



# ACTS OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL

## OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY

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## I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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*My dear confrères and sons,*

Once again it is time for me to maintain and strengthen my bonds with you with my regular letter, carrying out the function that article 129 of the Constitutions assigns to the Rector Major — to be the Salesian family's centre of unity.

### **Happy news: Bishop Trochta made cardinal**

The election of our dear confrère Bishop Trochta to the college of cardinals is the first happy news to record. Even though the event was publicized some time back it deserves mention in these pages. Such an appointment is a well-merited recognition of the faithful and constant service rendered to the Church in circumstances most delicate and difficult. It is also an honour for our humble society to which Cardinal Trochta always feels closely bound as a member, ever loyal and grateful.

Confident of interpreting the thoughts of the Salesian family, I hastened to congratulate him warmly, having in mind to express our joy in a more fitting way when he came to present himself to the Holy Father for the relevant ceremonies.

Meantime I am pleased to put on record that in all the

difficult, painful and disturbed thirty years of his work for the Church and the Congregation, Cardinal Trochta showed himself everywhere and always utterly faithful to Don Bosco's teachings and was always a priest of Christ and his Church; there was never any question of wavering or doubt; he was always the worthy son of Don Bosco.

### **Four months of work**

Towards mid-February the Superior Council completed its general meetings which had kept the members busy for four full months.

Halfway through February the Regional Councillors resumed their visits; and the remaining members of the Council now have a schedule of meetings and contacts according to their own particular work and Commission.

Your Rector Major has been busy with various visits and meetings, offering guide-lines and encouragement, and dwelling on the more important matters in getting the wheels of renewal rolling.

As you will read under section IV of these Acts, in the four months of full sessions there was much solid work done in tackling the many urgent matters arising.

We spent a lot of time examining the deliberations of the Special Provincial Chapters that followed on the Special General Chapter. You are aware, naturally, that these need the approval of the Superior Council to have binding force. More than forty were examined and approved. Some chapters, for one reason or another, were unable to complete their work in the time foreseen. We shall make every effort to examine their deliberations with all requisite despatch.

Eventually when we get a bird's-eye view of the general situation and have made the relative evaluations of the work done by all the Provincial Chapters we intend to let you know, at least



along the main lines, those elements of special interest that have emerged. Each Province was examined as to its own special situations and problems, together with its own practical needs and its practical proposals along the lines of the Special General Chapter's directives, i.e., in the light of our single mission and single spirit. This makes each Province not an isolated particle wandering about in a void, but a living and active cell in the organic life of an equally living and active reality — the Congregation.

### **Top priority to formation**

Many Provinces have now received back their deliberations together with possible observations and remarks relating thereto. They are now able to forge ahead and translate their deliberations into practice. This point of time is not easy, is of great moment and indeed is crucial. No matter how well conceived and pertinent these documents may be, as long as they remain on paper only, they are merely a list of fine ideas, good intentions and generous resolutions. But all will be « as was » and the documents pigeon-holed in the file of wistful fantasy unless we roll up our sleeves and do battle with the inevitable difficulties that will crop up as we try to put the deliberations into practice.

This is a job that is complex, vital and of the utmost importance, and those responsible are not only the Provincials and local superiors. It must be tackled courageously all together, methodically, and with special attention to those areas which should have priority. But top priority must go to everything that touches on formation of personnel (from aspirantship and postulancy to the curriculum proper to Salesian formation and our spiritual and religious qualification, and eventually to on-going formation). This is a « must » because it is so fundamentally important.

To neglect this essential and vital step, not giving it precedence in the renewal programme, would show a lack of understanding



and realization of the all-important interests of the Province and the Congregation, despite all words to the contrary.

The Congregation (every Province) cannot afford to delay its development, but it must be a development in depth, not in the multiplying or increasing of works.

I am well aware that this policy is not the easiest; but I also know that the really important things are never easy. Renewal must begin right here. If perchance we were to take any other line of thought, not only would we commit a grave error, but we would inflict irreparable harm on our Province and the Congregation: time is not going to stand still and wait for us.

On the subject of personnel in formation, I notice that after the Special General Chapter a very grave danger has come to light. People seem to believe that for young men in formation, preparing themselves for the Religious, priestly, Salesian life, mere living in a Salesian community is sufficient; no one capable or responsible is put in charge of their formation to give them that care that is irreplaceable; nor is there any concern to choose a suitable community that will have an educating influence on them. I have no hesitation in damning this error as fatal. Even if we were not aware of just how much these young men need (far more today than in the past) at least we should take warning from the saddening negative results furnished by these experiences.

Dear confrères, vocations are a precious treasure entrusted to us by the good Lord, and their scarcity makes them all the more precious. We cannot afford to risk damaging or losing these vocations by adopting a superficial and easy-going attitude. We must not neglect that necessary and elementary care which the very nature of a vocation in formation demands. This by no means excludes a wise and balanced understanding of the sensitivity that belongs to the particular times in which we live.

The problem is a serious one, and much of the future of the Provinces and the Congregation will depend on the way we solve it: hence all those responsible for formation must keep these thoughts constantly in mind.



## **The magisterium**

Quite a number of confrères thanked me for what I wrote about the Magisterium in the last number of the Acts. It was my duty to speak of it, and it is one of the responsibilities weighing on all in the Congregation who have been entrusted with any authority. Never before has the Magisterium been so much the mouthpiece of authority as in these days. And just as the Superiors have the obligation of carrying out this important task, so are all the confrères bound to its acceptance.

And so I feel I must point out that while the Magisterium is a duty of the Rector Major it is also proportionately a part of the office of Provincials and Rectors. They have the special duty to make known and, to the greatest extent possible, to promote observance of the directives and norms, especially those which in fact already exist — particularly in the new Constitutions and Regulations.

It is often obvious that directives and instructions that have been promulgated some time, are simply not known. Rather than indulge in empty laments, those in authority must insist, charitably but unequivocally, that these directives from our different legislative bodies be put into practice.

It is both necessary and more than ever beneficial that Superiors, Provincial and local Councils and every single confrère (according to the particular sphere of action and responsibility) be utterly aware of their sacrosanct duty to the Congregation in this regard.

If the clear and precise directives coming from the General and Provincial Chapters are not practised and made obligatory without fear or reservation, all is wasted.

## **Another word on prayer**

My January letter on prayer aroused many positive reactions, not only from those in charge of communities, but also from



individual confrères, and frequently from the younger members too; indeed there was some reaction in every continent. This is a sign that the perception of our « Life with God » is something widespread throughout the Congregation — despite deficiencies and infidelities to be lamented here and there. It offers comfort and confidence for our renewal.

However, to agree in words only, to applaud the argumentation, to stress the importance of prayer at this point of our history — all this is not good enough. As I pointed out in my letter, and from what is sadly the case in many places, every community and every confrère must show a truly practical conviction that our vocation only makes sense and is only sustained in *faith*; and faith in turn receives its natural nourishment in prayer. Without this it may be something else, but it is certainly not our vocation, certainly not our mission.

*Prayer: both fruit and nourishment of faith*

I have been deeply impressed by a chapter in one of Jean Guittou's latest books entitled "Why I believe". In it this renowned Christian thinker and scholar refers to his personal experience and develops a thesis that really sets one thinking.

At one point he remarks, "Faith is not real unless it leans on a continual exercise of what could be termed 'piety' ". (Note the word "piety".) He goes on to say, "I know that if I had not been trained to pray, my faith would have starved, like a plant without soil. And I think that the weakening of faith partly depends on the fact that all the thought of past centuries is neglected". He follows up with this observation, "The problem of faith is not just the problem of knowing where Truth is. It is also a practical problem: how can we seize this truth and implant it in our very being?" And again, "Knowledge is not necessarily a preparation for love. To make a truth part of me, to implant it in my being, in 'the flesh of my spirit', I must embody it, give



it a tangible covering". Guitton concludes that this incarnation of faith, which is truth, is to be found in piety, which (he maintains) is the indispensable element for nourishing faith.

I have quoted thus at length to show that souls dedicated to the diligent and keen quest for truth, souls who have no fear of new ideas (Jean Guitton is a philosopher, ecumenist and exegete) recognise that prayer and piety are deeply linked with faith — so much so that one can conclude that the problem of prayer is a problem of faith.

Indeed it is apposite to ask, "How is it possible to live our vocation and mission to the full if it is separated from prayer and languishes, or if it is reduced to a non-faith? »

Please believe me, dear confrères: to abandon or neglect prayer (and there are plenty of specious arguments being urged — suicidal sophistry) will diminish or harm our faith; and, although not always obvious, that entails our vocation and mission too.

There is only one thing left: we must renew our resolution responsibly and lovingly. Dear Provincials, Rectors and confrères, let us get down to deeds and realities so that prayer may take the foremost place which belongs to it in the life of every confrère and every community.

"Serve God first: the rest will follow". In this way one's neighbour will certainly be served and better and better loved. Indeed, the more prayer becomes part of our lives, the more active, generous and fruitful will our mission be. Our Lord tells us, "Without me you can do nothing", and daily experience shows just how true this is.

### *The value of silence*

While dealing with this matter I wish to develop another idea that has particular bearing on the subject. Voillaume has maintained authoritatively (quoting Brother Carlo Carretto) that prayer is "to think of God and love him". The two actions cannot



be separated. I shall not dwell on the second part, but it seems to the point to emphasise the word "think".

It is plain that to think of God seriously (as is the case with anything of importance) there must be reflection, calmness. There must be that fruitful silence in which alone it is possible to concentrate one's attention and render real that filial encounter, that speaking and listening to God.

Today, when the subject of silence is broached, we hear expressions like "monkery and medievalism!" This sophistical claptrap is meant to blind the unwary and superficial. Deep down it betrays a mentality tainted (perhaps unwittingly) by the thinking thrust on us by "consumerism", comfort, hedonism, a world allergic to all recollection or reflection and delighting in losing itself in distraction.

A modern author has written, "One has only to take stock of the colossal 'industry of distraction' and the efforts made in this field. People must have noisy distraction at any cost: and this renders more and more impossible the silence that makes for recollection. Modern man does not know what to do with silence, solitude, lone meditation. We used to say, "Nature abhors a vacuum": and this is man's reaction today. It is an attitude that makes a person do anything to get away from solitude, silence and quiet. Obviously reflection and recollection are thus rendered difficult if not downright impossible. We cannot live with the God of silence without being ourselves silent, alone, recollected" (Koser C., *Vita con Dio oggi*).

Of course we are not monks and we do not belong to the middle ages: we cannot be other than Salesians, with all that that name implies; and we are Salesians of our own times. But this does not negate what the Special General Chapter has so clearly maintained. Article 35 of the new Regulations reads, "Let every community decide on opportune periods of silence to produce an atmosphere conducive to recollection, personal work and rest".



As you see, the Special General Chapter, while wanting to relieve our community life of practices not consonant with our particular mission and style, by no means set at naught the importance of silence.

There is another consideration. It is a fact that modern man, caught up in industry, noise and distraction has an absolute longing for reflection and silence. If we examine the Church today, in its myriad contrasts and confusions, we see many thousands of simple Christians, men of action, religious and priests, not indeed "taking the cloister by storm", but certainly flocking to the ever-growing numbers of retreat houses: they feel that there they can breathe deeply of the spiritual atmosphere they find in the silence that envelops them.

Some may ask whether all this is pertinent for Salesians engrossed in work and feverish activity. My dear confrères, rest assured that it certainly is! William Fealher, one of those successful American businessmen who started from nothing, and always in a whirl of activity, left in his memoirs his secret of success: "Spend an evening in your room all alone with your thoughts: this will help you get to know yourself better. Such an evening passed looking in on yourself will help you find a few nuggets of gold or a few diamonds".

But without going as far as America, and certainly not treasure-hunting, Pascal had already written these words (and we septuagenarian Salesians would do well to ponder them): "I have discovered that all one's misfortunes issue from one thing: not knowing how to sit in a room and ponder".

If we gaze about us with honesty and also look into ourselves, we have to agree with this great thinker, who always speaks to man about man.

A propos of Pascal's invitation, we should put ourselves the question, "How much time do I give to reflection, to personal reading of matters that bring me face to face with my innermost self and with the Absolute?" This kind of reading is indispensable. The preparation of conferences, lessons, sermons is certainly always



good and necessary, but it is no substitute: there must be reading that is for the direct nourishing of our spirit, that puts us in filial and loving contact with God.

*The true Salesian is a man who thinks*

The quote from Pascal impresses me even more when I think of a remark made to me by a priest, a man of culture and anxious for conciliar and post-capitular renewal. After preaching the annual retreat in various places, he sadly remarked to me, "The Salesians I have met during these retreats gave me the impression of being allergic to silence, and also, unhappily, to thinking and prayer". I can only hope this judgement is not true, or at least a greatly exaggerated generalization.

Our classic Salesians, the men who built up the Congregation from its early beginnings, planning its expansion and progress, were indeed men of untiring energy and enthusiasm; but they were also men who, after the example of Don Bosco, were given to thought, personal recollection, reflection and prayer. Names like Rua, Rinaldi, Berruti, Quadrio, Srugi, are representative of thousands and thousands of confrères who were able to throw themselves into their work with great profit; yet always enjoyed the enlightenment and comfort of that "fruitful thought", that energizing "silent conversing ith God", which, despite difficulties that are never lacking, points the sure, safe way to new apostolic goals.

Dear confrères, the more active our life is, the more exposed to the gusty winds of wordliness, the deeper our roots must be. This is achieved exactly by learning how to think, reflect, encounter God, put ourselves in union with him. For this the atmosphere and ambient most suitable is to be found in recollection and silence, especially in those privileged times of the days of recollection we have every month, every three months and every year. The thought of our Founder is underlined by article 63 of the Consti-



tutions, "Don Bosco saw in these moments of recollection and renewal 'the basic part' and the synthesis of our whole life of prayer".

*Days of recollection are not study meetings*

At the risk of repetition I wish to stress that the days of recollection should not be turned or distorted into study meetings, round-table discussions or debates on all kinds of cultural matters. Admittedly such gatherings can be very useful, but they must not substitute the days of recollection; other times and occasions should be found for them. The days of recollection, with their special programming, must serve to restore and recreate the Salesian's spiritual and apostolic life: and this is done by reflection and personal and community prayer — these are the things that belong to such days. One can admit that there are many forms, many ways and means, for achieving recollection, silence, solitary withdrawal — and perhaps we have much to learn in this matter; but the basic necessity of these elements for prayer and the interior life cannot be gainsaid.

For the sake of man and his "life in God" we must get rid of the modern phobia regarding recollection, silence and prayer. Recollection and silence are indispensable not only for life in God but also for true culture and civilization.

These ideas may not "conform", but they are absolutely correct; and if Provincials and Rectors keep them before their minds, I am sure that the logical consequences will not fall on barren soil. They are well aware of their duty to see in one way or another that these days the Constitutions set aside for the spiritual and apostolic nourishment of the confrères be not emptied of their precious contents. The rights and true interests of the confrères in this regard must not be denied them.



*Why insist so much on prayer?*

Now it may be asked why so much is being said about prayer. The answer is seen in plain facts. I see how urgent it is to take courageous, total and methodical action for our renewal along the clear lines of the Special General Chapter. It is exactly because of this that it would be a grave mistake to insist on the other sections (important though they are) without making our starting point the dedicated renewal of our prayer life; and when I say prayer I include the sum of our personal and community relationships with God — as people consecrated and “sent forth on our mission”.

“This is the very centre, indeed it is the true secret of the renewal of our Salesian vocation today.” This unequivocal statement is not mine: it was made by the Special General Chapter (SGC 519). And a little further on are these words, “We are convinced that only a spiritual rebirth and not a mere set of new structures will give the go-ahead to a new era in the history of the Church” (SGC 523).

These affirmations issue from the most important organ of our Congregation and are the fruit of bitter experience. They come from the desire to see the Congregation extend itself without delay in bold apostolic dedication; and it is for this very reason that the Chapter bids us recharge our spiritual life with God’s urging action, so that we become men of the spirit, men of prayer that is not formalistic but convinced. We must be ever mindful of these statements, especially at this decisive moment when the Congregation is gathering its forces to set in motion the complex machinery of its renewal. It would be a sorry day for us if we were to set our shoulders to other sections of renewal and neglect our life in God — for this is the pivot and foundation of everything else. Renewal is not a case of getting ourselves reorganized, but aligning ourselves with the Lord in fidelity and spiritual docility. We would run the risk of setting up a lot of showy and apparently efficient machinery; but it would be soulless and



lacking that irreplaceable spiritual energy for the service to youth and the Church that the Congregation must render. It would be a poor structure that would very soon prove useless.

My dear Salesians, we have been invited to undertake the task of renewal: then let us be sincerely convinced of the solemn and ever-relevant statement of Don Rinaldi that is backed by the Regulations themselves: "Untiring work sanctified by prayer and union with God must be the characteristic of the sons of St. John Bosco".

### **Lent and Temperance**

One last thought. As I write these pages we are just beginning Lent. In tune with the whole thought of the Council, article 50 of our Regulations invites us to live this important part of the liturgical year intensely, turning Lenten austerity into practical reality, both as individuals and communities.

A general but important observation: I make frequent references to the Constitutions. It is important not only to be well aware of them, but to be thoroughly versed in them. This is the surest way we shall come to appreciate them and discover in them all the spiritual and Salesian wealth they contain. Thus it will not be a case of mere formal observance: rather we shall then live them in practice.

To be consistent and faithful to the promise we freely made we have to eschew all empty and false formalism: we must accept sincerely and cordially this means the Congregation offers its sons in order to help them measure up adequately to their mission and consecration. It is not just fitting, it is necessary that each community find a time for the public reading of the Constitutions and Regulations.

*Not shackles but railway lines*

Local Superiors, especially Provincials and Rectors, should refer often to the Constitutions and to the spiritual values therein — and I refer also to those articles that are not strictly juridical and practical, but which often contain essential and basic values for the Salesian life and spirit. We must remember that our Holy Rule is not a straitjacket, or a set of shackles to deprive us of liberty, but a railway line along which the Congregation can progress, develop and act in harmony. A little thought will make it obvious that the Constitutions are a synthesis of the spirit proper to our Congregation: to know them, practise them, and have others practise them — these are the simple and efficacious ways and means to keep us united in this spirit which is the vital element of our Congregation.

I should add too that we should do more than just refer to the Constitutions: when proper and necessary, especially those in authority should demand respect for them. Professional loyalty requires this; but there should also be a desire to respect and defend the “law” itself. It is, after all, the expressed will of the Congregation, written up in fidelity to our Founder’s charism. Any well-ordered and organized society would expect this loyal observance from its members. The day when the law (our Holy Rule) is regarded as a “scrap of paper”, and whims and individual caprices take over, and there is contempt (in practice if not theory) then that day would see the end of the Congregation.

Don Bosco gives a further reminder of this in his last will written from the depths of his paternal heart when he was about to leave his children: “If you have loved me in life, continue to love me after death by observing the Constitutions“. He has given us a yardstick to measure our love for him and the Congregation, his creation and our mother. Without this there would be no true love of Don Bosco, no matter how different things might appear. Don Bosco himself, our Father, has said so.



*Mortification means strength*

Let us dwell a moment now on Lent and its invitation to mortify ourselves. This is the special time for penance, but obviously the obligation extends throughout the year.

This austerity is referred to by Don Bosco and our Salesian tradition as *temperance*. We know well how today's pundits (and they are not all layfolk — possibly some are in our own ranks) despise and dispute these values. They substitute (at least in practice) values of comfort, well-being and status-symbol buying. But indeed where these values become criteria for evaluating persons, groups or peoples, man is no longer man. We should note how this is happening, especially among the young, in those countries in which progress is confused with the rat-race after the myth of plenty.

True human values are lodged on a higher plane than mere well-being (we are not denying the usefulness and validity of the latter, provided it be subordinated to the true values).

The highest human values are reached only when a man is master of himself; and to attain this he must face up to discomfort, austerity, i.e., mortification, temperance.

Pope Paul VI spoke some very apposite words at the beginning of Lent: "Christian abnegation, mortification, penance are not forms of weakness, they are not inferiority complexes; but, issuing from grace and will-power, they are rather forms of strength; they train us to be masters of ourselves; they give unity and balance to our faculties; they help the spirit prevail over the flesh, reason over fantasy, will over instincts; they bring to our being a need for fulness and perfection. Rigor means vigour!" (Address of Pope Paul VI at Santa Sabina, 7 March, 1973).

It is good to see Scripture quoted so freely these days. Then let us recall Jesus speaking simply and clearly to us in particular, who have elected to follow him closely: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and



follow me". We cannot escape this: it is part of the Christian message that we as consecrated men publicly accepted in full.

*Three threats to our communities*

Our Special General Chapter was very much aware of the importance of Christian self-abnegation — which means primarily and essentially temperance. Don Bosco knew what he was about when he gave us our Salesian diptych: work and temperance.

In article 606 the Chapter remarks that our witness to poverty is particularly meaningful when lived in community. It goes on to explain that in practice this means frugality in food, rejecting the superfluous, functional simplicity in our buildings, the way we own things (we place ourselves and everything we have at the common service of our mission), and our generous solidarity with the houses and Provinces of the Congregation and the various needs of the Church and the world.

Lent invites us to reflect and to ask serenely and sincerely in every community: "As individuals and as communities, how do we stand in the matter of austerity and temperance?" Let us not try to salve our consciences with smart, comfortable but unconvincing arguments; we must answer the question without hedging.

According to Don Bosco the three enemies that threaten our communities are "cibus, potus, lectus" (food, drink and sleep), and he dilated on the array of factors therein that could negate our lives. I think our Founder's words are relevant today, especially in certain sectors.

The lack of frugality and temperance in food, in certain prolonged and costly holidays, in going after all kinds of comforts and conveniences, in recreations that belong to the well-to-do, is an offence to so many of our confrères who live in genuine poverty and Salesian frugality; it is an offence to the infinite number of poor who lack even the necessities of life; and it is an



offence to the thousands of good souls who try to help the Salesian mission by conducting their lives in a frugal pattern of sacrifices, living far more modestly than those who enjoy the fruits of their mortification.

We are aware how critical the young are in this matter that touches on our personal poverty, our community poverty and the very meaning of consecrated life. It should be remembered what a positive influence a life showing the stamp of austerity and temperance can have on young vocations.

### *Our mission demands austerity*

The Special General Chapter had indicated the missions as the main avenue of our renewal. Hence my words on stirring up in every community a constant awareness and interest in the missions. But if we live a soft life, a life spent in anxious questing for bodily comforts, if the stuff of which we are made is mere jelly, if we lack the strength and energy that comes from Don Bosco's style of temperance, how can the missionary spirit flourish in us? Don Bosco knew what he was about when he exhorted his missionaries to "great moderation in food, drink and rest" — and it holds for us too!

One just cannot be a man of prayer with God's interests at heart, and be always anxiously striving for a comfortable little world, lacking nothing. This is very different from what Christ wants and offers us.

Lack of temperance is one of the weak spots; and history teaches us that the enemy makes use of it to undermine the walls of our Congregation. Don Bosco knew his history and shouted the danger to his sons loud and strong.

Our Founder urges us forward to a mission that demands self-giving, and this requires austerity and detachment, "a heart that walks barefoot", as St. Francis of Sales used to say.

Dear sons, it is my wish that you dwell on these thoughts

of mine and use them to check how you stand as individuals and communities. There are so many people who love and esteem the Congregation and want the Salesians to be faithful to their Founder. God grant that they may join our Founder and say of you, "Indeed these are true sons of Don Bosco".

I hope this letter arrives in time to carry you my sincere greetings for Easter.

Affectionate good wishes. Let us be united each day "in the breaking of bread".

May our Father Don Bosco bless you all.

Father ALOYSIUS RICCERI  
*Rector Major*