



ACTS OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL

OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY

SUMMARY

I. Letter of the Rector Major (p. 3)

FAMILY NEWS

Don Bosco wanted Salesian news

Spreading Family news

Salesian news is absolutely necessary today

Salesian news today is in a state of crisis

Together for a more active commitment

In the centenary year of the Salesian Bulletin

Conclusion: Let us publicize the good we are doing

II. Instructions and Norms (none in this issue)

III. The 21st General Chapter (p. 37)

1. Roster of the members of GC 21

2. A brief report on the preparation for the GC 21 at the Generalate

3. The Precapitular Commission

4. The Salesian Coadjutor at the GC 21

IV. Communications (p. 46)

1. Appointments

2. The Don Bosco Publishing Group in La Plata

3. Missions news

4. Solidarity Fund

V. Activities of the Superior Council and Initiatives of general interest (p. 55)

VI. Documents (none in this issue)

VII. From the Provincial Newsletters (none in this issue)

VIII. Pontifical Magisterium (p. 59)

Young people, help build a new society on hope

IX. Necrology and 2nd Elenco for 1977 (p. 60)

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome, July 1977

My dear Confreres and sons,

Here I am for what is to be our next to last get-together before the twenty-first General Chapter. The Acts that will be dated October next will actually get into your hands when the Chapter is about to begin or will already be under way.

As you will learn from other sections of this issue, the preparatory work at the Generalate is proceeding very regularly and in great earnest. I here want to thank the confreres of the Technical Commission for the work which under the enlightened guidance of the Moderator they did with commendable diligence and expeditiousness, furnishing the Precapitular Commission with ample material obtained from Provincial Chapters, groups and individual confreres. It is a carefully organized material that will notably facilitate consultation and study.

To the Provinces which, with great sacrifices, have made available confreres for both the Technical and Precapitular Commissions, I wish to express, in these pages, the thanks of the Congregation. For it is to its service — a very important service indeed — that these wonderful confreres have so generously given of themselves.

I remind everyone that the closer we get to the important event of the Chapter, the more intense our personal and community prayers must become. All the work of the Chapter will have to be imbued with a sense of the supernatural, in that climate of spiritual discernment which is the result of humble and sincere prayer. Let it be a prayer of souls moved by the lively desire

to become humble and willing instruments of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish, in true fidelity to Don Bosco, the great and vital goals of the mission which Divine Providence has conferred on our beloved Congregation in our time.

And now not to break with a tradition which has been inaugurated some years ago and especially to underline an anniversary which is particularly important to our Family, let me talk to you on the occasion of the Centenary of the Salesian Bulletin about *the importance of the Salesian news for our Family*.

I am sure that this topic will provide each of us with some helpful, up-to-date Salesian reflections and will also encourage some relevant and worthwhile initiatives to make one of our Father's most genial and cherished ideas come alive and effective.

FAMILY NEWS

Many important centenaries concerning Don Bosco and his early sons keep our interest in the history of our Family high these days. In 1972 we had the centenary of the FMA Institute, in 1974 that of our Constitutions, in 1975 that of the Salesian Missions — which was properly celebrated throughout the world —, and in 1976 that of the Cooperators. Exactly on these days falls the centenary of Don Bosco's little treatise on the Preventive System. (In my opinion, this last-mentioned anniversary deserves to be taken into consideration by our communities, because in the few pages of this precious pamphlet — that required an unusual feat of editing from the usually nimble pen of our Father — our entire educational heritage has been incisively condensed).¹

We look towards these past events not for useless self-

¹ See MB 13, 112-113 (historical background) and 918-923 (full text). We recommend it as a community spiritual reading.

satisfaction, but because we know that we owe our present position to what has gone before us. Someone once cleverly wrote that "every man is a bus on which his ancestors ride," and this is true also for us and our Congregation.

Actually, we can often get useful instructions to build the future from past history. Moreover, what makes retrospection full of fascination for us Salesians is also the loving figure of our common Father Don Bosco, who had his most prolific season precisely in the 70's of the last century and during the same period began, so to say, to harvest the ripened fruits of his hard work.

To complete our look towards the past, we must make mention of several other events of August-September 1877, which so heavily influenced the history of our Congregation.

"I need to speak to my sons"

In the first days of September, Don Bosco with twenty-two of the first Salesians, went to the boarding school of Lanzo Torinese to celebrate the First General Chapter of our Congregation.² He arrived there carrying under his arm a newsletter of few pages, with the ink hardly dry, on the cover of which was written "First year —Number one", and entitled *Bibliofilo Catolico o Bollettino Salesiano mensile* (*Catholic Book-lover or Salesian Monthly Bulletin*). Yes, it was the first Salesian Bulletin. Don Bosco began, one hundred years ago, through the press, a dialogue which would prove to be very fruitful, with his precious collaborators whom for just over a year he had begun calling "Salesian Cooperators."

But ten years before that, Don Bosco had started, in a similar way, a no less fruitful dialogue with the Salesians. In

² Also this centenary deserves our remembering, at least in a community spiritual reading; cf. MB 13, 243-294.

May 1867, he had written to them in these words: "Before long our Society may be definitively approved. I therefore feel the need to communicate frequently with you, my dear sons. Being unable at times to do it personally, I will try to reach you by letter."³

With these words he had begun his first Circular Letter, copied over in Valdocco by willing copyists and sent to Fr. Rua, Fr. Bonetti, Fr. Lemoyne — in other words, to all the Rectors of the first Salesian houses as well as "to other beloved sons of St. Francis de Sales," i.e. to all the Salesians. That first Circular Letter was to be followed uninterruptedly by many others, and they were to be eventually transformed into this booklet that you now have in your hands: the Acts of the Superior Council.

With these two initiatives in 1867 and 1877 — the Circular Letters and the Salesian Bulletin — Don Bosco had in effect given life to the thing, now complex and irreplaceable, that we ordinarily call Salesian News.

Rethinking and reshaping

On other occasions I dealt with the subject briefly and in passing. For instance, I pointed out that in a regular circulation of family news there is found a means to foster the communion and unity of our Congregation.⁴ But now, dear Confreres, I wish to deal at greater length with this subject of Salesian News, because, although unusual, it is nevertheless important to the life of our Congregation. In fact it regards an aspect of Salesian reality which — to express an overall judgement — was already stated with foresight and originality by Don Bosco in his time, was consistently developed by his followers and will perhaps with the current spreading of the mass-media need prompt intervention on our part at two levels, i.e. an in-depth rethinking and study

³ BM 8, 354.

⁴ Cf. *Acts of the SC*, No. 272, Oct.-Dec. 1972, pp. 31-32.

in terms of ideas, and then a reshaping or redimensioning on the practical and executive level.

Meanwhile, and this is the starting point of our considerations, it will be well to note that Don Bosco's initiative shows us that he considered it possible and even indispensable to build up that reality that we today call the "Salesian Family" also by making use of family news. And in fact, in his able hands, family news contributed a great deal to the establishment of his apostolic project for youth.

It will be our task to study his model, to examine the present situation (which has changed so much!), to assess the stiffer requirements of our age, and to bring about the necessary renewal in this delicate area as well.

Don Bosco wanted Salesian news

If we think back to the life of our Founder, among a long series of dates and episodes, we are led to acknowledge that Don Bosco with realistically modern intuition wanted his apostolic project to be within the context of social communication. And this from the very beginning, from the time when he was teaching his first pupils the art of book-binding and was resorting to a mincing-knife borrowed from Mama Margaret's kitchen to trim the edges of his first books, because he had no paper cutter...

He simply followed a deep and certain instinct that guided him towards the choice of that broad and varied 'pulpit' or forum, which then was and has become even more today the so-called instruments of social communication. This explains the great volume of works which, while he was alive, he wrote and caused to be written and circulated by his sons, and which our Congregation, following his example, continues to produce with untiring apostolic creativeness. We therefore — and why should we not remember this? — are the children of a book-binder, printer, journalist, writer and editor. We are therefore children

of a genuine 'worker for social communication,' who put the mass-media of his time among the most important instruments and typical Salesian initiatives to serve youth and the Church with foresight and effectiveness.⁵

But in particular Don Bosco wanted, and set in motion with courage and clarity of ideas, that area of communication which closely concerns us here and which we have called Salesian News.

Inside the Congregation

In the first place, Don Bosco wanted internal news of the Congregation, and the Circular Letters prove this. In this connection he rightly recognized the supreme importance of direct verbal communication, that which we call 'face to face.' "I need to *speak* to my sons," is what he wrote. Don Bosco also understood the unavoidable need of a group when it becomes too big and geographically divided into centers far away from each other to resort to the rudimentary forms of social communication of circular letters. In fact, realizing the impossibility of speaking in person and often with his sons, he immediately emphasized: "At least I will try to do it by letter."

In 1867 he had barely forty-four sons, but he was thinking in terms of the future development of his work. The Congregation had not yet been definitely approved, but he had already chosen the right road.

"A union of benefactors for mankind"

Furthermore, Don Bosco wanted the Salesian news to be extended to all the Salesian Family — and he used the former

⁵ Anyone wishing to go deeper into this very important aspect of Salesian apostolate should read, among other things, my message, *To Salesians in the publishing field*, in ASC, No. 282, April-June 1976, pp. 25-33.

to build the latter. Even if he did not use the term Salesian Family, this was an idea close to his heart from the beginning. We can also add that he accomplished it by resorting to a clever use of social communication.

We can attest to that from the very first issue of the Salesian Bulletin. On the second page, Don Bosco himself explained his intention to produce this publication for his Cooperators. "Here — he wrote — we are not establishing a confraternity, nor a religious, literary and scientific association, not even a newspaper, but simply a union of benefactors for mankind — people ready to pledge not merely their words, but their deeds, cares, troubles and sacrifices in order to be of help to their fellowmen."

These are fundamental words. According to the intentions of Don Bosco the Salesian Bulletin had the exclusive purpose of giving life to a "union of people." On another occasion Don Bosco was even more explicit: the Bulletin, he said, "will become a mighty force not on its own account, but because of the people it will unite."⁶

It is useful to recall how at the root of the Salesian Bulletin which he called the "newspaper of our Congregation,"⁷ was the need for Don Bosco to have an organ of the press always at his complete disposal and always at his beck and call to gather and spread all the news he felt it suitable to make known on a wide scale. This was because not all newspapers, even those well in his favor, could always respond to his continuous requests to circulate Salesian news. Yet, through the collaboration he had with other journals, especially the Catholic ones, and in various other publicity initiatives it is possible for us to discern our Father's interest for social communication, and specifically the definite role that he gave to communicating the ideals and the

⁶ MB 16, 413.

⁷ MB 13, 81.

achievements of the Salesian apostolate to the world at large. On one occasion, i.e. the first missionary expedition, all this reached a very high pitch.

Through articles and circulars Don Bosco was thus able to spread the news of his happy initiative to very many readers, and became so well-liked as to attract the support and help necessary for his costly endeavor. And it should be noted that it was not only a matter of material help, but also an impressive flowering of vocations that spread the Salesian work. At the same time, Don Bosco was asked to open houses everywhere; and Salesian Cooperators sprang up in various places (Venezuela and Mexico, for instance), determined to begin our works even before there were enough Salesians to take care of them.

In brief, there was a series of connected incidents which prompted a level-headed and dispassionate researcher such as Fr. Ceria to write: "A new chapter really had begun for the Oratory and for the Salesian Society."⁸

Now we should note among the decisive facts of this historical turning point the intelligent and courageous use of social communication by Don Bosco.

We know how Don Bosco relied most heavily on the Salesian Bulletin. He called it "the main bulwark of the Salesian works and of whatever concerns our members."⁹ He was convinced that "the Salesian Society will flourish materially if we strive to uphold and spread the Salesian Bulletin."¹⁰

For this reason Don Bosco wanted it to be printed in several languages, and before his death he completed four different editions: Italian, French, Argentinian, and Spanish. One might say that wherever the Salesian Family reached a certain membership level and a certain degree of strength, Don Bosco wanted

⁸ E. Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, I, 249.

⁹ MB 17, 669.

¹⁰ MB 17, 645.

a Salesian Bulletin to get there too to encourage, inspire, and multiply his collaborators.

Under Fr. Rua the editions rose to eleven in number. In this manner began and developed bit by bit a 'chain of publications' with worldwide circulation (there are 34 today), which constitutes a fairly unique occurrence in what could be called the minor history of journalism.

Now it is up to us to see if we are able to take the Salesian news into proper account and if we will succeed in utilizing it with sufficient competence and effectiveness to the advantage of the Salesian missions throughout the world.

Spreading Salesians news

Before getting to the heart of the evaluations and problems of the Salesian news, let us stop briefly to consider the overall picture that it puts before us. It is something that we are certainly aware of, even though not very clearly, and it therefore deserves some brief study as well.

Those for whom our family news is intended

The first question is: To whom is the family news directed that we, according to Don Bosco's example, continue to receive and spread throughout the Salesian world? The obvious answer is that group of people whom Don Bosco wanted joined together in the "union of benefactors of mankind", called by him to "be of service to their fellowmen," — in other words, all those belonging to the Salesian Family, understood, however, not in a strictly juridical sense, but in a wide one. Besides, not everything is meant for everyone, not in the same way nor for the same reason.

The Salesian news readership is, therefore, made up of various

kinds of people — in the first place, the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators and those who hold the most distinguished positions in the Salesian Family, even though they carry no membership cards, i.e. our parents.

There are other groups which in fact share to a certain degree in Don Bosco's apostolic project, for example, the Salesian Past Pupils who are particularly close to the Family of Don Bosco.¹¹ And then there are the thirteen Religious Congregations and the three Secular Institutes that grew off the Salesian stock, as well as the various other youth and adult groups organized by us in our schools, youth centers, parishes and missions.

Also the parents of our pupils, who by the fact of having entrusted their children to the Salesians, have a particularly close educational relationship with us and have thus entered into the Salesian sphere of activity. Nor must we forget our benefactors and all those people who may show only a friendly interest in our work. Actually, all of them can derive some benefit, such as an enrichment for themselves and a reason for fruitful collaboration with us, from open, serene, cordial and positive Salesian news.

All of them have a legitimate right to Salesian news, and it is therefore our duty to see that they are not deprived of it.

The channels through which Salesian news is transmitted

It would be interesting to make a survey of the initiatives that are today at work to spread our Family news. The result would be a very impressive picture ranging from film documentaries to slides, from books to hundreds of printed periodicals and

¹¹ *Const.*, art. 5.

countless cyclostyled or mimeographed sheets. I will confine myself to some brief comments.

For the news in the Congregation, other than the official "Acts of the Superior Council" (quarterly in 6 languages, with world-wide printing of about 8,000 copies), there is the Salesian News Agency (ANS, now in 4 languages with printing of about 2,000 copies), and there has recently been added the colorful collection of about 70 Provincial Newsletters. Proposed in 1971 by the Special General Chapter, these newsletters have been found extremely useful by both the Provinces and the confreres, which explains their large circulation and their popularity. Although requiring a great deal of work, they are put out wherever and whenever possible, often with good taste and always with much dedication and commendable spirit of service.

A news circulation somewhat similar to that of the Salesians is that of the Salesian Sisters. On their part, the Cooperators and the Past Pupils are kept informed through various national and local publications, while their leaders regularly receive from the Center cyclostyled sheets which deal especially with organizational matters.

The Salesian Family, taken in the broad sense, is reached through the 34 current Salesian Bulletins, still growing in quality and quantity, published in 19 languages and with an annual printing of over 10 million copies. Locally, the Salesian Family is informed through hundreds of school, parish and association publications, which at times are only cyclostyled or mimeographed sheets — an economical, practical and speedy means which can never be praised too much —, but which together add up to a great deal of Salesian '*animazione e informazione*,' i.e. spreading news and fostering good spirit.

While these publications usually reflect and follow up Salesian 'scene,' i.e. the day-by-day unfolding of our project, the books have the express purpose of recording and spreading Salesian history and reflecting on the spirit and charism of Don Bosco.

The Missions Centenary provided an occasion for a flourishing of historical volumes, in various languages.¹² Reflection is nurtured by collections or series produced in the Salesian Study Centers, and this is a definite sign of love for Don Bosco.¹³

The Missions Centenary also provided the occasion for a considerable and commendable production of documentaries, high in technical and artistic quality, and effective instruments for Salesian news.

On the whole this is a rich and varied panorama, though in some cases one wonders whether good will is accompanied by the necessary competence and quality level needed to ensure the desired result, i.e. that it will be accepted and read by those for whom it is intended.

The contents of Salesian news

What does the Salesian news bring to the Family of Don Bosco? We have said generically 'family news,' i.e. the news regarding Don Bosco's project being carried out in the Church for the benefit of youth. We can be more exact in saying that this Salesian news carries three types of content: the historical content, that of thought or reflection, and more often that of current events.

- At times, not sufficient importance is given to the *historical content*, to our past. Nevertheless, it is through the tradition left to us by Don Bosco, short but full of inspirational and

¹² Particularly precious has been the contribution, in this area, of the *Centro Studi di Storia delle Missioni Salesiane* (Salesian Missions History Study Center), which has published several series of books at the Libreria Ateneo Salesiano (Rome) and LDC (Turin).

¹³ One only needs to point out the publications of the *Centro Studi Don Bosco* (Don Bosco Study Center - UPS), the "Colloqui sulla vita salesiana" (Conversations on Salesian Life) series, the various volumes published by the Generalate, and various works of several centers especially in Latin America.

leavening elements, that the members of his Family fundamentally find the first element of union and cohesion. A scholar once said that "there does not exist, and there never has existed, a people without stories,"¹⁴ and that is true for the Salesian Family as well. In the almost unfathomable figure of our Founder, in the volumes of his Biographical Memoirs, in the missionary adventure of his sons, in the concrete example of his saints and of all those who have gone before us, it is possible — rather I would say necessary — to find again that brightness of life and that climate of generous dedication, which alone can animate, awaken ideals, and stimulate imitation and action.

- No less important is the content of *reflection* on the history and nature of the Salesian mission, that can bring about a more profound and orderly knowledge of our Founder's project and spirit, and of the Salesian charism.

We can sometimes notice, even amongst some Salesians — especially today when the myth of material efficiency has very many followers — almost a refusal of, and an escape from, ideas as though they were a useless waste of time; and we witness a persistent search for whatever looks 'concrete' and 'practical.' Well, I wish to remind those confreres who might be taken in by this outlook of what someone once said: "Nothing in the world can be more practical than a clear idea." Let us be convinced that personal and community reflection on the Salesian project, supported by comprehensive Salesian information in its various forms, is the shortest way to reach the 'concrete' and the 'practical,' and cannot but be of help in the accomplishment, without mistakes or deviations, of our mission amongst youth.

- Finally, and I would say above all, the Salesian news is concerned with *current events*. In the first place, it brings to our attention official communications regarding the activities of

¹⁴ Roland Barthes in Autori Vari, *L'analisi del racconto (Analysis of a story)*, Bompiani 1969, p. 7.

our various organizations, new appointments, the programs already planned and soon to be carried out, and the various opportunities for meeting. Furthermore, it brings up-to-date information on works, men, successes and failures, and expectations and problems.

We will see later on in this letter what positive influence — such as giving consolation and encouragement, and contributing proposals and programs — this type of communication can exert upon the entire Salesian Family. But in concluding this point I feel I must remind you that the flow of Salesian news can and must circulate, at least in part, to the outside, to those who know us and to those who do not yet know us, in such a way that Don Bosco's project, according to Our Lord's exhortation: "Let them see your good works!" (Mt. 5:16), may be accomplished in the daylight, in an open and truly evangelical confrontation with public opinion.

Those who spread family news

At the root of so many instruments and channels working in the Salesian world to spread our family news, there are definite people, who undoubtedly today are in great numbers, and several of them are well trained. Many work only occasionally in this area, but others on a regular basis, and some full-time, like the confreres working on some Salesian Bulletins. At the centers of our organizations, Provinces included, there are those who have permanently taken on the task of a *quasi*-news agency. There are Provincial secretary offices that have become like small clearing houses, engaged in the periodical and faithful receipt and dispatch of news.

It is a fact that at various levels of responsibility there is felt in our Congregation an increasing need to make things known, to inform in the most appropriate way, and to 'animate' through communication. Hence the need for men specifically trained and therefore capable of guaranteeing really effective information.

Social communication is today rightly considered a science, a technical skill, and an art; therefore, it calls for aptitudes, professional study, and patient apprenticeship. Commendably, the confreres who enter the Salesian news field through special study and thus have professional credentials, are growing in number. This is the road to follow, and I feel I should encourage the Provincials who direct their confreres toward such study.

To digress for a moment, let me remind you that the Salesian presence in social communication cannot limit itself to training 'intermediate operators,' i.e. those who transmit Salesian news. According to the example of Don Bosco, there is need for specialized confreres capable of producing the news, and it is necessary to train them.¹⁵

But, what I want to point out concerning those who have the task of transmitting Salesian news, is the exact interpretation of their role. They have been called on to present and illustrate Don Bosco's project, and therefore they must feel they are speaking in Don Bosco's name. This requires that in order to communicate *Salesiana* (things Salesian) they make every effort to know and truly understand our Founder, as well as the present Superiors interpreting him, and the Salesian 'reality' happening now as a part of our developing mission; in other words, it is not themselves they are expressing, nor their own ideas or their own tastes that they are asked to transmit in the communication of Salesian news, but that mission toward youth that God entrusted to Don Bosco and to his sons.

What should I say then about certain trends, clearly recognizable for example in some Salesian Bulletins, towards a generic

¹⁵ On this, which is primarily a duty of the Provincials, see the aforementioned message *To Salesians in the publishing field*, ASC, No. 282, especially pp. 28-31. See also *Acts of the Special General Chapter*, 455, where scientific training is said to be required "for those who will become involved at the production level, either as writers, editors or publishers of printed matter, or as advisers or reporters in the field of the cinema, radio and TV."

type of journalism, even if it is soundly Christian? On this point I would like to invite you not to confuse the two things. That kind of journalism, though excellent in itself, can not and must not replace Salesian information on channels normally reserved to Salesian information itself. The family of Don Bosco in every region of the world has an inalienable right to a suitable Salesian nourishment, and this under the pain of its deterioration and demise as a specifically Salesian reality.

The objectives of Salesian news

Family news evidently strives constantly to promote, inspire and urge on the Congregation and the Salesian Family in their pastoral endeavors on behalf of the world's youth. Now the Salesian Family, though it finds its *raison d'être* and justification above all on the supernatural level, continues nevertheless to be conditioned in its historical unfolding by the human element, and it is therefore subject to precise sociological laws, which we must reckon with.

For a reality as complex and variously organized on the five continents as the Salesian Family to attain its pastoral objectives such as were specified by Don Bosco, it will be necessary to have within itself a communication network capable of spreading definite kinds of news. We will leave it to those responsible for this delicate sector to go further into the matter. We will mention only that scholars consider four different kinds of information to be necessary in any organization.¹⁶

- First of all, there is the *information* which we call *operational*, necessary to guarantee the normal execution of community

¹⁶ Cf. Paul Grieger, *Comunicazione e informazione al servizio della comunità* (*Communication and information at the service of the community*), Edizioni Paoline 1976, pp. 47-49 (who refers to P. Jardillier, *L'organisation humaine des entreprises*, PUF-Paris, esp. ch. VII).

activity programs. It involves that combination of guidelines, announcements, declarations, etc. that are found in abundance in Salesian news media.

- There is also the *motivational information*, which in groups of volunteers like ours is, to say the least, indispensable. In the Salesian Family from the confreres with vows to the Young Cooperators fresh from their first pledge, we are all volunteers, that is people who have freely answered *yes* to the '*si vis*' (*if you wish*) whispered in the innermost conscience by Our Lord's voice — demanding but respectful of individual liberty. This makes it important for us to see continually set before our eyes the reasons for belonging to our group and the ideal values that give full supernatural justification to our attachment to, and our working for, Don Bosco.

- There is also *promotional information*, which in the case of the Salesian Family is understood above all as "on-going formation," for the spiritual enrichment and the professional updating of all those who are working on Don Bosco's project.

- And finally there is the *general information*, with carries with it every type of news — not only appointments, changes and obituaries, but also facts about people and data about works, description of experiences and initiatives, etc. — that promotes an adequate knowledge of group life.

This brief listing of the four types of information in organizations may seem uninteresting, but nevertheless it should be kept well in mind by the confreres involved in communication, whether they be heads of some important publication or of a simple cyclostyled or mimeographed sheet. They will have to ask themselves at the right moment if, besides spreading general and operational information, they are succeeding in transmitting to their readers motivation which is ideally valid, and content which is truly enriching at the human and spiritual level.

Salesian news is absolutely necessary today

After this bird's-eye view on the present situation of Salesian news it is necessary to briefly explain its value and usefulness.

Beginning with its limitations, we have already mentioned the most obvious one: that communication through mass media is not the best there is. Far more beneficial is the 'face-to-face,' person-to-person communication, which among other things allows for an on-the-spot dialogue and makes it possible to understand immediately whether the message sent has been received, understood and accepted, or rather misunderstood, opposed or rejected. One direct meeting is worth more than one hundred letters, articles, pamphlets or books.

Recourse to instruments of social communication becomes necessary, however, in so far as personal communication cannot reach everyone nor can it do it as often as necessary. In practice, for a group as large as the Salesian Family, recourse to such methods, already considered necessary in 1876 by Don Bosco for the forty-four confreres at that time, has today become absolutely indispensable.

Another necessary observation concerns excessive reliance on technology. Some may think that in order to ensure the complete success of communication all that is needed is to possess the most advanced and highly sophisticated means of communication available today. This 'idolatry of progress' could lead us to belittle or ignore the prime importance to be given to the content of communication, the rich substance of the message to be conveyed, without which the most advanced equipment, though attractive to the eye at first, would in the long run definitely leave a sense of emptiness and ill-advised ostentation, and a painful impression of sheer waste.

A sense of belonging

With the ground cleared of erroneous and misleading appraisals, it remains to point out several positive effects of family news. Above all, they cultivate and enrich our sense of belonging to the Salesian Family.

In the first place let us talk about the Salesian. For him to feel at ease in the Congregation, to work with satisfaction and effectiveness for Don Bosco's project and for his own spiritual enrichment, he must have a well-motivated conviction that "it is really worth" belonging to Don Bosco's Family. If the feeling grows in him that his religious family has a specific and important mission to accomplish in the Church, that he has been personally and definitely called to be — as our renewed Constitutions say in art. 2 — a sign and bearer of the love of God for young people, and that he can truly accomplish all this while fulfilling himself as a man, a Christian and a religious, then there can be no doubt in any of us that his heart will open up, and he will feel the joy of being Don Bosco's son and living happily in his vocation.

On the other hand, if he limits his vision to his own local group, which may seem insignificant to him, unsuited to witness to anything convincingly, incapable of solving the concrete problems of his fellowmen, he may easily feel useless, worthless, frustrated and disappointed in his aspirations.

Thanks to the Good Lord, we sons of Don Bosco today find ourselves placed in a substantially positive situation, regardless of human sins and weaknesses. The Family that Don Bosco created with his heroic sanctity is still a valid reality, operating effectively within the Church. As a matter of fact, it has been receiving public testimonials of appreciation and trust — sometimes perhaps beyond its merits — on the part of public opinion and many civil and Church authorities and I do not hesitate to say from the Pope himself, who has shown this on more than one occasion.

It is a consoling fact that very many confreres in difficult positions and with a life of sacrifice bear wonderful witness to God and to men of their faith and love for youth.

Now Salesian news that informs us without triumphalism or ostentation, but serenely and objectively on the activities of those who work for Don Bosco can only have an advantageous effect on one's sense of belonging to the Salesian Family. News 'without triumphalism or ostentation' I said, and I did so advisedly. For it is the truth — Saint Paul reminds us — and certainly not a pretentious put-on nor hidden persuasion that makes us free.

But I am thinking of certain isolated confreres, placed in a narrow-minded and perhaps mediocre community, engaged in thankless work — sometimes one continues for years and years to water the proverbial 'dry stick,' without any hope of ever seeing it sprout —. In such situations discouragement becomes understandable, as does the temptation to give up. If on top of that the confrere knows little or nothing about the other confreres, then he can easily generalize his pessimism, with easily foreseeable results. If on the other hand he is able to discover that in very many other parts of the Salesian world there are confreres who plant with the Lord's blessing and reap generous fruits, he can find in this a source of comfort and stimulation to remain faithful at his post even in difficult moments.

So let there be Family news! Abundant and positive Salesian news will reinforce his sense of belonging and give forth its results of enthusiasm, self-fulfilment, satisfaction and joy shared by all in the Lord.

The effects of widespread publicity

What has been said with reference to the Salesian applies equally well to everyone else — Cooperator, Past Pupil, etc. — working in the Salesian Family. Family news can improve everybody's involvement in Don Bosco's mission.

But this same news, if it is used well, can do more than just support us; it can make us new friends who will join forces with us. Don Bosco obtained support for his apostolic project because he was able to make it popular through the means of social communication. He achieved this *popularity* through a combination of what social communication experts today call *publicity* and *appeal*.

- Don Bosco's project, which he wanted to make known to the largest number of people possible, was publicized through the Salesian Bulletin: "Let us increase its circulation as much as possible," he said. "Let us make it known in every possible way."¹⁷

Fr. Ceria commented that he "used to recommend that it (i.e. the Salesian Bulletin) be sent not only to Cooperators, but also to as many as he knew who would not turn it down."¹⁸ Even more explicit is what Don Bosco said about 1884 in reply to a direct question of the Founder of the Pompei Institute: "Here is my secret," he replied. "I send the Salesian Bulletin both to those who want it and those who do not."¹⁹

- But publicity is not enough. For the Bulletin to achieve the desired result of bringing good people together, *appeal* was needed as well. The term used by Don Bosco has a richer meaning than that found in social communication books. He spoke of '*affetto*', affection. It is a question of "winning the people's affection for our institutions."²⁰

In reality, Don Bosco in the past century perceived empirically and applied consistently principles that today's social communication experts express in less simple formulas.

The fact remains that the popularity of this important project

¹⁷ MB 13, 261.

¹⁸ E. Ceria, *id.*, I, 242.

¹⁹ MB 17, 670.

²⁰ MB 13, 260.

of Don Bosco was a vital force that kept it going, and it continues to do so. A real knowledge of what the Salesians do in the world can inspire honest, Christian-minded and youth-concerned people with a desire to know more about the Salesians' involvement in youth work and can lead them to associate themselves with us. Thus from a contact with Salesian values and works people can easily and gradually acquire our Salesian outlook and developed a desire to belong to the Salesian Family.

At the operational level, this can mean, in the first place, that people give us external support in the form of financial contributions for our missionary work. Then their collaboration can be made more concrete by their joining some groups organized by the Salesians. Later, in the light of personal experience and reflection, they may feel a call to play a more stable and precise role in the Salesian Family, such as that of Cooperator, and in the case of young people the goal can even be to consecrate one's life as a Salesian or a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians or a Volunteer of Don Bosco. I am not speaking hypothetically, but through personal experience, for the modest history of our Congregation is rich with some very vivid episodes of this kind.

Salesian news today is in a state of crisis

The Salesian news system set in motion by Don Bosco and improved on by his successors, though continuing to render invaluable service, has been in a state of crisis over the past ten or twenty years. A similar crisis has also hit other religious institutes, but perhaps we have felt it more sharply because in our Family news has had and still has a particularly prominent role to play.

What are the causes of such a crisis? There are at least two — one that could be called external, related to the profound changes going on in society, and the other internal, related to the changes occurring in our community life.

The Salesians in the "World Village"

The new sociological fact is that the Salesians too — like all men today — have been taking up more stable residence in what Marshall McLuhan has called the "world village." In fact, thanks to the increase and improvement of the instruments for social communication, news today spreads on a world-wide scale with the same speed as it used to circulate from door to door, from gossip to gossip in any old-time village. In other words, as McLuhan has been telling us, our planet is shrinking to the dimensions of a village, as far as news is concerned.

In fact, we all find ourselves much more informed on what is happening in the world than in times past. Reliable sources speak of 8,000 daily papers in the world, 25,000 weeklies, 27,000 radio broadcasting stations, 18,000 television transmitters, 250,000 cinemas, and a total of about 150 million people employed in social communication.²¹

Now the torrent of news that continuously pours into the atmosphere from all directions and to which people are exposed whether they want it or not — and most of them seem to want it —, does not stop at the doors of religious communities, much less at those of the Salesian ones, since our mission to youth and the working classes leaves us wide open to the world. We can thus imagine one of the little houses in the "world village" to be that of a Salesian community. The news that reaches it, is for the most part news that we could term worldly, without necessarily giving this term a negative connotation. It is news about politics, current events, sports, social life, etc., all so disproportionately abundant as to swamp the other news of a religious or strictly Salesian nature.

It is a fact today that Don Bosco's voice, amidst the deafening

²¹ Msgr. André-Marie Deskur, *La Chiesa, lo Stato e i mass-media* (Church, State and Mass-media) in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26th March 1976.

chorus of the thousand other sounds carried by television, radio, records and cassettes, weeklies, dailies and books of all kinds, reaches our ears more and more muffled, fainter and fainter with each passing day. The negative effect of this on our religious life can easily be imagined.

Scheduled times for reading family news have declined

Besides this disturbing fact, we must take note of a more or less legitimate change which has nevertheless occurred in our communities. I mean the decline, in too many cases, of the fixed times for reading Salesian news.

The ever more rapid rhythm of modern life, which has also influenced the Salesians — who by vocation and on the example of Don Bosco are engaged in a very active life — has caused a further abating and almost erasing of the already short amount of time once given to Family news. An ideal moment for this news remains the time for Spiritual Reading, with which however some of the confreres dispense almost regularly and all too easily. Another time that was traditionally dedicated to family news was mealtime, which is now reserved for brotherly conversation.

Let us try to recall for an instant the Salesian legislation and practice of past times, in an attempt to recapture their spirit and their concern with regard to Family news.

Our 1923 Rule, which remained in effect until comparatively recently, 'canonized' the duty of reading at table "the decrees of the Holy See which refer to us, the constitutions, the regulations, the Acts of the Superior Council, edifying letters, the Salesian Bulletin, the biography of St. John Bosco, of deceased Salesians, of the Saints and other persons... particularly missionaries and educators of the young."²²

²² *Regulations of the Salesian Society*, 1923, art. 19.

But even before that Fr. Rua, in his Circulars, gave some detailed and stringent instructions. The Provincials after their visits to the houses had to report to the Rector Major “whether reading at mealtime was done regularly and, when the Bulletin came in, whether it was given precedence... whether the same was done in the case of other Salesian news, and whether due importance was given to Circular Letters.”²³ On another occasion, after recalling the obligation of reading the life of Don Bosco and the Salesian Bulletin of each month, Fr. Rua exclaimed: “How could one excuse a Rector who does nothing of this? And what could be said of the custom, started in various places, of shortening the reading at mealtime or beginning it after serving soup and finishing it ordinarily before serving dessert?”²⁴

These detailed norms and severe admonitions are indications of the obvious concern that confreres should never be deprived of family news. Today those times and those ways have changed; but has the need for Salesian news, too? The answer is no, and we will immediately state why.

Out of sight...

The spreading of news which we have called worldly, together with the decline of those set times for the reading of family news bring about a crisis not only in the Salesian news, but also in our feeling of belonging to the Congregation. The voice of Don Bosco is growing weak in our ears, and the Salesian ideal is becoming dim in our eyes. For its part, civil society offers a wide array of alternative life projects — often easier and more alluring — for self-fulfilment. There is an old saying that is valid not only for engaged or married couples, but also for religious

²³ Circular Letter of 25th December 1902, point 8a.

²⁴ Circular Letter of 1st November 1906, point 4.

in respect of their Congregation and their ideal: "Out of sight, out of mind."

Probably no Salesian has left the Congregation solely because of a scarcity or lack of Salesian news. But very probably ignorance of the positive aspects of our Family was a contributing cause in every case.

After all, the abandonment of one's vocation is only the extreme and visible result of a less serious but more far-reaching crisis, from which today perhaps many more confreres are suffering than we realize.

These considerations cannot leave the Salesian who loves Don Bosco indifferent, especially if he should hold a post of responsibility for other confreres in the Congregation.

Together for a more active commitment

The importance of Salesian news, that we have seen fully recognized by Don Bosco, as well as the danger lurking in its present crisis, of which we are aware and for which we are probably suffering personally, are reasons that should provoke in us a more active commitment to work in this sensitive area. This is also demanded by the care we must take of our vocation and by Don Bosco's mission that we have been called to carry on amongst the young.

To each individual confrere I would like to put these questions: How do you stand with regard to Salesian news? Do you look forward to it with anticipation and receive it with joy, as you do in the case of a letter from a dear one? Or do you feel uninterested and bored? Do you dedicate a little of your time to knowing Don Bosco and his charism, your confreres and their work in the Province and in the world? Do you know where to find this news? Are you interested in having books and publications at your disposal? Have you made it a real

habit of reading Salesiana? All this can be of great help for you and your vocation.

- To the *Superiors of communities* I would like to say a great deal, because so much depends on them. Let them begin by asking themselves a few questions about the kind of conversation that prevails amongst the confreres. What do they talk about? Are they limiting their conversations to sports and crime or do they rise to the higher level of spiritual and Salesian things? There are here tell-tale signs of what really interests them.

It is up to the local Superiors to find any necessary ways and means to re-establish suitable times and places for Salesian news within their communities.

A first step is *providing subscriptions* to Salesian periodicals and purchasing Salesian *books* for their communities and individual confreres.

A second step is stocking the *library* and setting up a *reading room*. These places should be not only adequately supplied (skimping is no longer commendable and recommended...), but also comfortable.

Here I would like to point out an original initiative, which is an improvement on the regular reading room. For some time in some communities there has been in operation a *Salesiana Reading Room* (« *la sala della salesianità* »), i.e. a room reserved specifically for Salesian material, e.g. ample collections of Salesian publications, audiovisuals, documents of old vintage, picture albums, curios, antiques, souvenirs, etc. — briefly, anything that could help the confreres to get better acquainted with Don Bosco and their mission.

- A third step concerns the *community use of family news*. Getting it through private reading is useful, but it is not enough. I would say that Salesian news is effective solely when the community becomes aware of it. This can be achieved through community practices, such as the Spiritual Reading — probably still the most suitable time —, conferences, and good-night talks.

The Rectors should not be satisfied with merely retelling events and repeating ideas, but should get the confreres to join the conversation and express their opinions, thus making sure that they derive some benefit from it. This can be done much more easily in small communities. It can be done also when the community is gathered together in the chapel. (The recollected atmosphere of a chapel should not make us fall silent, for the Apostles and disciples were not made silent by their awareness of being in the Lord's presence, but conversed familiarly with him and among themselves.)

- *Those in charge of training Salesians* have a special task to perform for the new generations of confreres. They must instil in them a lively interest in our family events. The years of training should be the "suitable time" for developing that habit of reading Salesian news which is to accompany these confreres for the rest of their lives. A Salesian who does not acquire a habit of perusing with enthusiasm and perseverance the Salesian sources of information during his training period, will hardly do it later.

Modern teaching methods in the studentates could likewise be usefully oriented and applied to Salesian information, both with regard to historical and theological and pastoral matters.

- *The Provincial and his collaborators* have also a selective role to play, because it is in their power to promote or to stifle the flow of news. This begins with the news about the Provincial community carried by the Provincial Newsletter.

- A special word needs to be addressed to the *Salesians directly in charge of Salesian news*. They are now numerous and are placed at various levels—from the Generalate to the Provincial and local houses. Some of them are responsible for complex publications; others for modest but very useful cyclo-styled or mimeographed sheets; and all of them are dedicated to

a work which often brings little recognition and entails much sacrifice.

Sometimes they may be criticized for putting too much printed matter in circulation, and this might be true. But what at first sight might appear to be a problem of quantity is very often nothing but a problem of quality, because whatever is poorly written from a journalistic point of view, even though it may be small in quantity, is rejected by the readers, and psychologically it is already too much.

If a recommendation is to be made to these workers, it concerns their professional training. (We have said above that social communications is a science, a technical skill and an art.) But more than to these confreres, who do their work out of obedience, our recommendation is directed to their superiors, who have the duty of training their personnel. Schools of journalism have grown in number throughout the world: amateurism and improvisation are no longer adequate in this field; on the contrary, they are tragic.

• *To everyone* I would like to say once again: Do not keep Family news for yourself — stored away in your cupboard, so to say. When it is suitable, pass it on to your boys, in sermons and talks, and in various other situations. In the past and even now, many Salesians had and still have a talent for speaking about Don Bosco and Salesian matters with charm and ease. We have known many such confreres — and some are still with us in our communities — who possessed a vast, nearly inexhaustible repertoire of Salesian anecdotes and were thus able to carry on lively conversation with their boys for hours and hours on end.

As you see, dear Confreres, in this area there is work for everyone.

In the centenary year of the Salesian Bulletin

There remains to say one last word on that beloved creation of Don Bosco's, whose "100th Birthday" we are getting ready to celebrate in a most effective way, and which has been the reason for this Letter, i.e. the Salesian Bulletin.

We already have a pretty good understanding of its importance for the Salesian Family. Don Bosco used to call it "(not only) the main means" but clearly "the indispensable means for our Congregation."²⁵ On one occasion he said: "It is the main bulwark of the Salesian works and of whatever concerns us, our vocations and our schools."²⁶ Then he added: "The Salesian Society will flourish materially, if we strive to uphold and spread the Salesian Bulletin."²⁷ It was Don Bosco's belief that "if it failed, our works too would fail."²⁸

The 1971 Special General Chapter declared the Salesian Bulletin "the official organ of the Salesian Family,"²⁹ but despite the appearance this declaration meant no change or anything new. Although written primarily to inspire and encourage the Salesian Cooperators and to attract new ones, the Salesian Bulletin from the very beginning had a much wider and more comprehensive purpose. Don Bosco had already called it "the newspaper of our Congregation,"³⁰ and wanted it to reach his Salesians as well: "The Bulletin is written for us and for our Cooperators."³¹ But he intended it for a still wider circle of readers: "The Bulletin is but a tool for acquainting others with our undertakings

²⁵ MB 18, 146.

²⁶ MB 17, 669.

²⁷ MB 17, 645.

²⁸ MB 13, 261.

²⁹ *Regulations of the Salesian Society*, art. 32.

³⁰ MB 13, 81.

³¹ MB 16, 412.

and uniting all good Christians in spirit and purpose.”³² Therefore he used to say: “Let us increase its circulation as much as possible; let us make it known in every possible way.”³³

Even the Tenth General Chapter in 1895 shared this view, and stated that the Salesian Bulletin was “the organ of the entire Salesian Society,” thus placing no limitations — as also the recent Special General Chapter has done — regarding its readers.

It will therefore be our task in this centenary year to work for its wider circulation — first of all, among the sons of Don Bosco and then among their families. (Who more than our dear ones are entitled to know of, and enjoy reading about, the wonderful things accomplished in the Salesian world with God’s blessing?)

Then the Delegates of the Cooperators and the Past Pupils should take up again at once promoting a regular circulation of the Bulletin in their associations, whenever this has been interrupted. Those in charge of other organizations operating within our Salesian environment should do the same. Parish priests should consider the Salesian Bulletin as a welcome bond with the families most actively engaged in parish apostolate. Nor should the people who work with us in our houses (teachers, employees, etc.) be forgotten.

We do well to make the Bulletin known also to the parents of our boys. In as much as by the mere fact of entrusting their children to us they show a desire to join forces with us in their education, they will find it interesting and useful. Also our pupils should be acquainted with the Bulletin, when the occasion arises in the school or elsewhere; they could use it for school research projects, for missiological education and for vocational information and talks.

The Bulletin should also reach people and places which are

³² *ibid.*

³³ MB 13, 261.

'outsiders' to our work and to which our work should be made known, i.e. civil and religious authorities, cultural organizations, libraries, companies and firms with which we deal regularly, and also plain sympathizers.

All this is part of that precise duty which our Constitutions impose on us with regard to the Salesian Family: "In it (we) have the special responsibility of preserving unity of spirit and of encouraging those friendly contacts which lead to enrichment and to a more fruitful apostolate."³⁴ There is no better way to achieve this than through the Salesian Bulletin.

In this connection we should adopt Don Bosco's modern outlook and approach. We should consider, as he did, the Salesian Bulletin as a kind of 'house organ,' that is, like the periodical that any large business concern distributes among its employees, sales personnel and customers to promote a better public image, better public relations and ...better business. Good results are bound to come to us from our Bulletin, too.

This is the experience of the past. In 1905 Fr. Rua wrote: "Don Bosco's predictions have come true. The Salesian Cooperators have grown in numbers prodigiously: they can be found everywhere in the world. The Bulletin is printed in 8 different languages and is read with enthusiasm. In this way about 300,000 people are kept informed of the work being done by the Salesians, and according to their moral capacity and material means they come to their assistance."³⁵

Since then the Salesian Family has been growing steadily — and whenever a Salesian Bulletin is skilfully edited and widely circulated, unfailingly the goals are achieved which Don Bosco set forth and the Special General Chapter summed up: "To diffuse the spirit of Don Bosco, to provide information about the work being done and its needs, to bring together the various

³⁴ *Const.*, art. 5.

³⁵ Circular Letter of 19th February 1905.

groups in our family, to encourage and inspire them, and to promote vocations.”³⁶

To attain all this, the Bulletin needs steady care and support. Like every living being, it needs to be protected and nourished. But it yields generous returns, for it wins friends to the Salesian work, strengthens the bonds of affection and cooperation, and helps to build up Don Bosco's Family.

“In thinking about these things,” Fr. Rua went on to say in the aforementioned text, “I assure you, my dearest sons, that I cannot be persuaded that those Salesians are inspired with true zeal who are devising a thousand other means rather than following that of spreading the Salesian Bulletin. I tell you in all sincerity, I cannot feel glad when I am told that certain confreres are working untiringly to establish and direct other associations and are giving no thought to that of the Cooperators which is completely Salesian. I cannot praise those who take on immense sacrifices and unbearable burdens to print and circulate other periodicals while they leave piled and buried under dust the Salesian Bulletins that we sent them with the hope they would distribute them.” (Circular Letter of February 19, 1905).

We should do our best to avoid deserving this reprimand from the one who wanted, even for the Salesian Bulletin, to go halves with Don Bosco. We too will work effectively in this Salesian Bulletin centenary if between August 1977 and August 1978 we try to take up some initiative such as our love for Don Bosco and our creativeness prompted by his example will suggest to us.

Conclusion: Let us publicize the good we are doing

To conclude this brotherly conversation on Family news, which for well founded reasons we consider truly capable of

³⁶ *Regulations*, art. 32.

helping us make the Salesian Family grow, there only remains to listen once again to Our Father Don Bosco, in a passage I consider fundamental for this subject. It is stated by Fr. Ceria in these words:

“There were at various times people who criticized Don Bosco for resorting to publicity either through the newspapers or through occasional pamphlets. We would like to say that his virtue stood out even in this matter.

In fact Don Bosco did not ignore the attitudes of some people and the criticisms of some others, nor was he unaware of the fact that by acting in this manner he was forfeiting the esteem of some people in high positions. Sometimes these would express their disapproval quite openly to his face.

However, he justified his way of acting by saying: ‘Our times demand action. The world has become earth-centered. *We must therefore work and publicize the good we are doing.* Even if one were to work miracles by praying night and day in the privacy of his own room, the world would take no notice nor believe. *The world must see and touch for itself.*’

Dear Confreres, as I said when introducing this letter, from Don Bosco’s clear ideas and especially constant and consistent work there come to the new generations of Salesians ideas and guidelines that we feel to be extremely valid, and I would say pressing, for our times. It is up to us now to make the word and example of the Father fall on good ground.

Sending my greetings and prayers to each and everyone of you, I am,

Affectionately yours,

FR. LOUIS RICCERI
Rector Major