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Refounding versus renewal

Out of Chaos is certainly a title calculated to capture the attention and interest of religious superiors and those interested in the future of religious life in the Church. To offer strategies for bringing new creativity out of the experience of declining numbers of vocations and ageing communities must seem like the long awaited light at the end of the tunnel. One statistic which marks the seriousness of the position is that in the last twenty-five years the numbers in the largest single men's religious order have declined by a third. Fr Gerry Arbuckle's thesis, developed in his book with the above title, suggests that religious life has to face up to the chaos and find and encourage 'refounding persons' or 'intrapreneurs' if it is to survive. This thesis has produced a considerable debate among religious and I would like to offer the insights of my own study of *The Foundation and Development of the Salesians in England* as a historical case study in refounding or renewal as a contribution to the discussion.

To a student of the history of religious life, one feature of Fr Arbuckle's discussion is very striking, namely the emphasis which he places on a multidisciplinary approach to the problems of religious life. He combines insights from cultural anthropology, management studies with Biblical insights, especially the Old Testament idea of Prophecy in the development of his thesis. I admit to being surprised that there is not more reference to the New Testament and to my own interest, the history of

The two books referred to are: G.A. ARBUCKLE, *Out of Chaos* (London 1988). Raymond HOSTIE, *Vie et Morts des ordres religieux*. (Desclée de Brouwer, 1972).

Charles Booth's Life and Labour in London studied by means of huge survey of the capital, the levels of poverty and also of religious affiliation and practice at the turn of the century and was published in 17 volumes (1902-3). The original reports are in a special Booth Collection at the London School of Economics.

My own Thesis on which these remarks are based is called *The Foundation and Development of the Salesians in England— the Dynamics of Growth*, and was presented at the University of Durham in 1988.

religious life itself. Another study of the *Life and Death of Religious Orders* from a 'socio-psychological point of view' by Raymond Hostie develops a parallel thesis but from a wide study of the history of religious orders. Hostie suggests that there is a natural life span for a religious order but that for it to survive and develop after that it must go through a process of renewal. The key element which he identifies in this process is what he calls, 'the creative ferment' which occurs when the religious concerned rediscover the essential Charism of their order and at the same time see its contemporary urgency and relevance which compel them to revive it.

Fr Arbuckle's analysis seems at first sight to follow a similar path but he puts his emphasis very heavily on the need for religious to correspond to current pastoral needs and sits very lightly with the equally important and fundamentally historical task of clarifying the original charism of the founder situated as it is in a specific historical and geographical context and being creatively faithful to it in a new context.

The Salesians in England A case study

The Salesians were founded by St. John Bosco in Turin working out of his practical experience among the young apprentices' and poor and abandoned youngsters on the streets of Piedmont's rapidly expanding capital. Though he began his work in 1841 it was only in 1874 that he received final approval from Rome for the *Constitutions of the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales*. He defined the aim of the Society in the earliest extant form of the constitutions of 1858, thus:

The first exercise of Charity (of the Society's members) will be to gather together poor and abandoned youngsters to instruct them in the holy Catholic religion particularly at weekends and holidays, as is now being done in this city of Turin at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales...¹

Don Bosco's own life and desperate concern to be a sign and bearer of God's love for poor and abandoned youngsters starting in their own surroundings became the founding inspiration of the Society.

DISCOURAGING BEGINNINGS

The first Salesians were sent to England in November 1887, just before

¹ G. Bosco, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales (1858-1875). Testi critici a cura di F. Motto* (Roma, 1982), p. 74 (my translation).

Don Bosco's death, to take over the abandoned Sacred Heart Catholic Mission Chapel, a corrugated iron shed in a back street near Clapham Junction. Of the first three pioneers, Fr Edward McKiernan, the first superior died of T.B. in little over a year, another, an Italian brother, returned to Italy within the year and the third, Fr Charles Macey (1864-1928), only ordained in time to go to England in November 1887, with less than a year's parish experience, was left without enough funds even to pay for Fr McKiernan's funeral, with a leaking chapel, apt to be demolished by the next high wind, according to the Surveyor of public works, and an irate Franco-Irish Papal countess for a patron. Astonishingly in this situation of rather desolate chaos round Fr Macey there arose a remarkable flourishing of vocations. This was due no doubt to the interest shown in youngsters by the new community and inspiration of Fr McKiernan's heroic death. But it also arose from the deep faith and affection of Battersea's Irish and with the sympathy and help of Fr Francis (later Cardinal) Bourne and some of the other local clergy, though largely financed from Turin.

EARLY FLOURISHING

Between 1887 and 1898 the number of Salesians grew from 3 to 40, five of whom were stationed in Cape Town, the vast majority of whom were English and Irish boys accepted free of charge for education to the priesthood. This was an extraordinary success when one considers that Battersea in the 1890's was considered something of a hellhole with a nearby street well known for its gambling dens and 'common boarding houses', where even the police were unable to enter. The personal charisma of Fr Macey must surely qualify him as a 'refounding person'.

DISTURBING DEVELOPMENTS

However by the time the first canonical Visitation of the Province took place in 1908, the Salesians found themselves facing the problems consequent on such a 'refounding person' producing a very personal, not to say ideosyncratic regime. Fr Paul Virion, the French Provincial and Visitor commented thus:

The Provincial looks after the different houses with diligence (excepting Cape Town) and is much loved by all his dependents, the greater part of whom were his pupils. It appears, however, that he shows a certain partiality and weakness for some of them. The Irish, on the other hand,

do not show much confidence and complain that he does not like them and the same for the Coadjutors (lay brothers)...²

As to the government of the Province,

The Provincial Chapter (a Council of senior members) do not have regular meetings, only getting together for particular topics, there is no freedom of discussion. The Provincial is absolute in his opinions and does not allow contradiction.³

Refounded in a different style

Under Fr Macey the Salesians in England had developed a style quite different to that on the continent. He was born in Salisbury in 1864, and became a Catholic in 1870. His own initial experience of religious life had been at Downside shortly after his conversion, when it was heavily influenced by the gothic revival and it seems that he tended to adopt something of their style, rather than that of Don Bosco and the Oratory. In fact, during Fr Macey's first six years in the Society before he came to England he had only lived there very briefly, having spent two years of his training in Marseilles and the rest at the studentate outside Turin. As Fr Virion said,

Thus the *Ispettore* is called Fr Provincial... The clerics (students for the priesthood) are called Brothers (Fratres) and change their name for a religious name. They say that this is how it is done in England, while in reality it seems that this is not done in the Seminaries, nor even do the other religious Congregations e.g. Redemptorists, Jesuits. The coadjutors wear clerical dress.⁴

These changes of custom may seem insignificant details but they indicated a real modification of the style of life and probably of founding charism of Don Bosco which valued the informality of contact between the Salesians and street kids which formal titles and the adoption of obscure, antique names might have discouraged. Furthermore in Don Bosco's view the Coadjutors or Brothers were professional craftsmen and professed laymen, whose role in the Society was to infiltrate the world where youngsters worked and Christianise it. Instead, Fr Macey saw them much

² Archivio Salesiano Centrale (Via della Pisana, 1111, Roma; S31 (24)12 Inghilterra Don Paulo Virion, Visitatore p. lb.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

more as the equivalent of religious domestic servants, which the Italian coadjutors who came to England stongly resented.

Perhaps at a deeper level Fr Macey's failure to found the most characteristic Salesian work of charity, an Oratory or Boy's Club, maiketu his farthest departure from Don Bosco's vision. That even in darkest Battersea this was not impossible is proved by the fact that C. Booth's survey *Life and Labour in London* recorded a most favourable impression of just such a Catholic Boys' club which had been founded during the same period in the East Battersea parish by Charlotte Despard, that extraordinarily courageous convert to Catholicism, Women's Suffrage and the Irish Independence Movement. This failure meant that the Salesian's main work in England in this period, as was also noted by Booth's interviewer, became restricted to the isolated, inward looking boarding school at Battersea which certainly provided secondary education for less well off Catholic boys and nurtured ecclesiastical vocations in many of them, but which was almost totally insulated from the poor and abandoned youngsters that Don Bosco wanted to bring God's Love to.

A crisis of growth

By 1907 the numbers of Salesians in the Province had reached its peak of growth and fell from 90 members in 1907 to 76 in 1908. In fact the 1907 figure was not to be surpassed till 1921, and the intervening period might be characterised as one of stagnation. The refounding activity of Fr Macey appears to have run its course. The school at Battersea, with the vast concentration of young Salesians living and working in it (never less than 40) quickly appears to have taken up the prevailing middle class model of education and the clerical-gentleman model of Priesthood, both far removed from Don Bosco's outlook.

A new departure

Although Fr Macey was succeeded as Provincial in 1909 by Fr Francis Scalonì (1865-1926) he retained effective control till 1919 as he remained Rector of the house at Battersea, with by far the largest community with 44 confreres. This position was further emphasised since the new Provincial still had to look after the Belgian Province, and in fact spent the war years on the German side of the lines unable to communicate with England.

However while the decade from 1908-1918 marked the doldrums as to the number of vocations, still in the post-war period there was a remarkable and sustained period of growth which took the numbers of Salesians from 83 in 1918 to 180 in 1928.⁵

This period marked a second stage of growth for the Province one based on a very different style of leadership and inspiration. After the war Fr Scaloni was relieved of his duties in Belgium and reappointed Provincial of the English Province. His work in Belgium was remarkable because not only had he put the Salesians in the forefront of the development of technical education but also in his pamphlet on *Christian Socialism* he had brought the Salesian name and the political education of young workers to the notice of the Belgian Parliament. He was a man of wide vision and genuine culture but his impact in England was somewhat blunted by his lack of facility with the language. However, his period in office saw the Salesian work spread outside London and the South East to Thornleigh College, Bolton and to two agricultural colleges in Ireland at Limerick and Warrenstown in Meath. Perhaps more significantly it saw the development of a Studentate at Cowley near Oxford.

His chief collaborator in this transformation of the Province was Fr Angelo Franco (1885-1966) who in his turn was helped by a remarkable communicator and enthusiast Fr Joseph Ciantar who scoured England and Ireland looking for candidates for the Society and finance to educate them. Together, they master-minded and put into practice a new systematic programme of study and spiritual preparation for the young Salesians in the Province.

Franco's contribution

Fr Franco brought to the Province an originality of mind and fine education which he combined with the living experience of having been a private secretary to Don Bosco's second successor Fr Paul Albera, a first hand witness to the life and work of the founder whom Don Bosco had repeatedly asked for on his death bed. In combination with the immensely practical and immediately appealing Fr Ciantar, Fr Franco became a powerful force for change in the Province. Three concerns dominated his outlook, his belief in the dynamic power of education, his love for England and his concern for the foreign Missions. As a result of their work, they not

⁵ Elenco Salesiano (Torino, 1908-1928).

only inspired a generation of young Salesians with a love for Don Bosco's educational outlook but prepared a steady stream of young idealists ready to go out to work for poor youngsters in the Mission fields of North East India, China and South America.

Fr Franco's initial experience was as Rector of the novices at Burwash, known by the English confreres as the 'tomb' of the Province. He wrote of his experience to Fr Albera:

They (the novices) come here with their heads full of prejudice against the life of the Novitiate and against the Italians. In these first weeks we have shown them (patience?) and watched over them with much indulgence and compassion in order to gain their confidence. And now my dear Fr Albera permit me to make a suggestion, why not consider preparing the better of our clerics abroad... to Rome so that they can complete their philosophical studies so that besides acquiring a serious ecclesiastical culture, they may also gain a practical knowledge of the language, of Salesian life, of the superiors... and then... they could communicate to their countrymen that Salesian Spirit which certainly given the fervour of their first years of religious life they could not fail to learn in Italy.⁶

STUDENTATE AT OXFORD

His other plan was to open a new house of studies at Oxford in a property recently vacated by the Franciscan Capuchins where the Salesians would be in a centre of learning near the other religious orders who had opened training houses there, the Jesuits, Benedictines, Dominicans and Franciscans, but also close to the university which he described as 'the centre of learned Anglicanism'. From this house he sent the first group of Salesians to take their degrees, thus preparing to have them make a serious impact on the world of education. His breadth of culture, his personal warmth and delightful simplicity attracted students and encouraged them to have a serious regard for their own intellectual preparation as well as a deep regard for the Salesians Spirit.

LATER FOUNDATIONS

In later years he followed up his foundation at Cowley by founding a Junior Seminary at Shrigley Park in Cheshire (1929) and a Theology House at Blaisdon Hall near Gloucester (1934). He transformed the process of

⁶ ASC (as above) S.389 Burwash. Franco-Albera (3.6.1920).

Salesian Formation from being a haphazard affair to becoming a real programme of serious preparation. Characteristically, moved as he was by the concerns of Don Bosco, at Cowley he encouraged the students to begin a Boy's Club which was open to all the local youngsters, not just the Catholics.

Fr Franco represents that style of 'renewal' rather than 'refounding' which is deeply in touch with the charism of the Founder and yet is able to adapt it both faithfully and creatively to the prevailing pastoral needs.

Conclusion

The revitalisation of religious life is essential in the Church in every age and particularly our own when the church seeks to present itself as the 'Light to the Nations'. In the figures of Fr Macey and Fr Scaloni who must both qualify as 'refounding persons' one can see illustrated the dangers of Fr Arbuckle's approach to development. With Fr Macey's imperfect grasp of, and attachment to, the original charism of Don Bosco and his tendency to a non-consultative style of government, he was shaped far more by his own idiosyncrasies and the prevailing ideology of his times than by the original charism maintained in the community and guaranteed by the Church's approval. In contrast, Fr Franco's collaborative style of government and personal grasp of and attachment to the Spirit of the Founder promoted a much more sustained path of growth and personal development for the Salesians involved and for the youngsters whom they served. The problem with 'refounders' as such, is that they do just that. 'Renewal', in contrast is at heart more Catholic in that it insists on the importance of creative continuity. It recognises the Holy Spirit as being at work in the Church in every age in authentic religious communities discerned by the church as such. Being in communion with that continuity and yet able to adapt is the hallmark of what Vatican II called *The Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*.