecrated identity is of vital importance.

Uncertainties in the understanding of consecrated life have had serious consequences for the living out of our Salesian vocation in its two forms. On the one hand there is the temptation to reduce the vocation of the Salesian priest to its priestly dimension alone, and that too very often to a merely functional understanding of the priesthood, when not to a clericalist hankering for power, money and status. On the other hand there is the inability to understand and value the vocation of the Salesian Brother, with tendencies to either a clericalist compensation or else a secularist reduction⁷.

Vita Consecrata (1996) was a great clarification of the place of consecrated life within the church. But what does it mean to be a “living memorial” of Jesus (VC 22)? What difference do the vows make to the way we share in the Salesian mission? What, we might ask, is the meaning of Jesus’ celibacy? As always, nothing that Jesus does is exhausted on the plane of the functional. Jesus is always revealing to us the Father. He celebrated the value of marriage and yet chose to be celibate. He proclaimed in word and deed the good news that our supreme vocation is communion with God. The celibacy of Jesus is a powerful anticipation and revelation of the “life of the resurrection,” where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Conse-

⁷ Abraham M. ANTONY, “On the Sublime Vocation of the Religious Brother,” *Consecrated Life Today*, ed. Paul Vadakumpadan and Jose Varickasseril (Shillong, 2015) 107; and Andrea BOZZOLO, “Salesiano prete e salesiano coadiutore. Spunti per un’interpretazione teologica,” *Sapientiam dedit illi. Studi su don Bosco e sul carisma salesiano* (Rome, 2015) 318.

crated persons are called to be precisely living memorials of Jesus, eschatological signs, in their poverty, chastity and obedience. In an age that has discovered the beauty of body and sexuality, the created world and freedom, and that yet blights all by exaggeration and overkill and an absolutizing of what is fragile and relative, consecrated persons are spiritual therapy, sign, prophecy. And it is our life that is a sign. The ministry of the priest remains valid even if the priest is unworthy, but the consecrated person is a sign only through the limpidity of his life. There is no chastity in a religious who is not chaste⁸.

In a church that is not only Petrine but also Marian, and Marian before being Petrine, consecrated life takes its place at the Marian heart of the church. For the Petrine ministry is destined to pass, but the Marian is the ultimate vocation of the whole church⁹. Consecrated persons are a sign and a reminder to the whole church of its final vocation and destiny. And also here the Brother is a sign to his priest confreres in the community. His vocation is the Salesian life in pure form¹⁰, *in statu nascendi*¹¹, a permanent reminder to his priest confreres of their consecration.

2. The path ahead

Reflection on the figure of the Salesian Brother thus leads us to a new appreciation of the Salesian consecrated vocation in its two forms. In the present guidelines, however, as we have said, we would like to give renewed attention to the lay form of our

⁸ See BOZZOLO 335.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 773.

¹⁰ Philip RINALDI in ASC 4, cited by Viganò, "The Lay Element in the Salesian Community," AGC 298 (1980) section 5.

¹¹ "In statu nascendi" (in the state of being born, or just emerging; nascent state) refers to the state of certain elements at the moment of liberation in a chemical or electrolytic reaction, characterized by a high reactivity. The term is now used analogously in other fields to indicate the great potentiality of certain experiences/situations at their origin, with the capacity to influence future developments. See, for example, Francesco ALBERONI, who uses it of the period in which a group of persons, united by common hopes, come together to create a new force (e.g., a movement), seeing in these beginnings dynamics which are very similar to those that we find when two persons fall in love.

Initial formation as of 31 December 2015¹²

	Post-novitiate		Practical training		Specialization before Specific formation		Specific formation		Total initial formation				All Conferences	
	S	L	S	L	S	L	S	L	Totale	% L	Totale	% L		
Africa - Madagascar	265	19	123	10	31	4	146	4	565	37	602	6.15	1479	12.51
East Asia - Oceania	55	16	55	9	9	12	105	10	224	47	271	15.47	1408	14.48
South Asia	310	13	201	11	206	15	217	4	934	43	977	4.40	2682	5.59
Europe Centre North	52	4	46	7	2	1	81	8	181	20	201	9.95	2416	8.73
Mediterranean	36	6	40	5	24	3	62	7	162	21	183	11.48	3117	17.97
America - South Cone	53	17	42	1	3	4	69	7	167	29	196	14.80	1337	13.24
Interamerica	90	11	57	2	0	0	108	4	255	17	272	6.25	1817	10.89
UPS + RMG ¹³	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	4	0	4	0	204	9.75
Total	862	86	565	45	275	39	790	40	2492	214	2706	7.90	14460	11.92

¹² Initial formation here includes Salesians after first profession until diaconate (included) or first five years after final profession for Salesian Brothers.

¹³ Includes Eritrea.

vocation. The statistics reveal that the number of Brothers in initial formation is going down: only 7.90% as compared to 11.92% in the congregation as a whole, and even lower in regions with greater growth in vocations (5.06% as of 31 December 2015). This cannot be taken to mean that all is well with the large number of aspirants to the priesthood. The question of the Salesian religious identity is urgent for both forms of our vocation.

In the last few years, the congregation has exerted itself to take care of the vocation of the Salesian Brother, as for example through the revision of the Ratio concerning the initial formation of the Brother, and the setting up of centres for the specific formation of Brothers (CRESCO, Guatemala City; Sunyani, Ghana; Yaoundé, Cameroon; Shillong, India; Parañaque, Philippines; and Turin – though of these, Sunyani and Turin are not functioning any more, while Shillong is temporarily suspended). In the present letter we would like to propose some more strategies and lines of action at various levels of the congregation.

Strategies and lines of action

Study and reflection on the Salesian consecrated identity in its two forms	Guidelines in the AGC	Formation Sector
	Notes on the Salesian consecrated identity and the specific identity of the Salesian Priest and Salesian Brother	Formation Sector
	Clarification of criteria for discernment of the two forms of our vocation.	Formation Sector
	Plans for the animation of the provinces in the area of Salesian consecrated identity in its two forms	Provincial and Formation delegate of each province
Vocation animation	Taking advantage of two iconic figures of the Salesian Brother and the Salesian Priest (Bl. Stefan Sandor and Fr Titus Zeman, to be proclaimed blessed in 2017) to promote the Salesian vocation in its two forms	Provincial Formation Delegate with Provincial Youth Ministry Delegate
Initial formation	Regional courses for those in charge of prenovices in 2017	Regional Formation Coordinators with Formation Sector

Initial formation of Salesian Brothers	Personalized plan of formation in line with the 2013 revision of the Ratio on the Salesian Brother Presence and adequate preparation of Brothers within formation teams	Provincial in dialogue with the Brother concerned Provincial
Specific formation of Salesian Brothers	Strengthening the existing centres (CRESCO, Yaoundé, Parañaque) and studying ways of making other centres available (Europe; South Asia; English speaking Africa-Madagascar) Study of curriculum and methodology for the specific formation of Brothers by means of a worldwide Consultation	Formation Sector with Regional Councillors and provincials concerned Formation Sector
Salesian studies	Online course to facilitate the formation of formators in Salesian studies	Formation Sector

3. Conclusion

In a church that is communion, the vocation of the Brother can be understood only in relation to the Salesian Priest, the community, the mission, and the consecrated life. As Salesian consecrated persons we are signs and bearers of God's love to the young, living memorials of Jesus. In his letter at the beginning of the year of consecrated life, Pope Francis insisted precisely on this:

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.' This is the priority that is needed right now: 'to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth....'¹⁴

And again:

What in particular do I expect from this Year of grace for

¹⁴ FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 21 November 2014, II.2.

consecrated life? That what I once said might always be true: 'Wherever there are religious, there is joy.'¹⁵

Through the intercession of Bl. Artemide Zatti, Bl. Stefan Sandor and Ven. Simaan Srugi, let us pray for a Salesian consecrated life that is transparent, visible and above all joyful. Joy is contagious, and happy Salesians are the best publicity for our vocation. Let us not forget the *via pulchritudinis*! (EG 167)

¹⁵ FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* II.1.