

COUNSELS AND ADVICE FOR PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF DON BOSCO IN ALL THE HOUSES

An Analysis of Don Albera's Circular Letter

1. Presentation
 - 1.1. Author – Don Albera
 - 1.2. When – April 23, 1917
 - 1.3. To whom – Provincials and Rectors
 - 1.4. Why – World War I is raging. According to Don Albera it might be an instrument by which God wishes to purify us from our personal imperfections and to spur us to do something about the evil that is in the world. Specifically, this might mark an effort to better our houses.
2. Analysis
 - 2.1. Structure of the text
 - 2.1.1. Index (main headings)
 - 2.1.2. Place and date (Turin, April 23, 1917)
 - 2.1.3. Opening address: Dearest Provincials and Rectors (Carissimi Ispettori e Direttori)
 - 2.1.4. Purpose: I would like therefore that the terrible war which afflicts us at present may mark a notable betterment of our houses; and to this end I turn to you, my dearest sons, with this circular which is especially addressed to the Provincials and Rectors. (Vorrei perciò che la tremenda guerra che ci affligge presentemente, avesse a segnare un notevole miglioramento nelle nostre case; e a tal fine ricorro a voi, carissimi figliuoli, con questa circolare specialmente riservata agli Ispettori e Direttori.)
 - 2.1.5. Body
 - 2.1.5.1. Models and masters (Modelli e maestri)
 - 2.1.5.2. Spirit of piety (Spirito di pietà)
 - 2.1.5.3. Constitutions (Costituzioni)
 - 2.1.5.4. Poverty (Povertà)
 - 2.1.5.5. Chastity (Castità)
 - 2.1.5.6. Obedience (Ubbidienza)
 - 2.1.5.7. Correction (Correzione)
 - 2.1.5.8. Fatherliness (Paternità)
 - 2.1.5.9. Humility (Umiltà)
 - 2.1.5.10. Zeal (Zelo)
 - 2.1.6. Closing address: Affectionately yours in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Fr. Paul Albera (il vostro aff.mo in Corde Jesu), Sac. Paolo Albera)
 - 2.2. Sources
 - 2.2.1. Sacred Scriptures
 - 2.2.1.1. p. 235. "...showing yourself as a model of good deeds in every respect (in omnibus teipsum praebe exemplum bonorum operum)" (Titus 2:7).
 - 2.2.2. Salesian Tradition and Literature
 - 2.2.2.1. Although he does not quote the circulars of Don Bosco and Don Rua, Don Albera does tell the Provincials and Rectors to read them once more (p. 236).
 - 2.2.2.2. The superior should see to it that priests celebrate mass "worthily, attentively and devoutly (digne, attente et devote)" (p.238).
 - 2.2.2.3. Don Albera suggests that Provincials and Rectors read the Ricordi Confidenziali of Don Bosco (p. 245).
 - 2.2.3. Fathers of the Church
 - 2.2.3.1. St. Augustine: "Stet regula, et quod pravum est, ad regulam corrigatur."
 - 2.3. Style
 - 2.3.1. In this circular letter, I find Don Albera writing as a teacher. Or better yet, Don Albera is writing as a father reminding his children about their responsibilities or about certain developments in the Congregation.
 - 2.3.1.1. "And to this end I turn to you, **my dearest sons**, with this circular which is especially addressed to the Provincials and Rectors (a tal fine ricorro a voi, carissimi figliuoli, con questa circolare specialmente riservata agli Ispettori e Direttori)." (p. 235).

2.3.1.2. "Allow me again to share with you something which wrenches my heart (permettetemi ancora che accenni una cosa che mi stringe il cuore)." (p. 241).

3. Synthesis and Assessment of Principal Contents

3.1. Models and Teachers

3.1.1. Models

3.1.1.1. In itself the office of superior demands being a good example to one's subordinates. But Don Albera brings out a practical reason for being a good example, the issue of credibility. Indeed how can a superior expect respect and obedience from his confreres if he is not a good example?

3.1.2. Teachers

3.1.2.1. Don Albera seems to have the young confreres in mind when he wrote this part of his letter. In the novitiate, they learn the theory. In the houses, they need to be helped to learn the ropes of real religious life. The Rector as father should take this seriously. Don Albera singles out a duty that might have been neglected or might not have been carried out well (because it is unprepared), the monthly conferences.

3.2. Spirit of piety

3.2.1. Working much is characteristic of the Salesian. For both superior and confreres, the danger of a diminished or even extinguished spirit of piety is all too real. Hence, there is a need to pay attention to it.

3.2.2. Don Bosco seemed to be particularly concerned about how the manner of carrying out sacred functions in church. Don Albera continues this particular concern by singling out the following: how priests celebrate mass (digne, attente et devote), how the sacred ceremonies are performed, and the teaching of sacred songs.

3.3. Constitutions

3.3.1. Don Albera must have become aware of abuses starting to creep in. Or based on his experience as superior, he must have become aware of how abuses begin. And so he hits the nail on the head by pointing out that one of the reasons for this is because Superiors let things go. They want to avoid confronting confreres in order to avoid annoyance and vexation (per non crearsi noie e fastidi, p. 239).

3.4. Poverty

3.4.1. The section on poverty is the longest section in the circular letter perhaps because it is the vow against which a lot of abuses happen.

3.4.2. Among the examples of which Don Albera writes, there are two which seem to be more about the family spirit than the vow of poverty.

3.4.2.1. Confreres who seek hospitality are asked to pay.

3.4.2.2. Sick confreres who need a change in climate find it difficult to find a house willing to accept him.

3.5. Chastity

3.5.1. Don Albera points to the practice of the preventive system (which includes vigilance) as a means of maintaining morality.

3.5.2. The cinema was already a reality at the time of Don Albera. But he judges the films of his time as inappropriate for schools. Consequently, he seems to be against the use of film and thus advises the use of 'proiezioni fisse'. Is he referring to slides? Don Albera's time is certainly different from our time and thus, from my point of view, his treatment of purity and sexuality look prudish, if not funny.

3.5.3. Don Bosco referred to purity as a delicate virtue. Consistent with this concept, Don Albera was right in expressing caution about the following:

3.5.3.1. Investigation of cases regarding morality should be reserved to the Rectors.

3.5.3.2. Confessors should be careful about questions they pose to their penitents as well as about how they respond to doubts expressed by them.

3.5.3.3. Rectors who see evil everywhere so much so that when they feel compelled to talk against the perceived evil, they tend to go to particulars which may prove harmful to youngsters who are still innocent about these things.

3.6. Obedience

3.6.1. Provincials and Rectors should not only sacrifice their own will but their judgment as well. They should not persuade themselves that their opinion would lead to the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

3.6.2. Our practice of obedience is based on the fact that superiors are supposed to act as fathers. Hence, when they give an order the tone should be one of request. Moreover,

they should express appreciation for the work done either because it was done well or it was done with good will.

- 3.7. Correction
 - 3.7.1. Don Albera was right when he observes that Rectors do not correct because they do not have the courage to do so. They leave the giving of correction to higher Superiors. But this is not a good practice because to some extent their figure of paternity is diminished.
 - 3.7.2. He gives some pointers for an effective giving of corrections. One of the suggestions is to give the correction in the office of the Rector. This was what Don Bosco used to do.
- 3.8. Paternity
 - 3.8.1. The Superior when he corrects should always remember that he is a father. For this reason, he should never act out of passion but should show love and tenderness toward the confrere but disgust for the fault committed.
 - 3.8.2. This topic seems to be a repetition of the previous topic on correction.
- 3.9. Humility
 - 3.9.1. The Superior should not regard the good that is done in his institution as the result of his work but of his confreres. He should not become jealous of the good that others do in his house. He should give credit to where credit is due.
 - 3.9.2. He should seek counsel, especially that of his council.
- 3.10. Zeal
 - 3.10.1. This section contains additional instructions and reminders that do not belong to any of the previous sections. For example: (1) Encouraging the students to join the association of the past pupils; (2) Working for vocations; and (3) Increasing the number of Cooperators.
 - 3.10.2. Don Albera ends his circular letter by encouraging the Provincials and Rectors. He does this by telling them that he knows that they are carrying a heavy burden and that they should remember how Don Bosco pointed the cross to Mama Margaret when she was about to give up. Don Bosco used to say that a piece of paradise will set everything aright. Don Albera ends his letter by reminding them of Don Bosco waiting for them in heaven.
4. Conclusion
 - 4.1. Don Albera's circular letter is not a theological treatise. He's very practical in what he writes. Probably because he draws from his rich experience as a Superior. We see this practicality, for example, when he ends a section by giving concrete suggestions. For instance, regarding the Constitutions, he tells the Rector to see to it that each confrere has a copy of the Constitutions (p. 239).
 - 4.2. The content of his letter is the fruit not so much of extensive reading but of extensive experience of working with the young and of being Superior.
 - 4.3. This circular letter of Don Albera can be a source for research on the Salesian Spirit. He is an authoritative source because he was a Salesian of the first hour.