



ACTS OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL

OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY

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ACTS OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL

THE ITALIAN SOCIETY

At a meeting of the Superior Council held on the 15th day of January 1914, the following resolutions were adopted:

1. That the Council should continue to support the work of the Italian Society in the various countries where it is active.

2. That the Council should also support the work of the Italian Society in the various countries where it is active.

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome, January, 1973

My dear confrères and sons,

I write to you still under the spell of Don Rua's Beatification; it was unforgettable. In the floodlit grandeur of St. Peter's Basilica the Holy Father proposed to the whole Church the example and cult of the first humble successor of Don Bosco. An immense crowd of over 30,000 enthusiastic and joyous pilgrims from every part of the world (their bond of unity was the Salesian spirit and mission) witnessed again the Church's official approval of the spiritual fruitfulness of the Salesian charisma.

"Learn from Don Rua"

The Holy Father gave a beautiful homily. He referred to Don Rua as "all meekness and goodness, all duty and sacrifice" and spoke of his faithful and creative "continuance" of Don Bosco and all he stood for. He told us that Don Rua "turned the example of Don Bosco into a 'school' and his personal work into a world-wide institution; he made his life a history, his rule a spirit, his holiness a type, a model; he made the spring into a stream". He spoke of the "marvellous fruitfulness of the Salesian family" and quite disconcertingly defined it as "one of the greatest and most significant phenomena of the perennial vitality of the Church in the last century and in the present".

The Pope bade us learn from Don Rua. "He teaches the Salesians to remain Salesians, ever-faithful sons of their Founder." And he gave us what practically amounts to a rule of life when he described how "all the sons of this flourishing young Salesian family, under the friendly and fatherly gaze of their new Beatus, quicken their step along the steep, straight path of the well-tested tradition of Don Bosco".

While listening to the homily I meditated on the spiritual heritage we have received from Don Bosco and the grave responsibility incumbent on each of us not to hamper its energy, its vitality, its spiritual fruitfulness so evidenced in the invaluable fruits of sanctity it has produced. At the Offertory, conscious of my unworthiness to be called to be the "father and centre of unity" (1), I offered God the anxieties and hopes of our family. I promised in your name not to fall short of our Special General Chapter's top-priority resolution of "renewed fidelity". I am well aware that "together with the Superior Council, my main care is to promote in the members a constant and renewed fidelity to their Salesian vocation". (2) I am also sure I can count on your collaboration in accepting the directives that derive from this mandate given me. (3) Accordingly I mean to dwell on a subject that needs to engage all the goodwill you have, for it is absolutely vital (I use the word advisedly); it is a matter of life or death for our Congregation.

The function of the magisterium of the Congregation

Before proceeding with my subject it is necessary to recall a few fundamental principles. You are well aware that one of the main duties of any Religious superior (at all times, but especially

(1) *Constitutions*, art. 129.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Regulations*, art. 95.

these days) is what could be termed the “magisterium”. This means direction, guidance and inspiration; pointing out the right road, quickly correcting deviations, denouncing abuses, clarifying the correct attitudes to be taken, so that all know clearly at any given moment the line that ought to be followed. This is not paternalism; nor is it stifling the freedom of the individual. Rather it is defending the liberty of all those who have the right to be defended against the flood of « opinions » that make everything relative and uncertain. They have given their names to the Society and they have the right to know positively in what direction it is going. Such guidance is not the prerogative of any individual or pressure group or any leader of the moment: it is the fundamental reserve of the competent superiors; by virtue of their office, this mandate and responsibility is theirs.

Obviously this magisterium should not be limited to purely negative matters, merely correcting errors or deviations. Its main work should be positive, i.e., guiding, strengthening and vitalizing our Salesian vocation (the meaning of which has been enriched by the enlightened pronouncements of the recent Special General Chapter).

In no way may the magisterium be used arbitrarily: it must at all times be modelled on the Constitutions which “in stable form give direction to our profession and shed a radiance on our fidelity ». (4) Only thus can we adequately promote the genuine growth of the Congregation, its mission and its vitality.

On the other hand it is the duty of all confrères to accept the magisterium cordially, generously and actively. The strength of an organisation such as a Religious Congregation lies in its cohesion, its internal unity in regard to certain principles and activities which clarify the nature of its vocation or are connected directly or indirectly with it. Of course, on certain matters proposed by the Superior there could at times be divergence of opinion. This rarely has to do with a matter of principle. But

(4) *Constitutions*, art. 200.

when a direction is proposed it is not generally just thrown in for discussion or critical examination; it is meant to be put into practice.

Please do not misunderstand me. I have no wish to infringe on reasonable freedom of opinion nor to lessen the personal responsibility of anyone. I simply want to make this clear: there exists an exaggerated independence that leads some people to argue every point, to criticise, to use completely personal or arbitrary criteria, picking and choosing what they think should be accepted or rejected. All this leads to anarchy and disintegration, and could be the ruination of our Congregation. In the normal manner of procedure, all issues have been well discussed and personal contributions, suggestions and criticism already made; using all the methods of consultation and collegial deliberation provided for by the Constitutions. This process should not be repeated endlessly every time some instruction, direction or prescription is issued by the competent organisations.

Here is a case in point. For three years the Congregation was engrossed in the work of deep and critical analysis of its life and mission. After further long and laborious study by the Chapter members it formulated its criteria for renewal. These are crystallized in the new Holy Rule and clarified by the Acts of the Special General Chapter. This is now no time for further discussion of these dispositions, or (in some ways worse) ignoring them, or judging them already obsolete or too avant-garde, or even not in accordance with Don Bosco's thinking. This is the time (as I have said on various occasions already) to put them into practice, to work according to the guidelines given us.

The ACTS formulate our policy

I have mentioned these things to emphasise the magisterium of the Congregation. The Rector Major and the members of the Superior Council are very conscious of the pluralism in the Congregation in the areas indicated by the Constitutions; of the

decentralization which the Special General Chapter rightly introduced; of a certain autonomy (5) in the Provinces consequent on subsidiarity. They make every effort to respect these principles and not to overstep the boundaries of their mandate. At the same time they are aware that theirs is a grave obligation to govern the Congregation in order to promote unity, growth and fidelity to the Salesian vocation at world level; and to see that the members everywhere assume the responsibilities required of them by the Special General Chapter.

In the past our Congregation wielded a mighty force because it was so united. It managed to survive many grave crises because it clung closely to Don Bosco in his abiding presence. It embarked on grand enterprises with unquestionable results because it concentrated its effort. Our Society was not a number of tiny rivulets flowing in all directions and being absorbed by the parched earth: it was a mighty river. Wherever it went it left its mark: it sowed devotion to Mary, it spread an educative system, because it marched in line as an efficient army. Let us be convinced that our salvation lies in being united.

To get down to practicalities. The directions contained in the letters of the Rector Major and the Acts of the Special General Chapter should be considered as "government policy" with the purpose of attaining a common line of action. They are not a pious exhortation to be read and put aside. They should be thoroughly pondered, especially by Provincials and Rectors and their respective councils, and ways and means should be found to have them known, assimilated and applied. On our part we are making every effort to have them translated promptly so that they may be read and, of course, put into practice.

Those confrères or communities who for some reason or other are not acquainted with the Acts of the Superior Council and the general news of the Congregation are like a city with the water supply or the electricity cut off.

(5) *Constitutions*, art. 162.

I speak with a father's confidence

I draw your attention in a special way to the subject of my treatise; as I said, I consider it of vital importance for our life and renewal. I open my heart to you with the confidence and freedom of a father speaking to his grown-up sons, hiding nothing of my anxieties and worries in this difficult time we are going through.

I have no wish to cause excessive apprehension or play the part of a pessimist. On the other hand I cannot conceal what I believe could jeopardise the very existence of our Society which cost Don Bosco and his great followers so many tears and sacrifices. I am sure I shall have your complete understanding that we shall be of one heart in our determination to live to the full our wonderful vocation.

My subject is the importance of prayer and its absolute necessity if our vocation is to be lived and our mission fulfilled.

PRAYER: VITAL PROBLEM

Towards the end of his address to the members of the Special General Chapter the Holy Father said: "We have a last recommendation to make. In face of the risk of excessive activism and the influence of secularization, to which Religious communities, especially communities like yours who are dedicated to active work, are more exposed than ever today, see that care of your spiritual life, prayer, the spirit of poverty, love of sacrifice and the cross, always have first place in your lives. If the desired *aggiornamento* were not to bring back apostolic dynamism to a closer contact with God, but were to lead it to a surrender to the worldly mentality, supporting short-lived and changing attitudes and fashions, to imitation of the world in its various forms and without discernment, then it would be necessary to reflect seriously on the severe words of the Gospel: « If salt becomes tasteless

what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing and can only be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by men". (6) It seems to us that the spirit of your saintly founder, who in his life was so open to the needs of young souls but always so united with God, asks you specially to make this particular effort... » (7) From the height of his magisterium the Holy Father points out to us serious and real dangers, risks waiting to entrap us and cause us to lose the identity and validity of our vocation; and he indicates practical goals for us that should have first place: the interior life and prayer. This comes to us from the Pope as the "particular effort" which Don Bosco asks of us today.

The words of the Holy Father find a sad echo of confirmation in the worrying report made on the state of prayer in the Congregation in the document that has been called "the X-ray of the Congregation".

I. Prayer is in a state of crisis

The "Report on the present state of the Congregation" that I made at the opening of the Special General Chapter already showed findings that side by side a successful effort in the liturgical field there existed a notable falling away and lack of interest in the main practices that nourish our piety, such as meditation, spiritual reading, confession, devotion to Mary, etc. As far as personal prayer was concerned, I was only too well aware of the difficulty of evaluating the state of interior and personal attitudes in individuals. I made this remark: "Nevertheless it can probably be said, on the basis of the external facts to hand, that the level of piety and interior life in the Congregation has decreased very noticeably". (8)

(6) *Matt.*, V, 13.

(7) *Acts of SGC*, page 637.

(8) *General Report on the state of the Congregation*, page 32.

Referring to the many “defections” in the six years, the report in its analysis maintained that the “principal cause (as I had already written in my letter of March 1970) was the decrease in the interior life both in communities and individuals; this ended in many cases in an actual loss of faith”. (9)

What is the present position? A detailed evaluation would be premature as our data is far from complete; but from what information is available I must say, unfortunately, that there is no evidence as yet of that general resurgence needed and expected after the Special General Chapter. This is a matter of grave concern.

When a crisis is unduly prolonged it runs the risk of becoming a chronic sickness with attendant fatal results. Of course it is also a fact that many Provincial and individual communities have made very consoling progress in applying themselves firmly and methodically to a prayer-life that is dynamic and vital: and already the results give cause for rejoicing. But we cannot close our eyes to the other side of the picture.

Negative signs of the situation

The following traits are relative, incomplete, negative and perhaps open to discussion. Obviously they do not reflect a universal situation, but they are fairly frequent at various levels and are indications: lack of interest in liturgy renewal; unwillingness to concelebrate (which is such a privileged way of praying together) and considering concelebration as merely a kind of prevailing fashion; a kind of resistance (under pretexts) to common liturgical prayers such as Lauds and Vespers (10) and other community prayer. The value common prayer has for religious life

(9) *Ibid.*, page 42.

(10) cf. *Constitutions*, art. 60 & *Regulations*, art. 44.

and building up the community is not sufficiently appreciated.

More serious and fundamental is the lack of personal prayer: in many cases meditation, spiritual reading, the rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, etc., are neglected or totally abandoned. In other cases it is sad to see meditation losing its character of "mental prayer" and being supplanted by various arbitrary and variant novelties which are not by any means true prayer; and work that loses its apostolic value because performed as a profession rather than for God.

Other findings could be added. The sad synthesis they all contribute to is this: our prayer falls short in quality and quantity.

One Provincial has summarised the situation in his Province thus: "God seems to be absent from our conversations and activities; our faith is weakened; our hearts are either listless or disturbed; there is not enough time for peace, serenity, prayer and joyousness; our activities lack energy and fundamental Gospel motivation; we lack the interior life".

Perhaps many confrères will see themselves mirrored in this sincere and courageous summation.

The reasons are many

Faced with such a situation we naturally ask what are the reasons for it. They are many; and although of various kinds, they all converge.

Some are rooted in the past, are complex and not easily described since they belong to the intimate and personal spiritual life of the individual. Others are of a general nature, dependant on social background, cultural differences, modern thinking (especially in the way man and his world are conceived) and certain theological or pseudo-theological hypotheses accepted uncritically, at least in practice. Again, there are other causes more directly connected with our Congregation, such as the notable changes in the pastoral-educative field, the new variations in community

life, or the lack of opportunity for calm recollection and dialogue with God.

A few causes have their beginning in the period of our formation. Findings show that the pedagogy of prayer was often lacking: this was aggravated later by our active life and by hazy and faulty ideas about the role of prayer in the Salesian life.

From these general remarks it is plain that the causes are manifold; and this letter is hardly the place for a deep and exhaustive diagnosis: such can be done elsewhere and by experts. Here and now it will suffice to note some of the more common and recurring causes in our prayer crisis (which is one of quality as well as quantity).

Influence of materialism

Among these causes worldly influence takes first place.

There is a well-known ambivalence in this phenomenon: true, it presents positive principles for clarifying the concept of God and religion by stripping away distorting pseudo-structures; but there are also many other consequences, and though some are obviously illogical, they nevertheless exert great influence. They exalt the autonomy of material reality and end by eliminating God altogether, practically turning him into an isolated, inaccessible transcendent being, and denying him any interest in the world and its doings. This materialism aims at putting creatures beyond the pale of God and making them independent of him.

One of the first consequences of all this is to argue that prayer be eliminated; and if we accept the premises, the argument is "logical". It is a thesis that independent theologians and certain widely-circulated reviews claim to justify with all sorts of specious argumentation.

Here I am moved to quote Cardinal Pellegrino, Archbishop of Turin, who could not by any means be called reactionary in his thinking. He spoke of the number of times he had to defend theologians. Then he went on: « However, let us get this straight:

in matters of faith and the spiritual life the criterion of judgement cannot be the opinion of a single theologian (or one who claims to be a theologian). We are very willing to listen with respect to the contributions of all. But if, for instance, a theologian tells me that prayers of petition are senseless, I prefer to believe Jesus Christ, St. Paul and the teaching and practice of the whole Church. Besides, it does not seem logical to give so much weight to these theologians (always presuming they are theologians) when today, as indeed in the past, theology is re-echoing and deepening what Scripture and tradition has always taught about the value and necessity of prayer, including prayer of petition. I quote just one of the many such testimonies from the work of a non-Catholic theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The child prays to his Father whom he knows. This is no generic worship: asking is of the essence of Christian prayer. The attitude of a man before his God is that he stand with his hands raised in prayer to him who he knows has a father's heart." (11)

I do not think these secularized theories are openly accepted by any of our Salesians, but they must make some impact, especially on people who are insufficiently prepared. Unconsciously they absorb ideas, prejudices and influences from all directions; they finish by tacitly accepting, at least in practice, that « today » in the new concept of the world and the new theology, prayer is not as necessary as it was once held to be. It then becomes a "burden" to be got rid of under any pretexts that might be at hand; or when they do pray, it is in a half-hearted sort of way: just to "carry out the obligation".

In the face of the evil consequences of this materialism, as far as we are each personally concerned, there is only one attitude: to resist and react with an intense spiritual life.

(11) Card. M. PELLEGRINO: *Pregare o agire*, LDC, 1972, page 23.

Horizontalism

Our active way of life possibly exposes us in a particular way to horizontalism. This attitude reduces the spiritual life to a "service and liberation of the poor". It considers prayer out of place because it cannot be measured in terms of immediate results, and furthermore it distracts from this essential Christian duty.

Pope Paul VI denounced this horizontal tendency with these words: "It is well known what a negative force this spiritual attitude has assumed: it holds that action, not prayer, renders Christian living alert and sincere. Social services take over from practices". (12)

Religious practices

At the beginning of last December I took part in the annual meeting of Superiors General. The theme was prayer. They dealt with the temptation to horizontalism which is ensnaring many Religious. With the help of two eminent periti, Father B. Haering and Father J. Loew, a number of fundamental conclusions were reached. Here is a summary of them.

"Salvation comes to us only from God and in the way willed by him: hence we cannot separate what he has united: body and spirit, action and contemplation, God and man. The horizontal can only be cured by the vertical. The source cannot be ignored.

"It is clear that charity in the Gospel and in the lives of the Saints covers an area that is not reduced to mere activity for others. God comes before our neighbour; and in regard to our neighbour, charity has other aspects than mere action.

"It must be remembered that, like the Church as a whole,

(12) PAUL VI, *general audience*, 20 August 1969.

every individual Christian has the continual need of 'conversion': and conversion cannot take place without God.

"Finally, those Religious of 'action only', who reject prayer, regularly end by abandoning their vocation".

These thoughtful conclusions are the fruit of a wide experience. They afford us plenty of matter to ponder deeply.

Adapting ourselves to change

Another cause of the prayer-crisis could be failure "to adapt" to certain changes either in our educative-apostolic work or our community life. Our educative mission and Preventive System has always put us in a position of "sharing" with the pupils. It was natural that in our boarding schools (so often our special type of work) the Salesians should attend the same practices of piety as the boys. Of course they put more understanding and will into them; but the practices were the same. Later meditation and spiritual reading were added, but the great moment of the day was Community Mass with the boys.

Then certain changes were introduced (not always happy ones and often too sudden and not pedagogically sound). The result was to reduce the pupils' practices of piety to a minimum or even to eliminate them altogether. The Salesians then found it a problem to fit in their Mass. Unfortunately in many places it ended up by being relegated to any half-hour which happened to be available; Mass was said in a hurry and often at times that were most inconvenient.

But the most common causes of the crisis are at the personal level: lack of prayer formation and training; little conviction or ability to concentrate; often a superficiality, a diminution in faith, a clouding of religious ideals; no interior life; frequently a paucity of thought and ideas.

I shall not dwell on these negative aspects: they could well appear exaggerated and pessimistic; and there would probably

be no lack of prompt justification forthcoming. I believe it will be more useful and constructive to deepen and strengthen our conviction of the importance and the absolute necessity of prayer.

II. Prayer is necessary

I have advisedly used the word “necessity” and not “obligation”. One who is baptized (and moreso one who is consecrated) and takes his vocation seriously does not need to be told he is obliged to pray: it would be like telling a person he must breathe and eat if he wishes to live. No man needs such an order unless he is abnormal. The comparison is not exaggerated if we begin our argument from a basic principle of faith.

Step by step this is our argument: prayer is essential for every Christian. The Holy Father states clearly: “Without a personal, intimate, continuous interior life of prayer, faith and charity it is impossible to remain a Christian, to participate usefully and wisely in the flourishing rebirth of the liturgy, to give efficacious witness of that Christian authenticity so frequently spoken of; it is impossible to think, breathe, act, suffer or hope in close union with the living pilgrim Church. Prayer is essential. Through lack of prayer, not only our understanding of things and events but also the mysterious but indispensable help of grace diminishes or may even disappear”. (13) This is a truth as old as the Church, which from its very beginning followed the precept of Christ (14) and “always prayed”. (15)

Indispensable for a Religious

For a Religious prayer is even more necessary — it is absolutely indispensable. It is one of the fundamental dimensions

(13) PAUL VI, *Teachings of Paul VI*, vol. VII, page 1019.

(14) LUKE, XVIII, 1.

(15) *Acts*, II, 42.

of his make-up. By definition a Religious is “a man of God”. This “belonging to God” is not just a juridical fact resultant on the contract expressed in our public Religious vows and the binding power of the Constitutions. It is above all a personal, spiritual fact, a choice of life that gushes from a love of God exclusive and enthusing. It means we simply must live in his friendship. Now, friendship is not satisfied with an initial declaration followed by a vacuum. Every friendship calls for nourishment, growth, demonstration. Presence and contact are needed to strengthen it; and the more it is strengthened the more it clamours for this “presence”. Prayer is nothing other than this “dealing with God”, listening to him, answering him, turning to him, keeping close to him, seeking union with him.

Our new Constitutions tell us that in prayer “the Salesian community becomes more conscious of its intimate and vital relationship with God and of its mission of salvation”, (16) and that “it fosters our intimate union with Christ and with the Father; it keeps prayer from becoming routine; it re-enchants love...”. (17) Hence prayer is a vital need. Not to pray means more than a moral default: it means losing a grip on life itself. It bespeaks feebleness, death-pangs, death itself.

And there are further considerations. The Religious life means opting for spiritual values which make sense only with the eye of faith. The way the world sees it, the Religious life is an absurdity. But worldly values are non-values. Take for instance the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, mortification, etc. What is fascinating and attractive about these Gospel values comes from grace. St. Paul says, “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned”. (18)

(16) *Constitutions*, art. 58.

(17) *Constitutions*, art. 64.

(18) 1 *Cor.*, II, 14.

Hence a vocation which bases its choice and perseverance on anything but faith is radically at fault and is in danger of serious collapse at any moment: all the more so when our “outlook of faith” is jeopardised constantly by worldly values which are measured by a totally different standard. Our life and mission cause us to be immersed in the world and we are endlessly bombarded on every side by propaganda and the mass-media shouting at us in a thousand and one ways that we are out-moded, that our way of life makes no sense. How then can we remain firm in our correct outlook, our perspective of faith, without “the window that opens on to faith” (von Balthasar) which is prayer? Prayer enlivens faith, strengthens the heart, dispels the mists from our understanding and gives us the assurance that “we have chosen the better part”. (19)

Prayer frees us from that influence to which we are all exposed: thinking and living contrary to the Gospel spirit, that perilous “conformism” which, under the illusion of “adapting to” the times, does away with “the scandal of the cross”. Prayer has us constantly seeking God and meeting him in our everyday life. It gives a new, authentically Christian meaning to everything we think or do. (20)

Don Albera in his circular on “The Spirit of Piety” said, “Experience has proved time and time again that the Practices of Piety impart that energy to our souls that prevents us from being overwhelmed by the travails inevitable even in the Religious life, and saves us from the misfortune of losing our vocation”. (21)

Pope Paul VI’s “*Evangelica Testificatio*” clearly expresses the unbreakable link between prayer and the Religious life. Prayer gives us a taste of that genuine and personal knowledge of the Lord “without which we could never understand the worth of

(19) LUKE, X, 42.

(20) Card. M. PELLEGRINO, *op. cit.*, page 25.

(21) Father PAUL ALBERA, *Circular Letters*, page 38.

the Christian and Religious life; nor would we possess the strength to advance thither in the joy of a hope that does not beguile". (22)

Fidelity to our vocation

Faith, prayer and fidelity are closely bonded and dependent on one another in many ways. When prayer is lacking faith is weakened and vice-versa. This is a law that is rigorously exact. Faith is a gift and obtained by prayer; and prayer is the breath of faith. So it is that prayer is absolutely indispensable for fidelity to our vocation.

"It is our belief", says Pope Paul VI, "that many of the sad spiritual and moral crises of educated people who form part of the Church's organisation at various levels are due to weakness and perhaps to the lack of a regular and intense prayer-life. When the frame-work of exterior discipline is removed, prayer goes with it, and with it go fidelity and joyousness . (23)

The Pope's words are borne out by our experience. I do not mean that so complex, delicate and difficult a problem is solely due to lack of prayer. But it is a fact that in the sad history of so many of our confrères there is always a single constant factor either obvious or implicit: prayer has been abandoned or has become an empty and sterile formality. In many of the crises preceding or accompanying the decision to abandon the priesthood prayer could have given the necessary élan to a clearer vision and a greater faith. A crisis can be a painful trial, a process of growth or maturing, a night of the soul; but if prayer is abandoned, we lose that confidence in God that our weakness so sorely needs.

Sometimes confrères who ask for laicisation say they have prayed much. Again I do not wish to generalise: there are cases where this is really so. But in many instances (I would say

(22) PAUL VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, n. 43.

(23) PAUL VI, *Teachings of Paul VI*, vol. VII, page 1019.

the majority) real prayer was lacking. Maybe there was a process of “reasoning”, a seeking to rationalize a decision already taken; but there was no facing God and praying humbly, confidently, perseveringly and patiently. It is an undeniable fact that the priesthood (like any true vocation) only founders when prayer is lacking.

Seeking love of God

Another point to be remembered is that prayer is necessary to attain what is always the purpose of any religious life: love of God, union with God, loving and total identification with his will; in a word, our sanctification.

Our Religious profession binds us to work towards spiritual maturity. (24) This is a long and tiring process and many factors must be taken into account. Over the years it should help us acquire a spiritual intensity, to become “men of God”, knowing him and carrying his aura about us.

Unhappily it sometimes occurs that confrères, even those of mature age and in positions of authority, reveal a painful superficiality, a kind of interior vacuum, like fountains without water; they can offer spiritual nourishment to neither confrères nor pupils; for them spiritual guidance is a closed book. The only explanation for this is habitual lack of true prayer, of the search for God.

Father Albera, writing on mental prayer, so important an element in the spiritual maturity we are talking about, says: “This exercise of mental prayer, taken in its broader sense, *is not only morally necessary* (the emphasis is Father Albera’s) for the conservation of the priestly spiritual life, *but absolutely indispensable* if there is to be any progress at all”. (25)

(24) *Acts SGC*, n. 525.

(25) Father PAUL ALBERA, *op. cit.*, page 443.

Carrying out the Salesian mission

Some may consider my insistence out of place in this climate of renewal, especially since the Special General Chapter has expressly stressed the Salesian mission. But, my dear confrères, also from this point of view prayer is indispensable. This is the true mind of the Special General Chapter and our constant Salesian tradition. Our Salesian mission, as part of the Church's mission, is not fully defined simply by what it does in the way of educating, evangelizing and helping the particular people we work for. These are fundamental elements but they are incomplete and do not portray the full character of our mission. Its wealth goes deeper and has its source in a dimension that is theological.

To be true to itself, a "mission" presupposes "God who sends", and hence the awareness of "being sent", the actual relationship with the sender and being dependant on him, a continual "referring" to the sender by the sent. This is a concept that has a wealth of important implications; it absolutely takes away from the mission all horizontal whims and anchors it firmly to God in a vertical dimension that cannot be substituted. Only thus is our mission a part of the mission of Christ who is the sole mediator and hence the model and reference point of every apostle.

In the Gospels, especially St. John, all Jesus' life and activities are inextricably related to the Father. As his Son, as the Word of the Father from all eternity, as the one sent by the Father in time, his existence and life derive from the Father. He never ceases to be aware of this... "I have not come of my own accord... My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me... My food is to do the will of him who sent me". This essential referral to the Father is never absent in Christ's work: through it he is in a constant state of adoration and glorification of the Father, contemplating his greatness, ever ready to do his will. His prayer flows from the very depths of his being which is so completely dominated by the sense of the Father that Christ is not so much an "adorer" or "glorifier" of the Father as "adoration" and "glorification"

personified. And in accordance with his human nature this prayer manifests itself in colloquy with the Father: this is the sublime and fruitful mystery of the prayer of Christ.

His public mission began with prayer; he prayed far from the crowds, in the wilderness, where he and the Father were alone; many of his nights were spent in prayer; it was a preparation for certain momentous acts of his mission (such as the choosing of the Twelve) and his most significant miracles; it culminated in the "Our Father".

The whole being and action of the praying Christ is synthesised in his priestly prayer at the last supper: a grieving plea for unity, for light and love for his children, a generous offering of himself to the Father for all of us, a eucharistic immolation. All this is continued, as St. Paul says, in the Risen Christ, living forever in unceasing intercession for us with the Father.

On one occasion Pope Paul VI borrowed a happy description of Christ as "the Man for all other men"; we could add that it is from the Father that this completely altruistic Christ derives the motivation, the energy, the meaning and the value of his total self-giving. Without this referral to the Father, Christ's living for others would be incomprehensible and meaningless and the value of the Redemption would be naught.

Article 2 of our Constitutions which describes our mission should be read in the light of this theological dimension. We Salesians "strive to realise through our Religious consecration the apostolic design of our Founder; then in our own Salesian way we try to become signs of and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are the poorest and the most in need". (26) The result is an all-pervading need of "being present" always and lovingly to God whom we must represent and mirror to the world. This is what the Special General Chapter requires of us. "This role of 'mediation' belonging to every

apostle, and all his tasks, presuppose in him a 'consecration' on the part of God, and require of him specific interior dispositions: a deep sense of the presence of him who calls and a willing availability in his instrument". (27)

We derive the same conclusion from the work of our mission, which is based on the Gospel and can only be adequately carried out in a spiritual perspective. We are directly collaborating "to achieve the saving designs of God and the coming of his kingdom by bringing the grace of Christ and his message to help permeate the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel... We aim in all our pastoral and educative work, if we follow Don Bosco, at helping all we come in contact with to grow gradually in the likeness of the perfect man, the Risen Christ". (28)

Also, in bettering man's lot we must never lose sight of bringing the Gospel to him: this needs the same interior attitude. (29) "Preaching the Gospel and catechising are fundamental to our mission. As Salesians we are all and at all times educators in the faith". (30) "Educating to the faith means above all leading people to the person of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. Our highest knowledge is to know him, our deepest joy to reveal the unsearchable riches of his grace...". (31)

In the face of all these grave statements, the question must be asked, "How can we achieve duties and ideals without prayer, without a prayer-life that is deeply rooted?"

Masters of prayer

There is yet further convincing matter to ponder. Our mission explicitly demands of us that we become "accomplished

(27) *Acts SGC*, n. 26.

(28) *Constitutions*, art. 17.

(29) *Acts SGC*, n. 60.

(30) *Constitutions*, art. 20.

(31) *Constitutions*, art. 21.

in prayer". "The first expression of faith is the adoration of the Father 'in spirit and in truth'. The Salesian educates to prayer as a loving and intimate encounter with Jesus our Saviour and with the Father". (32) "Today more than ever before we must help the young to rediscover the value of prayer in delicated living. It gives fresh vigour to faith; it enables them to listen, to seek out and follow the Spirit; it builds up interior life and creates community in and with Christ". (33)

Pure logic demands that if we are to instruct the young and others for whom we work in the way they should pray, we ourselves must be men of prayer. Our new Constitutions emphasise this fundamental need. "Our style of work and our relationships with others demand that we must always be renewing the divine element in our apostolic commitment: '...apart from me you can do nothing'. We need an ever fresh awareness of the Holy Spirit present in our lives". (34) And elsewhere: "In our mission we need a deep awareness of God and his kingdom... Our radical commitment as Religious to the God we love above all things serves to purify and enrich our apostolic service. It enables us to announce Christ as the life-giving word we ourselves have experienced in intimate encounter, to see him and serve him in his members...". (35)

To dispel any doubts about the intimate and vital relationship between prayer and our mission the SGC document on the "praying community" affirms that "prayer is the basis of our apostolic service directed to all men, our brothers, particularly towards poor and needy youth". (36)

The practical consequences are so obvious that there is no need to dwell longer enumerating them.

(32) *Acts SGC*, n. 64.

(33) *Acts SGC*, n. 372.

(34) *Constitutions*, art. 48.

(35) *Ibid.*, art. 70.

(36) *Acts SGC*, n. 529.

It is at the centre of our Salesian tradition

The explicit declarations of the Special General Chapter quoted above are in full accord with our genuine Salesian tradition: a lot of documentation is not needed.

We all know that Don Bosco was called "Union with God" and found in this continual referral to God the source of his untiring pastoral charity; and that he made "religion" one of the main pillars of his educational method. In this regard it would be useful to read the learned treatise of our Father Braida on the Preventive System, or Father Caviglia's "Life of Dominic Savio", or Father Ceria's booklet "Don Bosco with God". And there are many others of a similar nature.

Don Bosco once said, "Whoever is ashamed to encourage acts of piety is not worthy to be an educator". (37) This is a simple, clear and forceful summation of what the Salesian mission requires.

I quote two of his successors who lived with him and had ample opportunity to probe the depths of his method and mission. Father Albera wrote to his Salesians, "The whole of the educative system taught by Don Bosco rests on piety. Where piety is not properly practised our institutes lose all beauty and prestige: they become far inferior to lay institutes". He goes on to say that we cannot inculcate piety if "we are not ourselves well provided with it. The education we impart to our pupils would be deficient: the least breath of impiety or immorality would wipe out those principles which long years of effort had tried to imprint on their hearts. The Salesian without solid piety will never make an educator. No better praise can ever be given to a Salesian than to say that he was a man of solid piety". (38) Ten years later he wrote, "It would be a mistake to be over-zealous for exterior holiness and multiply practices of piety. It would be a worse evil to go to the other extreme, misunderstanding Don Bosco's

(37) *Memorie Biografiche*, X, 1019.

(38) Father PAUL ALBERA, *op. cit.*, page 35.

intentions and maintaining that to be his followers it suffices to love youth, schools and noisy playgrounds. Diligent preoccupation in one's own sanctification is absolutely essential". (39) And Father Rinaldi wrote in 1930 (24 December), "Let us be careful we do not turn out mere students and professionals. Knowledge is good and necessary. It is the salt of the earth; but woe if it loses its savour. Even if our Society possessed top-rate scientists, it would not be carrying out its original educative apostolate; it would be like an old castle which from without still retains much of its pristine magnificence whilst within it is a mass of ruins". (40)

From what has been written and quoted a fundamental postulate emerges: prayer is absolutely essential to live and actuate our Salesian mission. It would be a great error to think we could achieve our mission of helping the needy merely by well-organized social services. We cannot be satisfied with activities that are praiseworthy and apparently fruitful, but not vitalized by union with God, not flowing from genuine pastoral charity, not sustained by prayer. This is not the Salesian way: it is soul-less.

Dear confrères, I have dwelt insistently on these points. I do not claim to have treated them in depth: I simply wanted to bring home to you the urgency of the situation. In our life and in our mission there is no substitute for prayer.

III. Prayer must be renewed

It is not enough to intensify prayer: it must be definitely renewed. We should meditate frequently on the valuable treatise the Special Chapter offers us on this matter. It sets out a way for us that is safe and authoritative; it should be the inspiration of our updating and our spiritual rebirth.

(39) *Ibid.*, page 442.

(40) Father PHILIPS RINALDI, *Circular Letters in ASC*, X (1930), page 922.

Without going deeply into the matter, I simply put to you a few practical things which here and there I have seen neglected or undervalued and which I consider of great importance in our Salesian life.

Building up the community with prayer

As I wrote in my presentation of the Acts of the Special General Chapter, one of the basic structures of renewal is the building-up of the community. With this in mind, the Special General Chapter, when treating of prayer, put the accent on the community. The very title of the chapter bespeaks this: "The praying community" (instead of "The Salesian's life of prayer"). This preference means that before all else prayer is, in our Salesian life, a "fundamental dimension" of the community. It is both an expression of the community and its basis. The community expresses itself as such, i.e., as a Religious community, by means of prayer. The community is called together by the Word of God, it is united by the bonds of a common vocation, a common mission, a common love. For the community the moment of prayer is a "genuine turning to God in whom it finds the supreme justification of its being".

Prayer also builds up the community. This is especially true of the Eucharist, without which no community can be formed; (41) but it also holds for all prayer. "When the community prays it becomes more conscious of its intimate and vital relationship with God". (42) The sense of belonging, of giving oneself, increases; the presence of the Holy Spirit strengthens faith and love, the two pillars of any community.

It follows from this that prayer is not something extrinsic, artificial, superimposed; not just another job to get done: it is a

(41) *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 6.

(42) *Constitutions*, art. 58.

vital, intrinsic, essential part of the community, its very breath of life. Without it there is no such thing as a Religious community.

Accordingly, whilst the Practices of Piety should be without formality (reduced to a mere external attitude) or legalism, still they should not be treated light-heartedly and arbitrarily and omitted in a facile, motiveless, debonair way. They indicate a prayer-rhythm that the Congregation in its capitular revision judged necessary and hence binding.

The persuasive tones of the Constitutions and Regulations (as I have already emphasised) by no means signify that our obligation is lessened: after all, we assumed this way of life as adults with full consciousness when we made our profession. The “creativity” of which the Regulations (43) speak is not to be taken as permission to chop and change the Practices of Piety that are clearly prescribed by the Constitutions and Regulations. It is a call for co-responsibility and initiative in an effort to forestall and overcome the danger of mere routine.

I appeal fervently to all, particularly to Rectors and Provincials: each has in special trust the “furtherance of the Religious life” (44) and the particular responsibility in the question of the life of prayer. (45) In the most suitable and efficacious ways “he must rouse in the confrères a sense of need and a taste for prayer. He must seek to create suitable conditions that will favour prayer”, beginning by arranging horariums that suit the community, “safeguarding the right of each confrère to pray”. (46) And if need be, he must not fail to correct in all charity but firmly any confrères who show carelessness in prayer or omit community practices.

Indeed the Provincial certainly shares the Rector’s responsibility in these matters, and at times even more directly. It is true

(43) *Ibid.*, art. 45.

(44) *Ibid.*, art. 168.

(45) *Acts SGC*, n. 526.

(46) cf. *Acts SGC*, n. 526.

that we are adults and that each is self-responsible; but as Religious we have taken on specific duties of common life, and as adults we must carry them out thoroughly. Prayer is one of these duties, and it is not merely a private matter. The Special General Chapter speaks of the duty of every member to “bring his irreplaceable contribution to the different moments of a community meeting for prayer, even by the mere fact of his physical presence. His presence always has the value of witness and mutual stimulus”. (47)

The Eucharist is central

The Eucharist must always be for us the true centre and acme of our life of piety, (48) the root, the hinge, the foundation, the expression of brotherly communion, (49) the fountainhead, the nourishment, the energy of our apostolic dedication. The Special General Chapter invites us with these words: “In a spirit of faithfulness to the constant tradition of our family, we must feel the need to establish again the ‘centralness’ of the Eucharist in our personal life and that of our apostolic community dedicated to educating youth, in the richness of a vision renewed in accordance with Vatican II”. (50)

This must be a genuine duty for every Salesian and every community. It requires above all a courageous and humble self-criticism and a genuine conversion. Here I wish to allude to some situations which have come to my knowledge and which are in open conflict with our tradition and the recent capitular deliberations.

Before proceeding I must give due praise to many communities who are renewing their efforts to celebrate the Eucharist as

(47) *Acts SGC*, n. 525.

(48) *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5b; *Christus Dominus*, n. 30.

(49) *P. O.*, n. 6e; *P. C.*, n. 15.

(50) *Acts SGC*, n. 542.

it should be done. Good preparation is made with the singing, the clear and intelligible proclaiming of the Word, and the dignity and precision of the ceremonies.

But it is sad to have to say that in quite a few cases no renewal is obvious. Even the exhortations of the Special General Chapter run the risk of being a dead letter. In quite a few communities the Eucharist is not given its central place: there is no Mass which draws the whole community together. Concelebration, where it can be held, is resisted through prejudice and narrowness rather than with good reasons. And so a fair number of priests are satisfied with Mass said in a hurry, pushed into the first free space of the day (which is not always the most suitable or apt for recollection). One hears of others who, under various pretexts, omit frequently, and sometimes habitually, to say Mass at all. And the confrères who are not priests often have to forage round for a Mass: and sometimes they too are satisfied with Mass once a week. To this far from encouraging picture a few more sad facts have to be added: the abuse of interfering with the rubrics of the Mass by omissions, changes and additions which run counter to what the Church has clearly prescribed. (51)

Finally there are some houses that have been designed for a more adequate "community life", where there is no place for the Blessed Sacrament; and sometimes not even a chapel. They do not feel the need for one!

These things (which I hope are only few in number) are the very negation of the Salesian ideal. I say this with deep sorrow: they will never produce any renewal or any flourishing vitality.

We must then energetically and courageously remedy this state of affairs: it is opposed to the Special General Chapter and is more like the death-throes of a community than its spiritual rebirth.

(51) v. *Instruction III on application of liturgical reform* (1970) in Acts, n. 262, October, 1970.

Preference for liturgical prayer

In step with liturgy renewal the Special General Chapter proposed to all Salesians some parts of the Liturgy of the Hours as official community prayer. The Constitutions explain how we are to take part in the prayer by which the People of God are united to Christ. "Consecrated to God's glory the Salesian community sedulously takes part in the movement of prayer by which the People of God, through the Liturgy of the Hours, joins itself to Christ in his mysteries, so as to render thanksgiving and make supplication to the Father. It gives preference to this prayer and celebrates it with the dignity and fervour that Don Bosco recommended to his sons." (52) And the regulations say, "The members, if possible in common, shall say Lauds as morning prayer and Vespers as evening prayer". (53)

This is something quite new. I well understand the problems of older confrères in adapting themselves, having to abandon the simple prayers they have recited all their Salesian lives and which they considered the very essence of our spiritual tradition.

To overcome the possible distress of these confrères and to spur on the communities who are slow to adopt the capitular deliberations, I invite you to reflect that these changes are in line with what the Church clearly wants. They are found in the "official acts" of her magisterium. Hence they are what the Congregation wants; and its highest deliberative organization has authoritatively and clearly set them down among its requirements.

We could well recall here how faithful and prompt Don Bosco was to second even the simple wishes of the Holy See.

In the Apostolic Constitution "Laudis Canticum" Pope Paul VI presents the Liturgy of the Hours as a "necessary complement whereby the extraordinary wealth of divine worship in the Eucharistic Sacrifice flows forth and reaches out to every single hour

(52) *Constitutions*, art. 60.

(53) *Regulations*, art. 44.

of the human life" (Introduction). And so it "seems eminently desirable that it pervade, revivify, guide and express all the manifestations of Christian prayer and efficaciously nourish the spiritual life of the People of God". (54) The Liturgy of the Hours, then, is offered "to all the faithful, including those who are not legally bound to recitation". (55)

The "Institutio generalis de liturgia horarum" (1971) says even more explicitly: "Religious men and women who are not bound to common recitation, and members of every institute of perfection, are all strongly recommended to celebrate all or part of this liturgical action together in community or with the people". (56)

In his "Laudis Canticum" Pope Paul VI recommends this observance not as in the spirit of an obligation, "but because of the obvious beauty and pastoral and ascetical value. In fact it is greatly to be desired that the Church's public prayer flow forth for all from her spiritual renewal and the acknowledged interior need of the Body of the Church, which, resembling its Head, can only be defined as the 'praying Church'". (57)

To make the recital of the Liturgy of the Hours fruitful and not mechanical, adequate preparation is needed so that the psalms will be better known and understood. The Superiors have the responsibility of providing for this by meetings, conferences, readings and suitable books.

This is something new and naturally has its problems. We shall overcome them by our conviction that the direction comes from the Church: for we all wish to be her docile children.

I am confident that in this matter as in others, confrères young and not so young will give their complete co-operation.

(54) *Laudis Canticum*, n. 8.

(55) *Ibid.*

(56) *Institutio generalis de liturgia horarum*, n. 26.

(57) *Laudis Canticum*, n. 8.

Many communities have already done so. The matter calls for mutual understanding, discretion, obedience and charity. These will help us follow the line indicated by the Special General Chapter, which is a faithful reflection of what the Church wants.

Meditation: of capital importance

Meditation is a basic part of our prayer-life. Father Ceria, referring to the organization and regularizing of the Society, quotes Don Bosco's words: "In the ordinary way of things the Congregation would not have been founded, and if I had confined myself to a tiny area in order to have everything perfect, I would have achieved nothing...". And Father Ceria adds in explanation, "As the Society was gradually regularized, its foundation stone was piety; and the two practices of piety that were of capital importance were the annual retreat and the daily meditation". (58)

To consider meditation alien to our Salesian style and tradition would be gravely wrong. It is true that the official juridical obligation dates only from 1874, but it has always, right from the beginning, been considered fundamental.

In his circular of 1921 Don Albera wrote, "Some may think that maybe a Salesian should not aim as high as 'affective prayer' and that Don Bosco would not have wanted this from his sons. But I can assure you that it was always his wish to see his sons exalted by meditation to that close union with God which he himself had always so wonderfully achieved; and when occasion offered he never tired of urging us to do the same' ". (60)

Father Rinaldi speaks of meditation as the "daily nourishment just as needful for the spiritual life as food is for the bodily

(58) *Mem. Biogr.*, XI, 272.

(59) *Ibid.*, page 27.

(60) Father PAUL ALBERA, *op. cit.*, page 444.

life” and cites Don Rua in confirmation. He had once asked him “how he managed to remain recollected in the midst of so much travelling, work and visiting”. Don Rua answered, “I make sure I am well armed: a good meditation each morning; good helpful thoughts, and a strong effort of the will...”. Father Rinaldi added, “We must be convinced that a Salesian who does not meditate well runs the grave risk of reducing his work to the level of a simple employee. It could even happen (God forbid) that he lose his vocation”. Unhappy experience has borne this out more than once. Not to be convinced of this would be a great tragedy. (61)

The Special General Chapter solidly backs this tradition. The new Constitutions call mental prayer “an essential form of...personal prayer. It fosters our intimate union with Christ and with the Father; it keeps prayer from becoming routine; it re-enchants love, keeps the heart of man open and stimulates service to our fellowman. For Don Bosco it was a guarantee of joyous perseverance in our vocation”. (62) These precious and abundant fruits can only be had when we make our meditation and make it well. This requires of us effort and (perhaps) correction. Unhappily, I feel that even after the Special General Chapter there are confrères who, under various pretexts, make no meditation; others absent themselves from the community meditation; they are overwhelmed by the pressing work of the day and arrive at evening without having provided for this spiritual need. For others, meditation is reduced to a purely physical presence — or, as has been said somewhat cynically, “a reading with pauses for distraction”. I should be happy if the tints of this picture were not exaggerated, but from what I can see we have here one of our weak points, one of the most perilous deficiencies in our prayer-life. I admit that perhaps for us this kind of prayer is more difficult: but it is necessary for us just

(61) Father PHILIP RINALDI, *Circular Letters, in Acts VII* (1926), page 458.

(62) *Constitutions*, art. 64.

the same. The disinclination for it and the lack of effort could be an indictment of spiritual bankruptcy, a fearsome interior vacuum.

Furthermore the matter of our meditation, the texts we use, should all be well chosen. It is pleasing to see that in accordance with the Chapter's recommendation, Holy Writ is often used. But even here we must realise that a superficial reading is not good enough: preparation and study are needed.

While on this matter I must point out (a propos of the various forms and methods of meditation) that it should always be a matter of *meditating*, i.e., a loving dialogue with God, a personal encounter. Meditation always remains "mental prayer", speaking "in secret" before God. Thus a pause after a five-minute sermon is not enough; nor are readings of practical cases (which generally remain at surface level) or sociological analyses, etc. At times this kind of logorrhoea is a veil for a sort of spiritual egotism that blocks out communication with God.

Devotion to Mary is relevant

This letter is hardly the time for examining the various forms of prayer: but a word on Marian devotion is in order.

I need hardly say how this devotion is at the very root of our tradition. I have already had occasion to lament a falling off in devotion to Mary. Perhaps there is a reaction against what some consider is a devotion not well-founded or oversentimentalised. But the Special General Chapter leaves no doubt about Marian devotion being both relevant and essential for the Salesian family. "The long and uninterrupted Marian tradition of our family founded on the conviction that 'Mary did it all' because she is the 'Foundress and the one who sustains' our work, must continue to give its character to the spirituality and apostolic mysticism of the sons of Don Bosco". (63)

Constitution 65 says, "We therefore have for her a strong filial devotion. Mary Immaculate leads us to the fullness of our consecration; as the Help of Christians she gives us fortitude in the service of the People of God. Our communities celebrate her feasts with fervour and encourage all to imitate her with personal conviction". (64) And Regulation 47 adds, "The Rosary, in which Mary teaches her sons how to live the mysteries of Christ, shall be recited every day". (65) The position is thus most clear and I think further argument is not needed to exhort you to this daily homage to Mary. Just one more quote from Karl Rahner: "When (the Christian) understands that the Rosary can be a simple and sublime prayer and part of his daily religious effort to be with God; when he realises that his spiritual life will be increased and strengthened so as to make practical and personal the clear dogmatic truth and the objective importance of the Virgin in the life of each individual, then he will joy in reciting daily, when he can, part of the Rosary; he will consider this as a small contribution in his duty of prayer for the salvation of the world. And this can work in reverse: the recital of the Rosary teaches him just how well it should be said". (66)

Life becomes prayer

Prayer is an intimate encounter and dialogue with God. It presupposes an interior attitude which forms and strengthens the soul and saves it from formalism, ritualism, routine, mere external observance. This spiritual attitude is not automatic: it requires will and faith, etc. It also needs a favourable atmosphere, a kind of temperature, a prepared background. This latter is the

(64) *Constitutions*, art. 65.

(65) *Regulations*, art. 47.

(66) K. RAHNER, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. VII, Zur Theologie des geistlichen Lebens.

first need and is stressed by the Regulations: "Let every community decide on opportune periods of silence to produce an atmosphere conducive to prayer...". (67)

It is not that we have to become monks; but it is an elementary condition for meeting God "in depth". Don Bosco used insist on it at the Oratory. Today it is all the more necessary because of the massive bombardment of worldly images and violence of all kinds to which we are endlessly subjected by the mass media. Our minds are in danger of being reduced to a superficial gala-day of hustle and bustle with all its hurly-burly of sights, sounds, emotions and feelings. All this makes deep concentration difficult: we just cannot think.

The Special General Chapter speaks of "the silence of all one's being, which is not a simple absence of noise and of words; "it is a silence which can place us in the condition of really listening to God, and of identifying ourselves evermore with his plan of redemption". (68) "Evangelica Testificatio" says it is necessary "for those who must find God in the midst of the world's hubbub and din". (69)

If we are to achieve humble and sincere communion with God, there must be an atmosphere of peace and serenity in the community, a brotherliness that transcends the daily tensions. Divisions, rancour, aversions cut the wings of prayer. Confrères must make constant and sincere efforts to foster genuine brotherliness: this is a condition for true prayer. It increases our friendship with God; at the same time, it brings about the consoling peace and serenity of humble hearts united in prayer and charity.

Each individual, too, needs to cultivate for himself a suitable interior atmosphere — faith that is open and vigilant, humility and patience that persevere in prayer even when there seems to be no answer to his effort at dialogue. When God "is silent"

(67) *Regulations*, art. 35.

(68) *Acts SGC*, n. 552.

(69) *Evangelica Testificatio*, n. 46.

for long periods, the experience can be very painful, as many men of prayer have testified. Greater faith and perseverance are needed that prayer be not abandoned.

Furthermore, our heart must be free and available, open to God, detached in spiritual poverty from all things and all persons. All this calls for (indeed presupposes) an ascetic attitude, a mortification that is continuous and vigilant in self-control and focussed on things eternal; a mortification that brings freedom and clarity of vision so that in the turmoil of life God is visible and finds us ready to receive him.

The Liturgy of Life

The Salesian's prayer-life is not confined to the few Practices of Piety officially prescribed in the Holy Rule. These are a statutory minimum. His life needs much more — explicit private prayer (to express his personal sonship to God) and implicit prayer (that lends substance and expression to his apostolic life). The Constitutions read, "We have but few practices of piety, but we pray without ceasing and after the manner of Don Bosco's own union with God aspire to become contemplatives in action by praying in simple heart to heart colloquy with Christ, with the Father conscious of his presence, with Mary our helper". (70)

This is where the Liturgical Life comes in. The Apostolic Constitution "Laudis Canticum" exhorts us, "If the Divine Office becomes genuine personal prayer, those bonds uniting our whole Christian life to the Liturgy will become more obvious. The entire life of the Faithful, day and night, constitutes a "leitourghia" by means of which they offer themselves to God and to men in the service of love, uniting themselves closely to the action of Christ, who by making his dwelling among us and offering himself has sanctified the life of all men". (71) This "Liturgy of Life"

(70) *Constitutions*, art. 48.

(71) *Laudis Canticum*, n. 8.

concept mirrors Don Bosco's own life, which combined contemplation and action, and proved to his sons that apostolic work did not of itself conflict with contemplation, but rather was an exercise of charity and hence an efficacious means of holiness for them. This is the mind of Don Bosco when he insisted on work as a characteristic and ideal of his Congregation.

The implicit prayer of work

In 1869 Pius IX said to Don Bosco: "In my opinion, the Religious house where there is much work and little prayer is in a better position than the one in which there is much prayer and little or no work". (73) Unceasing work done under obedience was Don Bosco's ideal for his Congregation. In 1875 he spoke to his Rectors and said, "The work is immense and is being carried out with a will". Then he remarked that in his visits to the houses, whilst he was happy with the work being accomplished, he was even happier with the manner in which it was being carried out, and he added, "I feel that the ideal I set for the Congregation has been achieved; for besides the great amount of work being done, there is the spirit of obedience and the altruism that goes with every act". (74)

One of the last recommendations to Mgr. Cagliero, who was about to celebrate Christmas midnight Mass (in 1887), was, "Tell my Salesians to work zealously and intensely. Work! Work! They must use it as a means to save souls". (75)

I have quoted at length to stress the importance of work for us Salesians and to make the point that we cannot adopt "a snug and calm life of prayer", using this as an excuse for not

(72) *Mem. Biogr.*, IX, 566.

(73) *Ibid.*, XIV, 218.

(74) *Ibid.*, XI, 29.

(75) *Ibid.*, XVII, 493.

working or working little. We must not view work and the spiritual life as contraries. Work is not inimical to the spiritual life, or something periferal and not connected with it. "Perfectae Caritatis" (76) speaks of the interweaving of the religious and apostolic life; without boasting, we may claim that this has always been a matter of pleasant family principle for us.

But experience suggests that this is not where the Salesians' danger lies. If dedication to work is lacking, it is not because of over-dedication to prayer. If anything, the opposite is the case, and it is usually prayer that suffers.

Prayer is not always work

Certain teachings badly interpreted, the other problems mentioned at the beginning of this letter, and a heavy work-load can combine to create a great temptation to practically eliminate explicit prayer. The "justification" is that the apostolate is of itself prayer sufficient and that the apostle works out his sanctification by means of action. The excuse is made that work is prayer: so why add more prayer, which only takes up precious time that could be given to work? Surely God is more present in the poor and oppressed we are helping, than in prayer, which after all is a mere monologue!

Such sophisms only attempt to re-define (falsely) the true Christian liturgy as a fulfilment of the precept of helping our neighbour and mutual charity. I admit that this ever-present tension between work and prayer is a difficult problem. In theory the arguments are clear and acceptable: it is the practice that is troublesome. But the problem is not solved by simply removing one of the poles of tension and arguing the case with a specious theology that has been disapproved and refuted by the Magisterium.

This would be a fatal deception. (The findings of the Convention of Superiors General have already been mentioned in this letter.)

These quite radical attitudes run completely counter to Salesian thought. We should not divide prayer and work as though we Religious of the active life were faced with two irreconcilable realities. We know full well that, per se, the daily ups and downs of our work should not constitute an obstacle to prayer or be a source of distractions: rather should they be an invitation and an incitement to pray. They should help us to include in our prayer-offering to God, all people, things and events that form part of our work.

Unfortunately, in practice our service to our neighbour can easily lose its vertical dimension, its grip of the spiritual, and become dull, sterile horizontalism. Not every activity constitutes prayer. Both the nature of our work and the way we do it are important. The old teaching still holds: "Our work must have purity of intention"; it must be done in accordance with God's will — hence in obedience; not done independantly, outside (or even contrary to) the needs and requirements of our mission. Salesianly speaking, it should be "vitalized by union with God", and should "proceed from intimate union with him". (77)

If we do not work hand in glove with God, then even if we labour apostolically, our efforts are sterile and spiritually impoverishing. Theological theories are of little avail against the compelling experience of the Church's long history.

The characteristic restraint of the Practices of Piety left us by Don Bosco are not to be interpreted as an easy-going minimum. They must be seen in context, i.e., in the fruitful and intensely supernatural atmosphere of the Oratory at Valdocco — the result of Don Bosco's holiness and the utterly God-centred fervour he had engendered among the pupils.

Work "alla Don Bosco" is a means to sanctity

That untiring work and activity that Don Bosco proposed to his sons is indeed a means to holiness and cannot be conceived without that spiritual dimension which penetrates it completely and gives it its true meaning and apostolic flavour. The first successors of Don Bosco who were his close spiritual sons and completely possessed his ethos, were all at one on these principles and never tired of stressing them. They are basic to the authentic Salesian vocation.

A few months after he was appointed Rector Major, Father Albera wrote in a circular on the "Spirit of Piety": "I speak to you from the heart: I admit I am overwhelmed by the worrying fear that the much-vaunted activity of the Salesians, this zeal that up to now has feared nothing, this fervid enthusiasm that has so far enjoyed continuous success, may one day collapse, if it is not enriched, purified and sanctified by true and solid piety". (78)

Father Rinaldi was hardly elected Rector Major when he hastened to ask from Pius XI the "indulgence for sanctified work" as an "efficacious spur to help (the Salesians) to be every day more active and at the same time more united to the Lord". (79)

The transformation of one's life in prayer requires solid union with God. It is only then that explicit prayer may, if need be, diminish, since work transformed into prayer comes from deep down, from where the soul loses itself in God. Only then does prayer become "a kind of restful, basic harmony which continues playing against the background of the chaotic melodies of daily occupations, and which is heard as soon as there is a brief pause". (80)

(78) Father PAUL ALBERA, *op. cit.*, page 29.

(79) Father PHILIP RINALDI, *Circular Letters, in Acts III* (1922), page 16.

(80) U. v. BALTHASAR, *Klarstellungen zur Prüfung der Geister*.

This is for us an apex, a supreme ideal to aim at, not yet within our grasp. Thus it must not serve as a pretext for depriving our souls of that solid nourishment which our encounter with God supplies.

We work for renewal

At the end of this letter I return to a thought touched on at the beginning. At this moment the whole Congregation is mobilized for the difficult, delicate and urgent work of renewal. We must face the fact squarely that the future has many question-marks that set us thinking seriously. Many confrères are confronted with a mountain of work and wonder where to make a start. Others are disheartened in the face of so many difficult problems and their own limited means, and seem resigned to give up all effort to solve certain problems, barely managing to preserve the status quo, without verve or vitality.

Faced with the challenge of history and our modern age (full of problems but with the promise of Spring on the way) I invite you to listen to another of Don Bosco's successors. He spoke in circumstances just as difficult as ours, at the end of the First World War, amid its disastrous destruction, with personnel diminished, many vocations lost, and against a dramatically obscure future. Father Albera said to his Salesians, "We would be men of little faith if we gave way to discouragement. We would show ignorance of the history of our Society if, in front of the problems which seem to be blocking our path, we were to stop and lose faith. What would Don Bosco say if he saw us without energy and disheartened at seeing our numbers so few for the work Providence has assigned to us? He would only recognise us as true sons when our courage and efforts were equal to the difficulties to be overcome. And this courage and energy which is so necessary will come to us primarily through our piety. I have

always considered it necessary to insist on this: now more than ever is it my bounden duty to do so". (81)

From prayer to brotherliness

The difficulties we have are not hidden from us and we have no wish to play them down. We know that the interests and values at stake are enormous. As individuals, as superiors at all levels, as members of a society which in its various dimensions we love with every fibre of our being, we must expend every ounce of energy we have. It is a matter that concerns the magnificent family we have chosen to belong to: the Society has nurtured and formed us in every way. Today it needs our help to draw its breath and renew itself above all in faith and prayer. And we have the ability and means wherewith to achieve this.

The Congregation possesses so many who have a sincere and effective love for it: so many (and many young ones, too) are magnificent in every respect: hard-working, humble, full of faith, genuinely in love with God. Here is a vital and powerful force; it works quietly and efficiently to carry out its mission inherited from the Founder; and this mission is more relevant than ever these days. Proof of this are the many requests for help and collaboration, especially in countries where the increasing numbers of the young are in need of education, better social conditions and the Gospel.

We have many reasons to look to the future with confidence — provided we follow Don Bosco's teaching and roll up our sleeves for the job. We have to put our every energy into being active workers, especially in that basic renewal which is the *sine qua non* of all renewals: renewal of the spirit, both as individuals and as communities.

A year has passed since the conclusion of the Special General Chapter. In the meantime most of the Special Provincial Chapters have been held. This is good. 1973 must find each of us enthusiastically determined to “work, bring into effect, to carry out ...within the limits of his task and responsibility...” the renewal of our Society. (82)

In practice, the Provincial Councils, the local and individual communities should consult the Constitutions and Regulations in the light of the deliberations and directions of the Special General Chapter and the Special Provincial Chapters; they should use the suggestions in this letter of mine; they should work out practical ways, means and times to implement the great work of renewal, viz., that every Salesian community be transformed into a praying community and a genuine brotherly community.

The brotherly community is essential; it is a need that flows from the very nature and life of our vocation. Thus, everyone of us, young and not so young, and of whatever personal views, must be willing to dialogue, to surrender even certain private opinions. We must be convinced that some have limits, some have excesses, but all need “to belong”. A little humility and realism will make this evident and will help us look to Don Bosco and find our bearings in his thinking; these virtues will also help us in the practical applications; and the deliberations and clear indications of the Special General Chapter (which were always inspired by those of the Church) will be a helpful guide as well. But the community will find the authentic and joyous meaning of brotherliness only in the life of faith and prayer, especially in the Eucharist. Only this Food, which nourishes charity, and of which all the members will partake, will render the community joyously fraternal and hence apostolically fruitful.

This is the way of that renewal, of that rebirth, which we

(82) *Acts SGC, Letter of presentation of the Rector Major, page XXI*
(at foot).

want to achieve, and must achieve; we have to dedicate our lives to this task with fervour and efficacy. Once again here is decisive confirmation from the Special General Chapter: "In order to work out this necessary discernment and renewal, historians are not sufficient, nor theologians, nor politicians, nor organizers: we need *spiritual* men, men of faith, sensitive to the things of God and ready to work with courageous obedience as our Founder did". (83)

I have offered you words both of admonition and encouragement. I am sure you will translate them into practice with willingness, generosity and resoluteness.

May Don Bosco bless your good resolves.

Father ALOYSIUS RICCERI
Rector Major