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		page
1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	Father Egidio Viganò In the ever-growing splendour of the Gospel	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	Father Juan Edmundo Vecchi Our catechetical responsibility	31
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIONS	Information regarding period of religious profession	39
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL	4.1 Plenary session (November 79-January 80)	40
	4.2 Programme of visits	41
	4.3 Activities of Rector Major	43
	4.4 Youth apostolate	44
	4.5 Missions	44
5. DOCUMENTS AND NEWS ITEMS	5.1 Poland: new Provinces	47
	5.2 Appointments	50
	5.3 Missionary personnel	50
	5.4 Brotherly Solidarity (31st re- port)	51
	5.5 Devotion to Mary: a plan	53
	5.6 Redimensioning UPS	59
	5.7 Houses opened & closed 1979	68
	5.8 Deceased confrères	70

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Father Egidio VIGANO'

In the ever-growing splendour of the gospel

« IN THE EVERGROWING SPLENDOR OF THE GOSPEL ». - Introduction. - Our overriding choice for Christ. - Unravelling the coils of ambiguity. - The seventies and the announcing of the Gospel: The Council is the basis; Focal points. - Three bases of pastoral renewal: The General Catechetical Directory; Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi"; Apostolic Exhortation "Catechesi Tradendae". - The congregation well attuned to the Church: Evangelisation and catechesis; Salesians evangelisers of the young. - Prospects, pledges and plans: Resplendent harbingers of the Gospel; Responsible efforts in the cultural area; Training competent personnel. - Don Bosco's insistent call to us. - Conclusion.

Rome, 24 February 1980

Dear confreres,

From last October your Rector Major and his councillors have had a heavy schedule of meetings with Provincials and their councils, and these will continue for some time: so far, the Provinces of India, Germany and Holland; and in April, Poland and Jugoslavia; and others are being planned.

The main theme of these meetings has been the broad and practical guidelines and policies for renewal as laid down in the last two General Chapters. Our joint aim was a realistic examination of conscience and a review of life in the Provinces to see how it squared with the Gospel-project of Don Bosco as outlined authoritatively and authentically in the Constitutions. After all, in every Province we Salesians need to ask ourselves whether we are *really and truly evangelizers of the young*.

Announcing the Gospel was a theme much stressed by GC21; that and the Apostolic Exhortation "Catechesi Tradendae" recently

promulgated prompt me to invite you to reflect on this vital matter.

In a way, one could say that this document of Pope John Paul II on catechesis in our time completes the series of pronouncements from the Magisterium on the pastoral renewal in the Church initiated by Vatican II. The documents collate a number of directives that are amazingly in line with our mission among the young; indeed they touch the very nerve-centre of our Preventive System renewal. I propose to treat of the three most important documents:

— *The General Catechetical Directory*, published in 1971 in obedience to a conciliar mandate of the decree “Christus Dominus” (no. 44);

— *The Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi”*, that coordinates and sets forth the ideas of the III General Assembly of the Bishops’ Synod of 1974;

— *The Apostolic Exhortation “Catechesi Tradendae”* that treats of the theme of the IV General Assembly of the Bishops’ Synod of 1977.

These documents are the three columns that support the launching-pad for a new apostolate of evangelization for today and tomorrow. The next two decades “ring in the third millenium of Christianity” (Paul VI); this is the time to prepare for the “New Advent” of the year 2000 (John Paul II).

We live in an exciting and eventful age. “We must forge ahead, alert and fearless, bravely prepared to start all over again with the *complex and fatiguing mission of evangelization*” (Paul VI).

Our over-riding choice for Christ

We belong to those followers of Christ who have, by their religious profession, made a bid for freedom that is truly unique: we have made the Risen Christ our permanent and radical choice. *Christ is our fundamental option*, and this conditions and orients all our other choices. The Salesians can only traverse the paths of history when they are first enlightened by the Pascal Mystery. Their work among men must be totally Christocentric, a love-inspired marriage

covenant. Only in this spirit does our kind of life make sense. Christ is the reason we belong to the Church and take on work among the young and the working classes; he is the one who inspires our educational project, our activities and the distinctive way we carry them out.

Especially in these days is it important for us to be well aware of this fundamental choice we have made: it must claim our total loyalty and be the inspiring force in all our convictions, all our living and all our dedicated labour.

In my journeying through the various continents I have noted that our Salesian mission wears different cultural cloaks — two in particular: “liberation”, which concerns itself with the poor and oppressed peoples and battles for greater social justice; and “secularization”, that is taken up with the changing face of man and labours for a human development in clearly secular terms. These two polarisations are not mutually exclusive: they can be found together everywhere in varying degrees. In the Third World, for instance, the “liberation” pole is predominant, and people opt for social activities for the poverty-stricken. Frequently such work takes on a socio-political guise. In the more economically progressive nations the materialistic pole is to the fore, and the option veers towards cultural, pedagogical and social operations that are often merely humanistic and horizontal.

The various settings of our work are indeed diverse; and from them issue forth continually the nagging questions: Who are our charges par excellence? What work should we be choosing in our efforts to better society?

Unfortunately the answers to these questions are not always clear-cut. We are aware of the dangers inherent in worldly politicizing and materialistic horizontalism. The most worrying aspect about such dangers is that they gradually destroy genuine evangelization and catechesis; after all, they are making a shameful misuse of Christ himself to further revolutionary or humanistic ends.

We would do well to ponder deeply the vital significance of the choice we made at our religious profession. We opted so fundamentally for Christ that he must be our yardstick for every other choice we make. Our hearts can opt for absolutely nothing that comes before Christ or is cut off from him. He is the “first grace”, the “primary

charisma”, the “transcendent afflatus” of all our loving choices and all our enterprises.

If we wish to reply convincingly to the disturbing questions that arise from practical situations regarding particular priorities of work among our charges, we must stand with Don Bosco in his fundamental opting for Jesus Christ. The Salesian of yesteryear, of today, of the future, has opted (as his Founder did) utterly and definitively for Christ and it is only through Christ that he can discern and make further options. We Salesians do not love the young and the working classes first, and then refer this love to the Lord: no — we love God first, and that love makes us give ourselves to the young and needy. Our hearts must be so overflowing with Christ that we love youngsters as he loved them. We look to Christ, friend of the poor and insignificant; through Christ our earnest efforts for the young and the working classes become more intense, more persevering, more genuine, more fruitful. This is the basis on which we make further decisions in following the calling and experience of Don Bosco, open to adaptations to fit in with the needs of the Church and practical situations.

These are the days of identity-questing, personal and collective—*and the first and foremost task is to be absolutely sure of the exact significance of our religious profession* which incorporates us in a community that has made the fundamental choice of Christ our Saviour and Shepherd and friend of the young (v Acts 290 & 295). In the Congregation today we have an urgent need to ponder greatly on this choice. Only a vivid awareness of this basic option will allow us to see clearly through the eyes of the Gospel.

Unravelling the coils of ambiguity

We are in the toils of mighty changes that entammel us and have upset all the methods in use in the apostolate; often enough too they have also corroded some of their valuable contents, blurring the vision of our mission in its present significance, its effectiveness, its identity. Even our ranks number some who have begun to move in these nebulous areas; they no longer have clear-cut notions regarding the historical

significance of our vocation, they reduce the apostolate to mere material improvement in man's lot, they are satisfied with a simplistic and vague spiritual cult, give too much importance to ideological projects, overlook the important evolution in verbal presentation, and see today's humanistic trend as more important than the objective revelation of God.

We are indeed surrounded by perilous doubts, instability and confusion: and the grand ideals of our vocation could be weakened and abandoned. It is therefore necessary to react; we must re-establish the clear and valid principles of our commitment as true announcers of the Gospel. We must grasp the meaning of the unique, clear-cut and specific mission of the Church and avoid the temptation of those who would "reduce this mission to the area of a mere temporal project. They would confine her aims to a man-centred goal; the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being. Her activities, setting aside all spiritual and religious concern, would become mere initiatives of a political or social order" (EN 32). "As the twentieth century draws to a close, the Church is bidden by God and by events to renew her trust in catechetical activity as a prime aspect of her mission" (CT 15).

The announcing of Christ to the young is the very raison d'être of our Congregation. All our enterprises and training have one single aim in view: evangelization and catechesis. This work is not something added on to our time-table as an extra, or something to attend to in our spare time: it is our all-engrossing mission: "it merits having the apostle consecrate to it all his time and all his energies, and to sacrifice for it, if necessary, his own life". The message of the Gospel of Christ "is necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accomodation. It is a question of people's salvation" (EN 5).

Let me repeat a thought in my letter on the Preventive System (Acts 290). I referred to the Word of God as "by its very nature revealing and challenging. Strictly speaking, the Word of God is not a book of human wisdom designed to provide solutions to everyday problems: rather is it God's challenging call to us, taking the initiative, his gift to us, his questioning us... indeed the Gospel questions before it answers.

“This aspect of God must claim the total awareness and loyalty of the educator. In his concern to align himself with the youth situation he must never forget or negate his pastoral responsibility as a “prophet” of the Gospel. The two must be harmonized — educator and prophet; each must permeate the other: and this calls for reflection, revision and loyalty.

“Hence, since the Preventive System is based on a fundamental option of pastoral dedication, the Salesian must be constant and loyal in presenting the contents of the faith. His special desire and capacity to be involved in the circumstances surrounding his charges must be always enlightened and guided by Christ who intervenes and calls as the Lord of mankind” (Acts 290).

In other words he must create a living union of those two complementary aspects of the Preventive System that search the depths of its spirit: the principle in the heart of a confrere that directs and characterises his spirituality as a “prophet” — *the pastoral urge*; and *the pedagogical method* that moulds and orients his educational criteria when planning his apostolate, making practical choices, and using particular methods (cf Acts 290).

Worthy of stress is the fact that the *spirituality of the prophet* demands fidelity in passing on the Word of God; the “prophet” cannot select and omit to suit his own whims (CT 30); the young person is called to a fuller and deeper knowledge of the Mystery of God “according to the truth that is in Jesus” (Eph IV 20), and he must not be “refused any part whatsoever of this knowledge” (CT 30); the “prophet” will “not seek to keep directed towards himself and his personal opinions and attitudes the attention and consent of the heart and mind of the person he is catechising. Above all, he will not try to inculcate his personal opinions and options as if they expressed Christ’s teaching and the lessons of his life” (CT 6).

He who announces the Gospel must not go looking for proselytes for himself or his pet ideologies: he must exercise himself as the mouthpiece of the Church in forming true disciples of Christ. Christ has said, “All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make all men *my* disciples” (Mt XXVIII 18-19).

The “prophet”, furthermore, bases himself on *certainties* and

communicates them to others with conviction. His mission is to transmit “not doubts and uncertainties born of an erudition poorly assimilated, but certainties that are solid because they are anchored to the Word of God” (En 79).

Unfortunately we must recognise the sad fact (and the Holy Father calls our attention to it) that these days there are *abuses* here and there in evangelizing and catechising. Truths regarding the Mystery of Christ are watered down (cf CT 29), certain important points omitted (cf CT 30), ideologies tacked on to the Gospel (cf CT 52), certain incompatible cultural elements imposed on Christ’s teachings (cf CT 53), insecurity preached as though we can only seek truth and never be sure of finding it (cf CT 60); and we find unbalanced ecumenical approaches (cf CT 32 33), texts and manuals that omit various important facts and explanations (cf CT 34 49), and so on.

The ministry of the Gospel “prophet” comes directly from Jesus our Master, through the Apostles and the uninterrupted Tradition of the Church (“live transmission”). These are turbulent times and “the Church is living through an important and hazardous period of theological research” (CT 61). We need to couple profound renewal with genuine loyalty: “it is important for the Church to give proof today, as she has done at other periods of her history, of evangelical wisdom, courage and fidelity in seeking out and putting into operation new methods and new prospects for catechetical instruction” (CT 17).

How necessary it is that every Salesian know how to unite the roles of “prophet” and “educator” so as to practise the Preventive System as Don Bosco did: evangelizing through education and educating by evangelization.

The seventies and the announcing of the Gospel

The three recent documents of the Magisterium invite us to a strict examination of conscience regarding our mission to evangelize the the young. They will help us to put new life into realising the genuine intentions of the Preventive System.

Let us look briefly at the historical setting.

The Council is the basis

The great event that has marked the present period of the Church is undoubtedly the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Pope John spoke of it as a new Pentecost. From it there emerged a way of announcing the Gospel that gets to grips with the problems of modern man and is couched in acceptable terms.

Pentecost Sunday was the starting point in time for the spread of the Gospel among diverse peoples of various tongues. From the rich fruitfulness of that event and that period of Church history issued forth all the evangelizing and catechetical activity that has marked the centuries that followed.

Vatican II also enjoyed a Pentecostal fruitfulness. Paul VI looked on it as "the great catechism of modern times" (CT 2). Indeed all the important objectives of the Council could be epitomised as "rendering the Church of the 20th century more and more suitable for announcing the Gospel to mankind" (EN 2). This is truly its mission, what it set out earnestly to achieve. "Lumen Gentium" proclaims that "Christ is the light of humanity; and it is accordingly the heartfelt desire of this Sacred Council, being gathered together in the Holy Spirit, that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature, it may bring to all men that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church" (LG 1). This first basic emphasis is indispensable for the understanding of both the range and perspective of the renewal of evangelization and catechesis. How important it is not to measure and plan our announcing of the Gospel in terms of the number of enterprises we set afoot: rather the important thing *is to go for quality — in content, method, verbal expression, environment, means, objectives, and purveyors of the Word.*

All the work of the Council was imbued with a powerful urge to renew the announcing of the Word: from "Dei Verbum" (on revelation of the Word of God) and "Lumen Gentium", "Sacrosanctum Concilium", "Gaudium et Spes" (on the Church), to "Ad Gentes", "Dans ces derniers temps", "Presbyterorum Ordinis", "Apostolicam Actuositatem", "Inter Mirifica", "Gravissimum Educationis" (on vigorous and lively faith and evangelization) and "Orientalium Ecclesiarum", "Unitatis

Redintegratio", "Nostra Aetate", "Dignitatis Humanae" (on relations with other beliefs, religions, current thinking and typical experiences of contemporary society).

Focal points

Vatican II gave a bold emphasis to the ministry of the Word and drew up new and thorough guiding principles. It was not a question of vaguely offering a few novel and interesting themes: it presented definite new angles and perspectives by which the themes could be thoroughly explained. These new and all-illuminating guidelines are basically three in number: the Word of God, Man, and the Church.

When we ponder or act out our faith the Church insists that everything must centre round Christ. In Christ is the Word of God manifested and proclaimed; in Christ is the mystery of man clarified and grasped; and the Church, the Bride of Christ, looks to Christ as the Head of the Mystical Body.

The Word of God gives man a penetrating and overall vision of all reality and brings him to an understanding of his calling. It was the Council's wish that the People of God should be vitally attuned and responsive to Sacred Scripture, reading it in their own language and hearing it explained in liturgical celebrations. This was not just the enunciation of a principle: it was the creation of a practice that must inevitably lead to an evangelization and catechesis which the Word of God really does take pride of place. This means that Holy Writ is not used as a "help" or an "example" or an "exposition" or a "quotation" that is added on as something external to an argument based on some other source. On the contrary, the Scriptures must be the privileged source-material for evangelization and catechesis.

Also, today's "*man-orientation*", the "*man-centred interest*" must be treated as a perspective rather than a theme. It means that all must have *reference* to man ("the Church has oriented, not disoriented, herself towards man"); it is to him the Word of God is addressed, since he was loved and created in a form so superior that for him the Mystery of God is not a mere intellectual curiosity, a kind of

conceptual luxury: his very existence clamours for it, it runs right through the history of man, is the only true horizon he can aim for, and is the most indispensable element of his salvation. This centring in on man involves the announcing of the Gospel in problems of approach, idiom, and communication; it points too to the considerable importance of the human sciences as a part of pastoral training.

Finally, *the emphasis put on the Church by the Council* has brought about quite a new situation too. The profound "Mystery of the Church" makes it the great Sacrament of the ages in which men are gathered together and constituted by the Word of God. The ecclesial community is nourished with the bread of Revelation and shares it with one another as brothers. This community is also the sounding board of the truth of salvation; it is the guardian of the "sense of faith", which, under the guidance of its Pastors, becomes clearer and clearer in the light of history rather than by analyses and semantics; so it becomes the servant of humankind as it grows and develops on its journey to perfection.

In the coming two decades of work among youth and the working classes we should have little of worth to say unless we act along these basic lines. Indeed it is not only a matter of *contents*, but a *new specialised formulation* of evangelizing and catechetical activity for modern man that is envisaged — and this is the reason I have dwelt somewhat on these initial perspectives.

The main post-conciliar work of the Church has been to examine this comprehensive vision of Vatican II from a pastoral point of view, endeavouring to understand it better, clarify it and develop it. And we have taken our part in this general effort of practical renewal and much positive good has resulted (for instance, the four General Episcopal Synods, and the Latin American Episcopal Conferences at Medellín and Puebla). There are also many unpublicised cases of good theoretical and practical work done in this pastoral area, and with increased sensitivity regarding man himself. Centres and means of formation for announcing the Gospel have been re-examined and restructured: this includes programming, text-books and pastoral and catechetical institutes.

Such a widespread effort necessarily involves problems of some

complexity. There is a search for new ways and methods, more suitable verbal presentation, integrating faith and practical living, combined researching by personnel from various disciplines, using new pedagogical techniques, etc. Here and there there will be bias, contestation and identity crises in the apostolate; certain doubts and deviations have been noted above and it would be easy enough to cite questionable experiences and instance tensions resulting from rigorism and progressivism, when the new perspectives of evangelization and catechesis have not been grasped.

Three bases of pastoral renewal

This travail in the Church has brought about a number of happenings that have been of interest to the whole Church and of particular significance for pastoral work: the International Catechetical Congress (1971), the III General Assembly of the Episcopal Synod on evangelization (1974), the Holy Year and its particular stress on renewal in announcing the Gospel (1975), various episcopal gatherings throughout the continents on the same theme, and finally the IV General Assembly of the Episcopal Synod on catechesis today.

In the framework of all these ecclesial events of the seventies we have the three great documents of the magisterium, the three bases of pastoral renewal.

The General Catechetical Directory

This document (11-4-71) *marks a decisive moment for present day catechesis*. Pope John Paul II says "it is still the basic document to stimulate and guide catechetical renewal throughout the whole Church" (CT 2). "The intent of this Directory is to provide the basic principles of pastoral theology by which pastoral action in the ministry of the Word can be more fittingly directed and governed. The errors which are not infrequently noted in catechetics today can be avoided only if one starts with the correct way of understanding the nature and purposes of catechesis and also the truths which are

to be taught by it, with due account being taken of those to whom catechesis is directed and of the conditions in which they live" (CT Intr).

The document carefully stresses the fact that the announcing of the Gospel is an act of the living Tradition of the Church. Not only does it communicate the contents of Revelation "completed at the time of the Apostles", but it also helps (with the guidance of the magisterium of the bishops) to see the relationships of the Gospel with the signs of the times, to understand more thoroughly its contents, to apply them to new situations, and to "make authentic judgements on the interpretations of the faith and the explanations the faithful see and offer".

"From this it follows that it is necessary for the ministry of the Word to set forth the divine revelation such as it is taught by the Magisterium and such as it expresses itself, under the watchfulness of the Magisterium, in the living awareness and faith of the People of God. In this way the ministry of the Word is not a mere repetition of ancient doctrine, but rather it is a faithful reproduction of it, with adaptations to new problems and a growing understanding of it" (GCD 13).

The Directory takes the Council's panoramic points and organises them into an harmonious whole suitable for catechising. This then forms the basis for setting the catechetical principles which must serve for compiling national directories and drawing up catechismus to suit the specific situations of different regions. (The main categories will be the actual problems of the moment, the ministry of the Word, the Christian message, methodology, catechesis according to age, and pastoral planning.)

One must add that this thorough catechetical renewal has given rise to a fair amount of discord (and among some Salesians too). There is an obvious discrepancy between those who fall in line with the directory and endeavour to translate it into practice, and those who have not assimilated its principles and have not managed to hurdle successfully the first feelings of insecurity that follow in the wake of change; these latter remain shackled to the old formulas, methods and practices; and the discrepancy is aggravated in some cases by non-

attunement, omissions and perilous inaccuracies (which are possibly inevitable in the running-in stages of a project so vast).

Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi"

This second document (8-12-75) is of prime importance in an age which is seeking to define the role of Christianity in changing the world. It affirms that evangelization "constitutes the essential mission of the Church... her most profound identity" (EN 14), her unique contribution to man through the centuries (cf EN 5 15 51 81).

Evangelization implies a clear understanding of the transcendency of the Mystery of Christ: the Gospel is not to be identified with "the signs of the times", but is essentially a revelation of the *Kingdom of God* announced by Jesus Christ (cf EN 6-12 25-28). However, it involves at the same time a profound sensitivity of "*incarnation*": the Gospel is a message that involves the total life of man and his history; and it is particularly sensitive to the needs of the signs of the times (Gosp. cult. expr: EN 19-20 22 40 50).

The Exhortation dwells on the way evangelization approaches, confronts, distinguishes and makes rapport with the concept and historical movement of human liberation (cf EN 30-38); this clarifies the proper and specific role of announcing the Gospel (already expounded in the previous chapters).

It is worth noting the document's broad and comprehensive conception of evangelization: "No partial and fragmentary definition can attempt to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism... It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements" (EN 17). It does not limit itself to announcing the Gospel to those who know it not, but includes "a proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative... Each of these elements must be seen in relationship with the others" (EN 24). Therefore a proper pastoral planning must be comprehensive and not sectional, and the various elements must be drawn together in harmony, not in disarray.

The range of renewal such an idea presents is well understood

when we remember our old idea of evangelization as practically limited to a particular kind of apostolic activity in the foreign missions. Such a concept today would substantially warp every pastoral activity aimed at achieving maturity in true believers.

It is easy to see the reasons that have motivated such a *change of view*: the disintegration of Christianity, the rise of cultural and religious pluralism, the widespread trend in the direction of materialism and away from Christianity, the new awareness of personal rights and socialist ideas, etc. All these circumstances call for a re-assessment of our traditional pastoral practice of announcing the Gospel. To shoulder the task of evangelization requires of us that we accept the challenge of a kind of "open market economy" in which the faith is no longer something taken for granted and accepted by all, but a "prophesying" by convinced persons and communities who really live out their faith. In this light, pastoral activity takes on a totally new evangelization-dimension.

It is important for us to listen to the *call made to Religious*, not only because of their special witness in "poverty and detachment, purity and sincerity and of self-sacrifice in obedience" (EN 69), but also because their apostolate is "marked by a creativity and a brilliance that one has to admire. They are generous: often they are found in the outposts of the mission" (EN 69). In the work of evangelization, therefore, we are invited to man the outposts of the "mission" with a true charismatic afflatus in our life and activity: that is to say, we must boldly reactuate that distinctive character of our Institute (cf MR 11-12) through which we realise in the Church the charism of Don Bosco.

The Apostolic Exhortation "Catechesi Tradendae"

This third document has appeared at the end of the decade (16-10-79). Both in the final message of the 1977 Synod and in the Exhortation itself it is solemnly and explicitly stressed that catechesis is relevant to the lives of the Christian community and to pastoral activity. "In the next ten years catechesis will be throughout the world the natural and most fruitful seedbed for the renewal of the entire

ecclesial community" (Message of the Synod on catechesis). In these closing years of the century God invites the Church "to renew her trust in catechetical activity as a prime aspect of her mission. She is bidden to offer catechesis her best resources" (CT 15). In the sum total of pastoral activities catechesis deserves to take pride of place (cf Synodal message on catechesis, 18; cf CT 15).

There are a number of particular instances to be noted regarding the impetus given to catechetics.

— *The main lines of renewal set out by the Council are reconfirmed*; the progress made is optimistically recorded, though naturally a number of faults need to be righted (and the Synod has some good suggestions along these lines — the result of general experience and the Bishops' own reflections).

— *The complexities of catechetical activity*. Catechesis is not limited to mere teaching: it includes also *word, memory and witness* (cf Synodal message on catechesis, 8-10), and makes an integrated and solid unit of: 1) the knowledge of the Word of God, 2) the use of the Sacraments in full-hearted faith and 3) professing the faith in one's daily living (cf Synodal message on catechesis, 11).

— *The valuable reinstatement of the catechumenate* is considered a basic process of special importance in the present day situation.

The text of Pope John Paul II's Exhortation must be read in the wider context of the Synodal work and the whole development of evangelization and catechesis (which was intensified by the publishing of the General Catholic Directory). The Holy Father, in his "Catechesi Tradendae" has confirmed this Directory as a valuable document and means to give a further fillip to the work of catechesis, "stimulating creativity (with the required vigilance) and helping to spread among the communities the joy of bringing the Mystery of Christ to the world" (CT 4).

The crowning example is the *central focus given to the person and mystery of Christ*. He is the principal subject and object of catechesis. Christ is the *truth* who is transmitted, the *way* that guides us, the *life* we share, the *one and only master* who leads us. This centrality of Christ in man's understanding of himself and in the

working out of his salvation demands the total involvement of evangelizers as united and faithful disciples.

Likewise it is important to have a broad conception of catechesis (CT 25). It is a specific process and distinct from initial evangelization — even though catechesis is in general a part of evangelization, that is to say, a particularly important stage in the growth of the faith (cf CT 18). It is *teaching, educating to the faith, initiation to Christian life*, “maturing the initial faith and educating the true disciple of Christ” (CT 19) and developing the “first announcing”. In its teaching aspect it deepens doctrinal understanding, sets its component parts in order, further harmonises the overall view of Revelation, presents the truths more systematically and harmoniously (cf CT 21, 22, 35), and it is always open to new findings and fresh beginnings.

This Exhortation on catechesis is also (in the spirit of John Paul II’s pontificate) *a call to prudence*, to ecclesial objectivity. It calls on the “prophets of catechism” to view their task with gravity, and insists that they transmit the truth and the whole truth.

The Congregation well-attuned to the Church

The Salesians have not been dragging their feet in this great movement of the Church. Indeed the earnest zeal of our confreres is marked by a considerable number of achievements: a genuine effort to train personnel, the inclusion of catechetical and associated disciplines in formation programmes, concern for increasing the number of lay catechists, setting up catechetical centres for animation and for producing and distributing aids, endeavouring to reach new understandings and revise syllabuses and methods according to different circumstances (with various results), and providing specialised services for certain areas and dioceses (cf Fr. Ricceri’s “Report on the state of the Congregation”, 31-10-77).

The already existing centres for study, formation, application, prospectuses and distribution, etc., must be commended for their zeal in launching so many worthy enterprises.

The last decade has also witnessed fundamental changes in our

Pontifical University. This task has been far from easy but has proceeded apace. The aim has been to channel the research and teaching of the various faculties into a common and overall interest in youth apostolate and catechetics. At last all this hard work has led to a well-planned refounding that we hope will be truly efficient (cf p. 59).

In line with the thinking and general policy of the seventies the Congregation has incapsulated its choices and experiences in two documents that carry the stamp of approval of the two great General Chapters: they are *Evangelization and Catechesis* (SGC) and *Salesians Evangelizers of the Young* (GC21).

Evangelization and Catechesis

This is document 3 of SGC, and its theme was not among the pre-capitular schemes: it was added by request in the early days of the Chapter and is the first of the texts on our apostolic activities (Docs 4, 5, 6, 7) and sets the tone for them. It considers "catechesis of the young as the first and foremost activity of the Salesian apostolate. It therefore calls for a re-assessment and re-organisation of all Salesian works so that they may have as their main purpose the formation of the man of faith" (GC19 & SGC).

Our document, then, was called for by an overall examination of our life and mission and in the light of the Council's behest; and it was developed under the immediate inspiration of the General Directory: so it is in total line with the Church's vision and programming. Such a basic agreement is highlighted by SGC's statement: "The document keeps in mind the human choice in all its aspects, and places the individual, the Word of God, and the community in a permanent and mutual relationship. This means that we can emphasise 'the priority of the Word of God' as the fundamental criterion for renewal, and can assert that the whole process of pastoral development from man to Christ is inspired by Christ right from the start" (SGC 274).

Since we made this option, we must realise the importance of the word "educative", for the document stresses "the educative context

in which catechesis has always been developed in our Congregation” (SGC 274). “To catechise is more than to preach or to teach religion or to give catechism lessons: it is a complete educative process to help the baptised use all the values of his own personality from the point of view of the Gospel” (SGC 307).

Round these three focal points (*Word of God, man, community*) will be grouped all references and suggestions, and from them will flow developments that this short letter has not space to detail — such as listening again to the *Word* (SGC 283-288), announcing the word in the context of *man's* situation (SGC 289-292), witnessing to the Word (SGC 293-296), catechising through genuine *communities* (SGC 318-321), evangelizing in dialogue with a pluralistic world (SGC 293-300).

The whole Province is conceived as a “community at the service of” evangelization. “Its duty is to give a new impetus to catechetics on the part of both communities and the individual confrere, to stir up responsibility in the formation of personnel, to re-organise its works so that there will be even better evangelization, and to set up a Provincial programme for catechesis” (SGC 337).

Integrated education in the faith according to Salesian practice implies the following aims: to lead all to the person of Jesus Christ (Const 21), to form mature Christians and cultivate in them a mental attitude of faith (Const 22), to introduce people to the liturgical and sacramental life (Const 23) and to draw them to a serious commitment (SGC 315).

The seventies began with the SGC offering us broad lines for syllabuses and methods, educative structuring, pastoral guide-lines — and the offerings are still valid if our memories are good and our sensitivities acute.

Salesians evangelizers of the young

This is the first document of GC21. It aims at implementing “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” in regard to youth according to the educative project and apostolate of Don Bosco.

The GC21 takes it for granted that the doctrinal and pastoral

structures and the basic methodology set out in the Catechetical Directory and the SGC are accepted and established. In then gets down to the practicalities of some of the "options". In particular, it fits catechesis neatly into our educative project, proposing again the Preventive System as a unique synthesis of three principles: our attitude as "prophets", our pastoral terms of reference and our evangelizing methodology.

We opt for man. This means in practice that we must be ever aware of the youth situation and study it earnestly; for "evangelization proceeds with ever-increasing necessity by way of an analysis of life-situations that influence the youth personality" (GC21). It also means that evangelizing must be part of a project that aims at the total and integrated development of man, as an individual and in groups" (GC21 81).

We work through communities. We do this according to the inspiration of "Evangelii Nuntiandi" with the Gospel witness of a loving religious community; and this community is at the service of a larger educative and pastoral community, sharing in communion and ideals, in responsibilities and programmes.

We embody the Word, that is to say, we use it not simply in pedagogy or catechesis: we make it part of a project that gathers together the "process of human development, Gospel announcement and deepening of the Christian life" (GC21 80).

The complete process, then, implies that we utilise the elements and events that make up the life of a youngster and raise them to the level of an educative experience (games, instruction, leisure, ideals, group activities). Naturally all this will be from beginning to end inspired by the Word and the presence of Christ; and wisdom will see that the process is a gradual one. Indeed a truly religious and Christian course of action is developed in Salesian educational and pastoral action in continuity with the commitment to develop and promote the more specifically human values" (GC21 91).

In order to introduce evangelization into an educational project, the *cultural aspect* is by no means a secondary matter in catechesis. In fact anyone who tacked on cultural or recreational activities to catechesis, using them just to attract youngsters would show that he had not under-

stood the secret of the Preventive System — for such activities have a real, objective value (albeit subordinate) with a richness and power all their own; and we must know how to draw educational profit from them.

This is truly a realistic way of action, involving as it does the introducing of catechesis into our integrated Salesian project of formation, with all its experiences, contents, relationships, atmosphere and style; and GC21 has helped us emphasise *certain privileged aspects* for our evangelizing and catechetical activities: the enlightenment that comes from teaching and doctrine, the sacramental and liturgical life, devotion to Mary and vocational guidance.

It is the job of every Province now to combine these concepts into an integrated educational project to serve as a practical guide for our post-conciliar conversion.

Prospects, pledges and plans

This has been a rapid presentation of the wealth of pastoral material we have received from the teaching and events of the seventies and its purpose has been to help all to understand and tune in to the concern of the Church and to make an enlightened re-assessment of the duties of our Congregation.

Resplendent harbingers of the Gospel

If we are sensitive to the call of the Church and docile to the last two General Chapters, we simply must make a *decisive option to busy ourselves with evangelizing*. This does not mean taking on extra work so much as subjecting our labours to an overall assessment, making sure that they are a convincing testimony and a valid announcing of the Gospel.

Let us re-read the first document of GC21. It deliberately sets out to put the Congregation into this state of evangelization-awareness. Let us see how we can better the community that is “Gospel-imbued” and “love-inspired”; how we can relaunch the “Salesian educative and pastoral project”; how we can increase the “vocational fruitfulness of

our pastoral activities"; and finally how we can re-envisage in a pastoral way the various "settings and ways in which our evangelization takes place".

Our educational work must everywhere and always (even among non-Christians) have Christ as its goal. Indeed GC21 says, "The educational system of Don Bosco proves itself brilliant in its insights and endowed with the most diversified possibilities. Applied with flexibility, gradualness and sincere respect for the human and religious values of the cultures and religions of our charges, it can yield abundant fruits on the educational level, it can create friendship and promote affection from pupils and past pupils, it unleashes great energies for good, and in more than a few cases lays the foundation for an open path of conversion to the Christian faith" (GC21 91).

Every confrere, then, in all his educative work, must find "his inspiration and motivations in the Gospel, the light that illumines him and the goal that ultimately leads him to Christ. The final goal of every Salesian educational action is to make people aware of God as Father, to find his will at all times, and co-operate with Jesus Christ for the coming of his Kingdom" (GC21 91); and our ultimate goal must be the prime mover of our pastoral urge. In our educational project "Christ is the foundation: he reveals and promotes the new meaning of existence and transforms it, empowering man to live in a divine manner, that is to say, to think, to wish and to act according to the Gospel, making the Beatitudes his way of life" (GC21 91).

But then, "*on the Christian and religious level*, Salesian action strives to teach an aware and active faith, to revive hope, optimism (serving the Lord in gladness), and the *life of grace*. It stimulates charity in a full experience of life sustained by a lively catechesis and by practical and relevant preaching. It teaches one to discover and love the Church as an efficient sign of communion and service to God and to our brothers, and to see in the Pope the bond of unity and charity in the Church. It permits one to live the experience of joyful liturgical celebrations with an intense participation in the Eucharist. It promotes a strong devotion to our Blessed Lady the Help of Christians, the Mother of Grace, true model of a successfully faithful life and of serene and victorious purity. It teaches and stimulates a true life of prayer with particular care to use

those forms which are most accessible and close to youthful and popular piety" (GC21 92).

It is absolutely indispensable, then, that our lives and activities be regenerated and illumined ever more and more by the splendour of the Gospel.

Responsible efforts in the cultural area

To announce Christ to the young we must experience the need to participate actively in the shaping of a new culture and to get to know the practicalities of the youth situation in the various cultures in which we work. We Salesians must understand and translate into practice the Chapter's behest "to evangelize by educating and to educate by evangelizing". This is a topic I have put before you a number of times already (Acts 290, 1978; Acts 292, 1979). Our mission to youth and the working classes is set in the arena of a culture in the making, and education has a front seat.

Now the three great documents of the Magisterium lay great stress on the necessary relationships between evangelization and catechesis on the one hand, and cultural values and procedural details on the other. Let it suffice to quote some of the more significant affirmations. The General Catechetical Directory (cf esp. 2-9) reminds us that "the Christian faith *requires explanations and new forms of expression* so that it may take root in all successive cultures. Though the aspirations and basic needs peculiar to human nature and the human condition remain essentially the same, nevertheless men of our era are *posing new questions* about the meaning and importance of life. *Believers of our time are certainly not in all respects like the believers of the past.* This is why it becomes necessary to affirm the permanence of the faith and to *present the message of salvation in renewed ways*" (GCD 2). Hence the urgency to find new pastoral methods to enliven the cultural transition.

The Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (cf esp. 19, 20, 40, 50), taking stock of the present "cleavage of culture from Gospel" (EN 20), makes it clear that "it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater

numbers of people, but also of affecting and, as it were, upsetting (through the power of the Gospel) mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (EN 19). Here we have an explicit and extensive description of how the power of the Gospel should penetrate and enliven the cultural fabric.

Finally, "Catechesi Tradendae", speaking of "acculturation or inculturation", tells us that these neologisms "express very well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation. We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called *to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures...* On the one hand the Gospel message... has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue which inevitably becomes part of a certain dialogue of cultures. On the other hand, the power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates... Genuine catechists know that catechesis 'takes flesh' in the various cultures and milieux... but they refuse to accept an impoverishment of catechesis through a renunciation or obscuring of its message by adaptations that would endanger the precious deposit of the faith, or by concessions in matters of faith or morals. They are convinced that true catechesis eventually enriches these cultures by helping them to go beyond the defective or even inhuman features in them, and by communicating to their legitimate values the fullness of Christ" (CT 53). In this Exhortation Pope John Paul II gives us practical guidance to overcome certain real dangers some cultures could be to the Gospel. He gives us too a frame of reference as we examine and appraise our practical efforts to establish dialogue between Revelation and Humanism — always safeguarding the Gospel's authority to interpose, its power to transform and regenerate, its understanding support of all that is genuinely human: to the point of confirming with the Fathers of the Church the principle of incarnation as formulated in the famous dictum: "He redeemed only what he assumed".

The three texts of the Magisterium are complementary and emphasise different highlights. The Directory stresses the need to announce the Gospel in a new cultural way; "Evangelii Nuntiandi" insists on

thoroughly understanding the emerging culture; and "Catechesi Tradendae" confirms both these aspects and emphasises what the genuine elements must be when dialoguing with these cultures, indicating the dangers to be eradicated.

Training competent personnel

How shall we answer the call of our Pastors?

First and foremost I believe it would be extremely useful to *make a thorough study of these three documents together* and use them as basic guidelines for renewal in our apostolate. In every Province the documents should deeply influence all Salesian activities and make their mark on the thinking of the confreres and all who collaborate in announcing the Gospel to the young. It should be quite unthinkable that things could be otherwise. To riffle quickly through the texts with considerable time-lapses between them and treat them as independent documents; to be influenced perhaps by biased remarks prompted by ideological preconceptions — this kind of attitude could lead to prejudices and misunderstandings and prevent appreciation of the complementary nature of the three documents. Indeed their interconnection is achieved by the developing use of the Magisterium in them and effects greater significance and completeness in an overall vision that makes for better integration and harmony.

It should be added that the Church's travail in this area is by no means ended: indeed it has only just begun — or rather it is always beginning. At the level of the Episcopal Conferences and the local Churches, for instance, the various catechisms are being prepared. We should be especially interested in these initiatives and *offer competent collaboration*, particularly in regard to catechisms for the young. With our experience and ability our contribution should be considerable and should influence the preparation, revision, presentation and spreading of such texts and the various enterprises for evangelization and catechesis for the young in the local Church. We really ought to accept the challenge of the new horizons opened up by evangelization and catechesis. The three documents, for instance, highlight the effort to adapt and rethink that is required, especially these days, in the matter

of suitable verbal presentation, realistic tackling of the youth situation, the vital and clear effectiveness of the message, the special areas in the various cultures that need Gospel animation. In every nation the Salesians should be able to do their part in the spread of ideas and projects.

We must be generously open to the Pope's explicit call to Religious, especially those who (like us) exist "for the Christian education of the young, especially those who are abandoned" (CT 65).

The effectiveness of our response to the Pope's call will be conditioned by an important and obvious fact, namely, *the responsible effort to form really competent personnel* who will be personally and Salesianly loyal to the Gospel and skilful in communicating it. Training confreres in this area must be paramount in basic formation, specialization, and in updating and ongoing formation. More than ever does SGC's direction obtain: "Every Salesian is always and everywhere a teacher of religion by reason of his vocation and mission. This means that during the time of his formation he must have guides who will help him to weld together the teaching of the sacred sciences and of secular subjects, and likewise his community life with the direct pastoral apostolate. Once he has acquired this art he can place himself enthusiastically at the service of the community for the rest of his life in the all-important work of evangelization and catechetics" (SGC 341).

Don Bosco's insistent call to us

Dear confreres, let us be sure that when we move along these lines we carry on Don Bosco's work and achieve the options he made. I should like to cite some of his thoughts and hope they will provide a few flashes of his afflatus that is still the best contribution to an evangelizing Church today.

It is obvious that his educational project for the salvation of the young is intrinsically and extensively *catechetical*. Just as he considered Religion as the sustaining force for the salvation of society, so did he consider the catechism "in the festive oratories to be the way of salvation for so many poor youngsters in the midst of so much perversion" (MB XIV 541). And as his work took its first steps and began to

develop, it remained true to this principle. Don Bosco recorded that "this Society in its initial stages was a simple catechism" (MB IX 61). This principle had a privileged place too in the Constitutions, where our Founder outlined the purpose and activity of the Salesians. In its older edition the text read: "The first act of charity is to gather together, especially on feastsdays, poor and abandoned young people to interest them in the holy Catholic Religion" (Salesian Central Archives 022). In the light of this practical and all-embracing aim it is understandable that Don Bosco considered it a radical error to study for study's sake or prestige, and abandon the festive oratories and the catechising of the young (cf MB XVII 387). He joyed in communicating the Word of God. It was his special personal talent right from childhood, his relaxation and recreation as a student of philosophy (cf MB I 381), the grace he requested on his ordination day, his practical guideline right from his first dream (when he was told to "set to immediately and instruct the boys"); and finally it was his programme when he met Bartholomew Garelli: "If I taught you catechism privately, would you come?... When do you want to begin?" (MO 126).

These first facts are basic to Don Bosco's work, and they demonstrate how important he considered the announcing of the Gospel in his educational and pastoral activity. It is interesting too to note the three great means he adopted for his evangelising and catechising. First there was *education* and the various cultural initiatives he used in order to attract, gather together and do good to the young. Next came the *printed word* by which he reached out to the working classes and made religion a part of their culture. Thirdly he made use of *centres or places for popular devotion* (the outstanding example being the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians). In these places the worship, the celebrations, the decorations and the initiatives all aimed at teaching the Gospel and practising it.

These three great means built up for Don Bosco a *catechetical style*, and one can examine it in his personal writings and the more characteristic incidents handed down to us by historians. It is a style that comprises fundamentally strict adherence to the contents of the faith as proposed by the Church; use of ordinary language easily understood by the young and working people; a preference for the

historical aspect (Sacred History, Church History, History of the Popes, History of Italy...) and the use of anecdotal and didactic narrative, concentrating on essentials and simplifying abstract notions; the preference and ability to get to the essence of the truths of the faith, eschewing fashionable and out-of-the-way speculations; practicality beginning from the essence of faith and explaining and inspiring attitudes and behaviour.

When Don Bosco announced the Gospel *he was able to weave his "catechism lesson into the fabric of everyday activities"* (SGC 275). The class became an occasion of joy and mutual sharing which is so much a part of youthful natures: and perhaps this is the most original trait in the Saint that makes him so attractive to young people.

Dear confreres, let us take pains to study and apply the documents that point the way to the renewal of our apostolate. Perhaps the best way to end these reflections so apposite to our mission is to listen together to the words spoken to the young nine-year-old John Bosco by the Man of noble bearing in his famous dream: "Not with blows will you win over these friends of yours, but with kindness and charity. Start straight away and *instruct them* on the ugliness of sin and the excellence of virtue". "Where can I learn how to do this? What means shall I use?" "I shall give you one who will teach you. Under her direction you will learn wisdom. Without her all wisdom is foolishness" (MB I 124).

May Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church, help us all to evangelise and catechise the young ever more wisely and ever more competently.

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ
Rector Major

P.S. - The Feast of Mary Help of Christians is now very near. May I recommend that you give special attention to the *Plan for the Salesian Family to increase our devotion to Mary* (p. 53 of this issue).

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT OF THE RECTOR MAJOR'S LETTER

Ecclesial documents

AA	Apostolicam Actuositatem (Conciliar Decree 1965)
AG	Ad Gentes (Conciliar Decree (1965)
CD	Christus Dominus (Conciliar Decree 1965)
CT	Catechesi Tradendae (Apostolic Exhortation 1977)
GCD	General Catechetical Directory 1971
DH	Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration 1965)
DV	Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution 1965)
EN	Evangeli Nuntiandi (Apostolic Exhortation 1974)
GE	Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration 1965)
GS	Gaudium et Spes (Constitution 1965)
IM	Inter Mirifica (Conciliar Decree 1963)
LG	Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution 1964)
MR	Mutuae Relationes (Document 1978)
NA	Nostra Aetate (Declaration 1965)
OE	Orientalium Ecclesiarum (Conciliar Decree 1964)
PO	Presbyterorum Ordinis (Conciliar Decree 1965)
SC	Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution 1963)
UR	Unitatis Redintegratio (Conciliar Decree 1964)

Salesian documents and works

ASC	Acts of the Superior Council
SGC	Special General Chapter 1971-1972
GC21	21st General Chapter 1977-1978
MB	Memorie Biografiche
MO	Memorie dell'Oratorio