

IV. DELIBERATIONS OF THE LAST GENERAL CHAPTERS DON BOSCO PRESIDED OVER (1883-1886)

Amongst the documents drawn up by the third (1883) and fourth (1886) General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation – which the founder also took part in – of particular merit is the new Regulations for the festive oratories and deliberations regarding Orientations for the working boys in Salesian houses. The two documents were published, as already recorded, in 1887.

The contents of the Regulations, formulated in the ten short articles it comprises, offer many and marked differences compared with the almost 270 articles of the broader and systematic Regulations of the Oratory of St Frances de Sales for non-residents, found in the earlier pages. It is enough to point to one: of the thirteen roles or responsibilities—with their respective duties—proposed in the 1877 Regulations, the new version in 1887 only has two: the Director of the House and another priest, responsible for the oratory.

Such simplification of the organisation however does not mean that the importance of oratory activity has diminished in Don Bosco's thinking and experience. In fact the 1883 General Chapter gave this rule at the same time: in all places where there is a Salesian house there will be a festive oratory to be considered as "the most important work"; the Salesians, priests and lay, are called to cooperate in its smooth running, regarding it as the "single prospect for salvation" for many boys.

In the third General Chapter in 1883 the agenda for the first time contained a theme regarding the "worker's side of Salesian houses", then studied further in the fourth (1886) ⁶⁷.

In the manuscripts preserved in the Salesian Central Archives we find no handwritten interventions by Don Bosco, president of the Assembly. The draft of the last two stages in drawing up the document shows traces of some of the

⁶⁷ *Deliberazioni del terzo e quarto Capitolo generale della Pia Società salesiana tenuti in Valsalice nel settembre 1883-86. San Benigno Canavese, Tipografia Salesiana 1887, pp. 18-22.*

more outstanding chapter members: Luigi Nai, Michele Rua, Giovanni Marengo, Giulio Barberis, amongst others.

In this regard, Eugene Ceria writes: “Don Bosco in 1886, a little more than a year before his death, called together and presided at the fourth General Chapter in which they aired improvements to be introduced amongst the working boys. A range of norms resulted, few but fundamental ones drawn up under Don Bosco’s gaze and communicated to the houses by him. They are almost a brief charter of Salesian vocational centres for every time and place.”⁶⁸

The “important norms” of 1887 were a relevant step in transforming the early trade workshops at Valdocco into schools of arts and trades⁶⁹.

The variations between the critical text of the final document of the fourth General Chapter and the one printed in 1887 are few, and in general more of a stylistic or formal nature. Only in a couple of cases is it considered appropriate to signal the modifications introduced by a footnote.

182. Regulations for the festive oratories

Critical ed. in *Deliberazioni del terzo e quarto Capitolo generale della Pia Società salesiana tenuti in Valsalice nel settembre 1883-86*. San Benigno Canavese, Tipografia Salesiana 1887, pp. 22-24.

Article 3 of Chapter 1 of our Constitutions says that the first exercise of charity of the Pious Society of Saint Francis de Sales is to gather poor and abandoned boys to instruct them in the holy Catholic religion, especially on Sundays.

To attend more effectively and widely to this noble intention it helps very much in the cities and towns where there is a Salesian house, to also set up a

⁶⁸ E. CERIA, *Annali della Società salesiana. Dalle origini...*, p. 653.

⁶⁹ Cf. Sante REDI DI POL, *L’istruzione professionale popolare a Torino nella prima industrializzazione, in Scuole, professioni e studenti a Torino...* Torino, Centro Studi sul Giornalismo Piemontese 1984, p. 81; cit. by José Manuel PRELLEZO, *La “parte operaia” nelle case salesiane. Documenti e testimonianze sulla formazione professionale (1883-1886)*, in RSS 16 (1997) 370.

recreation ground or festive Oratory for non-resident youngsters who most need religious instruction and are exposed to the risk of depravity.

For which the third General Chapter deliberates as follows:

1. Every Director should take care to set up a festive Oratory near the house or Institute, if it does not already exist, and develop it if it has already been founded. He should consider this work to be one of the most important entrusted to him, and should recommend the place to the charity of benevolent and well-to-do people to have the necessary funds. He should speak often of it in conferences, encouraging the confreres to be involved and instructing them about it, and never forget that the festive Oratory was once the cradle of our humble Congregation.

2. As a lasting memory of this and as an example and help for other houses the festive Oratories of St Francis de Sales and St Aloysius Gonzaga in Turin, and the one attached to the house at San Benigno Canavese are to be especially promoted and supported, and as far as possible clerics and other Salesians are to be employed in them so they can be made more capable of exercising an important ministry of charity on behalf of youth at risk.

3. In distribution of personnel for each house the Provincial, in agreement with the Director of the House should have in mind each year to establish a priest put especially in charge of the festive Oratory, and the Director should take loving care to see that he has the material and personnel help necessary for its smooth running.

4. All Salesians ecclesiastical or lay should consider themselves fortunate to lend a hand to the work, convinced that this is an apostolate of the highest importance, since at present the festive Oratory is for many young people, especially in the cities and suburbs, their only prospect of salvation.

5. For the regular setting up and development of the Oratory everyone should try to keep good and harmonious relations with the local ecclesiastical authority.

6. Where there are colleges and hospices, communications between boarders and non-residents are to be prevented. To obviate any danger and

disturbance, inasmuch as it is possible, design a place next door with an appropriate courtyard, separate chapel and whatever is needed for games, classrooms and bad weather.

7. Especially encouraged are games and amusements of various kinds in accordance with age and the usage in the area, this being one of the most effective means of attracting boys to the Oratory.

8. To foster frequent attendance and good behaviour in the festive oratories it also helps much to have prizes to distribute at fixed times, for example books, devotional items, clothing; also raffles, outings, simple small theatre, music classes, celebrations etc.

9. The smooth running of the festive Oratory depends above all on having a true spirit of sacrifice, great patience, charity and kindness to all, so the pupils will always have and keep a dear memory, and come even when they are adults. Also to be promoted amongst them are the Sodalities of St Aloysius, Altar Boys, etc.

10. The General Chapter approves the regulations for the festive oratories printed separately.

183. Orientation to be given to the work section of Salesian houses

Critical ed. in RSS 16 (1997) 388-391⁷⁰.

Amongst the principal works of charity that our Pious Society carries out is that of taking in, as far as possible, boys that are so abandoned that any care seems useless for instructing them in the truths of the Catholic Faith, and also setting them on the path to some art or trade. Therefore in houses where the number of working boys is considerable one member could be put in charge of taking particular care of them. He can be called the professional councillor.

⁷⁰ *Indirizzo da darsi alla parte operaia nelle case salesiane, e mezzi onde svilupparne e coltivarne le vocazioni [1887]*, in J.M. PRELLEZO, *La "parte operaia" nelle case salesiane...*, pp. 353-391; ID., *Las escuelas profesionales salesianas. Momentos de su historia*. Madrid, Editorial CCS 2012; cf. *Dei giovani artigiani, in Deliberazioni del terzo e quarto Capitolo generale...*, pp. 18-22.

The aim that the Pious Salesian Society proposes in accepting and educating working boys is to bring them up in such a way that when they leave our houses, and once completed their practical training period, they have a trade with which they can honestly earn their bread in life. They will be well instructed in religion and have the scientific knowledge appropriate to their state.

It follows that there must be a threefold orientation given to their religious and moral, intellectual and professional education.

Religious and moral orientation

A good religious and moral education is gained by putting the following norms into practice:

1. By taking great care to see that the regulations of the houses are faithfully practised.
2. The pupils are often reminded to think of God and their duty, and are convinced that good behaviour and the practice of religion is proper and necessary to every kind of person.
3. Care is taken that they know they are loved and respected by the superiors, and this is obtained by treating them with the spirit of true charity. Only this can make them good.
4. To revive the study of the catechism, establish an appropriate exam (twice a year?) and special prizes to be given out with a certain solemnity to those who do best.
5. They should also be taught Gregorian chant so that when they leave they can take part in religious functions in the parishes and confraternities.
6. Other than the existing Sodalities the Blessed Sacrament Sodality can be introduced to encourage frequent communion.
7. Where possible the younger ones should be separated from the older ones, especially in the dormitory and recreation.

8. Avoid the inconvenience of having students amongst the working boys who have been reprimanded for their behaviour. If the Director believes he should make an exception for special reasons he should send them to other houses.

9. Every two months the Director should hold a conference for the assistants and workshop heads to hear the observations they have, and to give them guidelines and appropriate instruction for the good running of the workshops, and when needed also invite outside instructors if there are some.

10. In view of the great need we have for many trade teachers so we can always open new houses and reach out to a greater number of boys to give them the benefit of education, each confrere should try by his good example and charity to inspire in some pupils the desire to join our Pious Society, and when someone is accepted as a novice he be sent, even at some sacrifice, to the novitiate.

11. It is important to place the pupil who has finished his practical training with good and Christian employers and that he be given a letter to be given to his parish priest.

12. It would be appropriate⁷¹ to enrol them amongst the Salesian Cooperators and recommend them to some Catholic Workers Society.

Intellectual orientation

So that the working pupils may follow up their professional training with some literary, artistic and scientific knowledge they need, it is established that:

1. They have a hour of class every day: for those with greater need they can have class in the morning after community Mass until breakfast. Where the law requires more it is best to adapt to what is prescribed.

⁷¹ In the printed *Deliberations* it adds: "if their conduct is good enough" (*Deliberazioni del terzo e quarto Capitolo generale...*, p. 18).

2. A school programme will be drawn up to be implemented in all our houses with working boys also indicating the books to be read and explained in class.

3. The boys will be classified after they have sat a trial exam, and their instruction will be entrusted to practical teachers.

4. Once a week a superior will give a class on good manners.

5. No one can be admitted to special classes like drawing, French etc. if not sufficiently instructed in material from the elementary classes.

6. At the end of the school year there will be an exam to see the benefit each pupil has gained and the most worthy will receive a prize.

7. A certificate will be printed to give the young man when he has finished his practical training and wishes to leave the institute. This certificate will clearly note what he has learned in arts and trades, his religious instruction and his good behaviour.

Professional orientation

It is not enough for a working pupil to know his profession well. For him to practise it with profit he needs to have practice with different kinds of work and do them skilfully.

To obtain the first of these it will help:

1. To support the likely inclination of the boys in their choice of art or trade.

2. To provide able and upright trade teachers, also at some financial sacrifice, so that in our workshops they can do the various kinds of work to perfection.

3. The professional councillor and trade teacher will divide, or consider as divided, the gradual range of works involved in the art taken as a whole into many courses or grades. The pupil will move through these so that after his apprenticeship he will fully know his trade and how to carry it out.

4. It is not possible to determine the duration of the practical training period since not all the arts require equal time to learn, but as a general rule we could establish five years.

5. In every professional [vocational] house there should be an annual display of work done by our pupils when prizes are given out. Every three years there should be a general exhibition involving all of our trade schools.

To obtain ability and skill in work it will help:

1. To give the pupils a weekly mark in both work and conduct.
2. To distribute work according to contract establishing a percentage for the young man in accordance with a system prepared by the committee.
3. The house for the trade boys' novitiate should be well stocked with the necessary items to perfect them in their various professions and have the best Salesian trade teachers.