

# ACTS OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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*Rome, Italy*

*August 24, 1979*

*My dear Confreres,*

Good news has been coming in from various parts of the Salesian world in terms of renewed efforts to understand and practise Don Bosco's Preventive System. Almost all the Provincial communities are taking serious steps to follow the directives of the 21st General Chapter and the thoughts I expressed in my circular letter on the Salesian Educational Plan, as well as the yearly practice.

Moreover, the 25th anniversary of the canonization of Dominic Savio was celebrated in many places. This provided the occasion to stress some of the typical characteristics of our Salesian way of carrying on the apostolate. In Rome we had a Salesian youth pilgrimage. Boys and young people from all parts of Italy came for an unforgettable meeting with the Pope. And from the Holy Father's talk on that occasion we are able to glean some fine pointers and priorities for our Salesian pastoral and educational work.

These two facts give me the opportunity of sharing some thoughts with you on the importance of "Youth Groups and Youth Movements". Their growth and development in our present day will be a very practical example of the re-launching of the Preventive System.

I should like to present to you a few thoughts on this topic. The Councillor for the Youth Apostolate, Father John Vecchi, is stressing this same topic and will continue to do so during the coming year. With the help of his immediate col-

laborators he will provide you with study aids, information, and guidelines for planning.

I wrote in my circular letter on the Salesian Educational Plan: "In our living tradition, the renewal of the Preventive System is closely linked to making operational certain conditions of community living and sharing which appear to be quite simple, but which carry rich educational implications" (ASC No. 290, p. 40).

Among these typical characteristics we are asked to emphasize "Youth Groups and Youth Movements." In my address at the closure of the 21st General Chapter, I had pointed out how much importance the Chapter gave to directives which would enable our works to qualify as places of evangelization, and in particular, "in the line of apostolic group work" (ACG XXI, No. 572).

### **An authentic and urgent request**

However, the most authoritative appeal came to us recently from the Pope himself. During the Salesian Youth Pilgrimage of May 5, 1979, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, spoke to the numerous children and young people gathered in St. Peter's Square and said:

"You expect from the Pope a word of guidance and encouragement for this renewed youth action... My second suggestion for you and for all those in charge of your human and Christian education, concerns the urgent need, felt nearly everywhere of the revival of sound models of Catholic youth associations.

"It is not a question of creating militant expressions deprived of ideal impetus and based on the force of numbers, but of animating real communities, instilled with the spirit of kindness, mutual respect and service, and above all made compact by the same faith and by one unique hope... In belonging to a group, in the spontaneity and homogeneity of a circle of friends, in

constructive comparison of ideas and initiatives, in mutual support, the vitality of that social renewal to which you all aspire can be established and preserved.

“You young people aim at the precious goal of community implementation, of conversation, of friendship, of giving oneself and of receiving, of love. Youth associations are flourishing again: the Pope exhorts you to be faithful, clear-sighted, and resourceful in this effort to make these societies more and more far-reaching. It is a pressing invitation that I address to all those responsible for the Christian education of youth, that is of the men of tomorrow” (Oss. Romano, 7-8, May, 1979). We must take seriously this “pressing invitation” of the Pope and act on it courageously.

*Vatican Council II* had also stressed the importance and efficacy of Christian formation through group experiences. The Declaration on Christian Education states that the Church values highly various educational media and seeks to ennoble them by imbuing them with its own spirit. Among these there is an explicit mention of “youth associations” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, No. 4).

In the Decree on the Training of Priests, those involved in any way in the education of boys and young men, “and this applies especially to Catholic societies,” are urged to foster vocations among the young (*Optatum Totius*, No. 2). It is above all in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People that the Council Fathers developed the topic of group apostolates. They point out that these are to be found in apostolic associations, and they emphasize that groups dedicated to apostolic purposes must be respected and guided (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Nos. 18, 19, 21).

Our own *21st General Chapter* also called for a rebirth of group experiences and community experiences for youth. The Chapter did this in the context of the renewal of our manner of evangelizing youth. We are to be with the boys and young people in such a manner as to respond to their present-day

needs. The Chapter considers this condition as an essential element of the Salesian manner of evangelization \*, as a constant characteristic of our finest apostolic experiences, as one of the “privileged places” to inculcate our Salesian values, and as an environment which guarantees a Salesian approach to apostolic activity.

Our *renewed Constitutions* remind us of this same obligation in articles 22 and 28. We have to know how to encourage and animate youth groups and youth movements in terms of formation, apostolic activity, and social action.

Such a commitment requires on our part a special effort to adjust to the present-day conditions of youth according to the cultural situation of each region and nation. In this we are to follow the pastoral criteria which are the fruit of group and community experiences. These criteria will, of course, be in accord with the pastoral guidelines of the local church in which we are working; but they will also be a well thought-out effort on our part to recapture the original inspiration of our charism of predilection for the young. In order to do this, it is important to recapture two characteristics of our Salesian origins.

First of all, let me recall the importance of having an “oratorian heart.” I spoke of this in my talk at the conclusion of the 21st General Chapter (CG XXI, Nos. 565-568). By this expression, I want to stress the primacy, in the attitude of the Salesian educator, that must be given to the “pastoral thrust” as the principle which inspires every type of Salesian presence among youth. Members of youth groups and youth movements must be able to sense, more than anything else, that a Salesian is involved in the apostolate because he is in love with Christ. We are not simply “teachers” among the young. We are disciples of the Risen Lord, enthusiastic missionaries of youth.

Secondly, we are called upon to put into practice a *new*

(\*) Cf. GC XXI, Nos. 90, 102, 115, 126, 131:2.3.4., 132, 158 c.

*Salesian presence.* This entails a relaunching of the spirit of initiative or pastoral creativity (GC XXI, Nos. 156-159).

This new Salesian presence is a principle of our pastoral method, and it is “the fruit of pastoral creativity for the benefit of young people; it fills in the gaps which have not as yet been carefully studied.”

The Chapter gives some examples of such gaps, or ways in which we must strive to reach young people. One of them is the following: “the promotion of *youth movements*, while at the same time assisting youngsters in their search and desire for bonds of unity which go beyond the confines of their own environment” (GC XXI, No. 158).

Therefore, it is clear that we are authoritatively and urgently asked to seriously commit ourselves, in a spirit of creativity, to the promotion of youth groups and youth movements. This we are to do with a genuine “oratorian heart” and with means which are up-to-date.

### **Original inspiration**

One might say that the tendency to live and work in groups and the desire for community life was almost a spontaneous experience in the life of our Founder, Don Bosco. He had a natural inclination to be sociable and to make friends. From the time he was a boy, he seemed to show signs of his vocation by the religious and apostolic flavour which characterized the groups he belonged to. Nevertheless, his association with his peers was always marked by his human warmth, his friendly and lively character, and his naturalness and enterprising spirit.

We can see that as a young man he saw the importance, at least in a general way, of group experiences for Christian formation. He was industrious and creative in his dealings with the boys from the hamlet of Becchi and the nearby towns. He organised the *Società dell'Allegria* at school in Chieri. He ap-

preciated the experience of community life and valued the friendships he made at the seminary. Later this experience will find its concrete expression in the Salesian "Sodalities." Don Bosco possessed many natural gifts and keen educational intuition. These gifts were enriched by experience. Thus he learned to communicate effectively to youngsters the joys and advantages of sharing in a fraternal fashion their way to the Lord and of placing themselves at the service of others in everyday things. He taught them how they could live a life of faith with simplicity, authenticity and balance in the ordinary occurrences of their daily lives.

We find in Don Bosco's fascinating autobiography a description of the kind of boys who were members of the *Società dell'Allegria*. The boys who tried to entice him into trouble were usually doing rather poorly in their school work. John's friendliness prompted them to ask him either to loan them or dictate to them the assignment given by the teacher. John consented. But the teacher did not approve of it. After this episode John tried a better way of helping them, namely, to review their lessons with them and tutor them. This way everybody was happy and he gained their goodwill, affection and esteem. Little by little they began coming to him, first to play with him, then to hear his stories or to do their homework. Finally, as in Murialdo and Castelnuovo, they just came for no special reason. It was like a club of their own, and they started calling it *Società dell'Allegria* (*Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p. 52).

Thus, Don Bosco's first experience in forming a youth group was not so much an effort to gather together the best boys but a venture on behalf of those boys who had a special need of getting their ideas and their ideals straight. And this effort paid off immediately in terms of bettering the environment by their witness and charitable activities.

But the most important group experience, as it relates to the Preventive System, was the *Sodalities*. Sodalities came into being as a means of education in the early days of the Oratory.

They had the same goals and characteristics as the Oratory itself, and they shared its spirit in a very real way. Don Bosco writes: "Once I had set up Valdocco as our permanent residence, I started to stress those things which could help us keep united in spirit, in life-style, and in administration" (M.O. p. 195). The first of the Sodalities was that of St. Aloysius, founded by Don Bosco himself. Next came the Immaculate Conception Sodality, which — Don Bosco testifies — was founded by Dominic Savio. Then came the others; six altogether (M.B. II, 225). These sodalities became an integral part of Don Bosco's whole educational set-up. They offered an opportunity for the boys to participate actively in their own education and to act as a leaven in the whole group. Most of all, they helped reinforce the religious and educational goals of the Preventive System as a whole. They also served to make up for deficiencies which would naturally be found in any environment.

A sodality should not be thought of as an independent and closed group just for the formation and activity of a few members. The members must be a leaven in their environment by means of their Christian witness and their service on behalf of all their companions. The Immaculate Conception Sodality, for example, whose members were chosen with particular care, had as its purpose to act as a leaven among all the boys as part of the overall educational and pastoral plan.

Every sodality had its own objectives — objectives which corresponded to concrete situations and to the need of youngsters to mature gradually. But each sodality fit into a common spiritual and organizational background. What gave these sodalities vigour were the religious and educational values which they had in common. They were linked together as part of the same environment and the same educative community. They were at the service of this community as an expression of active participation in the overall educational plan. Thus they were keenly and responsibly involved in the important goals of the one educational and pastoral plan.

## A requirement of the Preventive System

Carrying on the formation of youth by means of youth groups is an indispensable requirement in the kind of preventive plan envisioned by Don Bosco. In a circular letter of January 12, 1876, he himself wrote to his Salesians: "In each house let everyone take a great interest in fostering youth associations... Let no one hesitate to talk about them, to encourage them, and to explain their purpose... *I believe that these groups can be called key to prayer life, the defense of morality, and the support of religious and priestly vocations*" (Epistolario, vol. 3, p. 7-8). In his commitment to Christian education Don Bosco wanted to reach large numbers of youngsters. There was no way he could effectively reach the individual boys without their active and well-organized participation. Hence the need for youth associations that would have an educational and religious thrust.

This was clearly understood by the first collaborators of our good Father, by the Salesians of the first generations and by all the successors of Don Bosco. It would take us too long to quote what the Superiors General who had known Don Bosco personally (Don Rua, Don Albera, Don Rinaldi) wrote and said on this topic, as well as the others. By way of example, I might mention how Father Rinaldi insisted that the Rector consider among the most important duties of his ministry the diligent care of youth associations.

The educational style of the Preventive System is not based only on individual relationships. It entails creating with great care an environment and an atmosphere where education can take place. Here is where the associations of the students themselves play a key role. In the Preventive System these associations have had various characteristics, both of an educational as well as of a religious and spiritual nature.

Among the educational characteristics, let me mention the following:

— They presuppose a clear freedom of participation.

— They are meant to be an authentic activity of the boys themselves.

— They have a precise educational aim.

— They stress sensitivity in the service of one's neighbour — especially of one's schoolmates.

We are dealing, therefore, with associations of those who are to be educated, or of youth associations for the purposes of education. This, in turn, basically implies a union of purposes and of commitment between the students and the educators.

When we speak of these associations as the "activity (or work) of the boys themselves" in "union" with the action of their educators, we are at the same time indicating the inner dynamic and the educational thrust of these associations. We are also referring to the unique role of the Assistant in terms of his function as animator-educator.

These associations also have the characteristics of a religious nature. Let me mention a few:

— There is a very definite influence of the faith in the daily life of the members; there is also a clear vision of their last end.

— Fulfilling one's duties is seen as a religious mission.

— There is an emphasis placed on discerning one's vocation in life and growing in it.

— Generous and charitable service on behalf of one's neighbour — even in a heroic way — is inculcated.

— There is a stress on the coresponsibility for the apostolate that has its source in one's baptismal commitment.

These associations, therefore, are explicitly based on religious and Christian motives. They are by no means just groups which have only human and cultural development as their aim. We see here in a practical way that these groups both evangelize

and educate. In other words, the slogan “to evangelize by educating and to educate by evangelizing” finds its concrete expression in the Preventive System. Obviously, we are not speaking of just any kind of group or movement. We are speaking of a special type of Christian youth groups.

Finally, these associations have characteristics of a spiritual nature. Here are some of them:

— The youth associations of Don Bosco fit into the overall spirituality of the Preventive System.

— They concentrate their attention on the mystery of Christ, the Friend of Youth, and on Mary, the Help of Christians and the Mother of the Church.

— Hence they do not lead to an exclusive spirituality, but they contribute to the spiritual welfare of the whole educative environment — although each association has its own goals and objectives.

We are dealing, therefore, with associations which are imbued with the Salesian spirituality of Don Bosco, which is, by its very nature, a youthful spirituality. Father Caviglia wrote some very insightful pages on this topic in his precious study on *Savio Domenico e Don Bosco* (cf. Book X, especially Chapter II). I think it is important to stress that at the time when youth associations were started and began to flourish at the Oratory, there was a strong and rich Salesian spirituality there. The unique spirit of Don Bosco was intensely present. It permeated the environment and created an educational atmosphere that led to true sanctity.

It is worthwhile for me to repeat here what I wrote in my circular letter on the Salesian educational plan: “The original and bold goal of helping youngsters become saints is part and parcel of Don Bosco’s educational expertise. His great insight was not only to avoid disappointing the deep-seated aspirations of the young (their need for joy, freedom, life, liberty; their need for room to grow and to look to the future) but also to

have gradually and realistically brought the youngsters themselves to the realization of the fact that their authentic ideals could be fulfilled only through a life of grace, i.e., friendship with Christ, the source of unending joy. 'Here we make sanctity consist in always being cheerful' " (ASC No. 290, p. 37). I wanted to recall these facts and to help you reflect on their meaning. The purpose of course, is to rediscover our precious heritage in terms of experience with youth associations.\*

The actual way of putting this heritage into practice has gone through many phases as our environments have evolved and the Church's approach has changed with the times. In our present day we are not asked to rigidly reproduce a structure from the past but to grasp, in a practical and genuine manner, the pastoral and educational principles which underlie that structure. Knowing how to do this will help us to discern well and to avoid deviations from the educative plan of Don Bosco. We shall not lose our Salesian spiritual identity as we strive to choose group activities for our young people and organise them.

### **The idea of youth Associations today**

It is fashionable to say that our modern day youth are tired of belonging to youth groups. But that statement is contradicted by the facts. Without a doubt there has been a crisis of those types of youth associations which are bound up with outmoded structures and which no longer correspond to real

(\*) On the topic of socialities in the Salesian tradition, cf. the following:

- 1) *Memorie Biografiche*: Index, under the words « Compagnie Religiose ».
- 2) A. CAVIGLIA: *Savio Domenico e Don Bosco*, a study in: *Opere e Scritti editi e inediti di D. Bosco*, Vol. 4, Turin 1935.
- 3) E. CERIA: *Annali della Società Salesiana*, Vol. I, p. 641-643, Turin, S.E.I., 1961.
- 4) PIETRO BRAIDO: *Il Sistema Preventivo di Don Bosco*, « The Sodalities », p. 377-387, PAS-Verlag, 1964, 2nd edition.
- 5) PIERO STELLA: *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*, Vol. II, p. 346-357: « Le associazioni religiose », PAS-Verlag, 1969.

needs. In Salesian circles as well, our Sodalities have suffered a real setback. However, it would not be accurate to say that the Salesian Family has reached the point of putting aside completely the experience of youth associations.

A quick glance over the vast field of our apostolate brings us in touch with quite a number of creative efforts in this area (cf. the study made by the Youth Pastoral Department, which will soon be sent to the Provinces). Perhaps in some cases there are deficiencies in the way new initiatives have been arbitrarily chosen, or there is a lack of a clear Salesian sense of direction. There may be difficulties in remaining faithful to Don Bosco's educational plan while being in tune with the signs of the times. At times there may be a lack of constancy and coresponsibility on the part of communities and provinces. We must also be aware of the fact that after the decline of the old forms of youth groups, some confreres have organized on their own certain experiments of which spontaneity, discontinuity, and independence are the hallmarks.

If we are to accomplish our mission, we must be well aware of the great changes which have taken place in the area of group activities in recent times. Certain signs of the times which have surfaced have brought with them new moral and social values. We are forced to review our hierarchy of values and to make sure it is in accord with our faith in the pascal mystery. We are faced with the urgent task of creating real Christian models of the kinds of attitudes that the various segments of society should have — especially for youth. In this period of great cultural changes, there is, naturally, much innovation in the educational field. There is more emphasis on new values to be disseminated than on set organizational, cultural or behavioural patterns.

Moreover, there is a strong pastoral renewal going on. The accent is being placed on the historicity of the faith, on the Church inasmuch as it is the initial phase of the mystery of God's kingdom. There is a stress on the kind of unity that

has its basis in plurality. There is a strong emphasis on the *local Church* as a source of unity and as a reference point for every group or movement which springs up or develops in a particular place.

There is also a renewed awareness of the importance of the local and provincial community as well as a deeper reflection on the meaning of Don Bosco's educational thrust.

We live in a time of profound changes. The way youngsters look at things has also changed. Thus it is necessary to take a hard look at the style of youth associations, at the choice of objectives in the various groups and movements, at the presence and the role of the "animators" in these groups, and at the way of wisely and gradually combining the work of education and evangelization in them. This list of factors of change is by no means complete. I have no intention of trying to single out or explain all the aspects of the present situation. My purpose is simply to show how in the area of the formation of young people through group activities there is a need to come up with a synthesis which takes into account the basic inspiration of Don Bosco's educational plan and applies it to a very different set of circumstances.

In some parts of the Salesian world, members of the Salesian Family have succeeded in re-establishing youth groups (after a few years of uncertainty and experimentation). They have succeeded in bringing about an up-to-date unity between modern culture and the gospel. They have established a proper balance between the leadership taken by the youngsters and the urgent spiritual and educational support of the educators. They stress the importance of harmony between the kind of autonomy and responsibility the young people need and the contribution (in terms of animation) of the educator. The content of the programmes they follow is determined by a spontaneous dialogue in which the young members can share their experiences and the educators can propose certain values to be stressed.

In many places we have succeeded in instilling in Salesian

environments what the 20th General Chapter states about the Salesian school and youth center:

— The Chapter says that the *Salesian school* “aims at creating a youth community... Parents and teachers share in this family too. In it students can *group together* for goals which are formative and helpful” (GC XXI, No. 131, 2.3.4.).

— The Chapter states: “If the *Youth Center* is to be valid as a setting for promoting the overall Christian growth of the young, it must be organized along certain well-defined lines, such as: division into groups, with an eye to the possibilities for formation and apostolic action, in which an explicit education to the faith can be developed” (GC XXI, No. 126, 1.5.3.).

This appeal of the General Chapter comes to us at a time when the efforts are being made all over the Church to study carefully and to revitalize Catholic Associations. Research is being carried on to rediscover the principles upon which each movement was founded and to make sure that each movement has a suitable spirituality of its own. And to facilitate the spread of good ideas and sound values, these movements are striving to be in continual contact with one another.

In conclusion, my dear confreres, let us go back to the fervent appeal the Holy Father made to us on May 5, 1979: there is today an “urgent need, felt nearly everywhere, of the revival of sound models of Catholic youth associations.” Let us hear the call, in this field, to create “a new presence” (cf. GC XXI, No. 158). We are challenged to translate the riches of our educational and spiritual patrimony into action. We must channel the energies of today’s youth and respond to the pastoral demands of the universal church as well as of the local churches.

Let Dominic Savio spur us on during this year which marks the 25th anniversary of his canonization. His youthful sanctity at the Oratory reached its culmination in the founding of the Immaculate Conception Sodality.

Fr. Caviglia, who studied Dominic Savio's life so thoroughly, considers his founding of this youth group as the sign of Dominic's spiritual and apostolic maturity. He calls it "the fact which symbolizes and sums up the whole enterprise of his Salesian sanctity." Now, it certainly is significant to notice that "the origin, the purpose, and the means" of this youth association, "all have to do with Marian devotion, which, in turn, is naturally linked to Eucharistic piety" (A. Caviglia, *op. cit.*, p. 447). This means that Dominic Savio, at the apex of his spiritual growth, invites us to see in Mary a special help to bring about a rapid reflowering of strong Salesian youth associations.

It is my fond hope that each Province and each Provincial Conference or Region will be successful in studying this important topic with its own resources and in accord with local needs and will revitalize one of the most effective "typical characteristics" (ASC, 290, p. 37) of the Salesian style — that style which is a constitutive element of the Don Bosco's Preventive System.

I wish all of you true success in this urgent task.

Assuring you of a remembrance in my daily prayers, I send you greetings of fraternal joy and hope.

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ

*Rector Major*