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of the Superior Council  
of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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Father Egidio VIGANO'

The death of Father Giovenale Dho - Appointment of his successor - **"OUR AFRICAN COMMITMENT"** - The Rector Major in Black Africa - This is Africa's hour - The Holy Father and Africa: a meeting of souls; A wealth of genuine human values; The Africanization of the Church - The new presence of Don Bosco's charisma - Our Founder saw us in Africa - Exciting appeal to the whole Salesian Family - Conclusion

*Dear Confreres,*

On Saturday evening, 17 May, when I returned from Butare to Kigali in Rwanda, I received the sad news by radio of the sudden death of our Councillor for Formation, *Father Juvenal Dho*. You can well imagine how shocked and distressed we were. Father Vanseveren, Brother Romaldi and myself had finished our work and managed to return to Rome in time for the Mass and obsequies at the Generalate.

The death of Father Dho is a serious loss for us all and has certainly given us food for meditation: we remember the wonderful example of his life, his missionary vocation, his whole-hearted and cheerful consecration, his kindness, his wisdom and spiritual discernment, his competent and knowledgeable grasp of human learning, his unfailing service to the Christian education of the young (especially in the vocation-apostolate), his many-talented contributions in various ecclesial areas, and his wise and unstinted dedication to the formation of our confreres along the lines of the recent Chapter directives.

Indeed it was this latter exacting work of initial and ongoing formation at world level that he was engaged in when death overtook him. It was a kind of confirmation of Don Bosco's assertion that it was a memorable day for the Congregation when a confrere died in harness.

Now inscrutable are the designs of God; how different from our plans, our calculations, our desires! Death (especially when it is sudden and thwarts our efforts to implement important projects for God's Kingdom according to his plans) sets us pondering sadly on how genuine is our faith; we find ourselves meditating on the certainty we imagine we have for our projects.

Our sympathy goes out to Father Dho's mother, his relations and friends, his council colleagues and his co-workers in the Formation Department. He was loved and revered by all.

As we have reflected on dear Father Dho, his meeting with Christ, and the mystery of the after-life, all our meditations have culminated in praise of God, in supplication for our departed confrere, and in petition for help.

Please continue your good prayers for our dear deceased, for those near and dear to him, and for the Congregation. He will be with us in Christ and will help us with the problems that have arisen. In particular, I shall remind him continually of our Project Africa; for the memory of his death is linked with the first journey of the Rector Major in Africa. Indeed in memory of Father Dho (and, I feel, in his company), I wish to speak to you about our *African commitment*.

Our new Councillor for Formation<sup>1</sup> is Father Paul Natali, up to now our Regional for Italy and the Middle East. In his place the new Regional

1. v Const 147.

Councillor is Father Luigi Bosoni, Provincial of the Novara Province. Congratulations to both: they may be sure of the collaboration and prayers of all the confreres.

## OUR AFRICAN COMMITMENT

As you know, I have just returned from visiting the vast Continent of Africa (33 million sq. km!). To help me I took Brother Renato Romaldi. I wanted the visit to include a priest and a brother together to emphasise the complementary facets of our Salesian vocation as the Congregation commits itself to the burgeoning of Don Bosco's Charisma in that Continent.

Before putting my thoughts to you on this subject, I must insist on an all-important premise: *Project Africa is for us Salesians today a veritable grace from God.* I am utterly convinced of this and I would have you share this conviction with me.

## The Rector Major in Black Africa

In February and March of this year I was able to journey twice to Africa. The prompting came from the mandate of GC21: "The revival of missionary activity calls for practical planning and the adoption of a strategy directed to those countries where missionary activity is most urgent. Therefore as we enter the second century of our missionary presence, recalling Don Bosco's prophetic wish<sup>2</sup> (and not excluding possible missionary development in other needy and promising regions), the Salesians will apply themselves to an appreciable stepping-up of their presence in Africa"<sup>3</sup>.

2. MB XVI, 254.

3. GC21, 147a.

My first journey took me to the south of the continent, where I met the confreres working in South Africa, Swaziland and Mozambique.

During my second visit I was able to take in Libreville for the confreres of Gabon, Cameroun, Equatorial Guinea and the Congo Republic; then Lubumbashi and Kigali for the Salesians from Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi. I also visited Zambia and Kenya.

I was impressed by the excellent and necessary work that has been in progress for many years, thanks to the generous missionary zeal of the Provinces of Ireland, Portugal, France, Spain and Belgium. I could not but enthuse over the prospects of our Project Africa, both where we are already established<sup>4</sup> and where we are now implementing "new presences" (in at least eight other republics: Angola, Benin, Liberia, Senegal, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania and Madagascar).

At the present time we have one only Salesian Province in the whole Continent, namely, Central Africa (Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi). There the two houses of formation for African confreres from various countries comprise a novitiate and post-novitiate at Butare, Rwanda, and the theologate community at Kansébula, Zaire. Members of GC21 will remember our first African confrere to be Master of Novices, Father Jacques Ntamentalizo. We also have two African Salesian Bishops: Bishop Sebhat-Leab Worku in Ethiopia and Bishop Basil Mvé in Gabon.

4. v Sal. Bul. 1-3-80,  
pp. 20-23.

### **This is Africa's hour**

Africa is seething with changes and visions for the future. The many new States have shaken off

the trammels of colonialism and are now busy working out their own destiny.

Eleven years ago Paul VI addressed these words to the Parliament of Uganda: "Africa is now emancipated from its past and ready for a new era"; and last May, John Paul II said in Kenya: "This new era has begun".<sup>5</sup> "Africa is on the brink of acquiring her rightful position in the Universe".<sup>6</sup>

However, the many African nations, teeming with young people, are faced with problems on all sides, and by the difficulty of reconciling their own characteristic cultures with the ubiquitous "new culture" thrust upon them by technology, science and various ideologies. Unfortunately there is great danger that these peoples will be exploited and subjugated anew by systems that exclude Gospel values; "materialism, no matter from where it emerges, is an enslavement from which man must be defended".<sup>7</sup>

The need for Christ is urgent if Africans are to achieve an integrated African development in the new world they are entering.

A trip to Africa is not just a change in geographical position and a new stock of customs: it is a kind of flight in time back to the early centuries of Christianity; it would seem that in Africa today the transition has just been made from the Old Testament to the New. It is true that from the second to the fourth centuries Christian life flourished in North Africa. To quote Paul VI, "There come to mind great doctors and writers such as Origen, Athanasius, Cyril, the great luminaries of the Alexandrine school; and where the Mediterranean washes the shores of Africa, Tertullian, Cyprian, and especially that great shining light of Christen-

5. To Nairobi Diplomats  
6-5-80.

6. To Ivory Coast President  
10-5-80.

7. John Paul II.

dom, Augustine. Then there are the great Fathers of the Desert, Paul, Anthony and Pacomius, the first founders of a monasticism that spread both east and west. And among many others there is St Frumentius (called Abba Salama) who was consecrated bishop by St Athanasius and was the apostle of Ethiopia. These shining examples, together with the saintly African Popes Victor I, Melchiades and Gelasius I, are indeed part of the Church's common heritage. Furthermore, the writings of the Christian authors of Africa are still basic today in the understanding of salvation history in the light of the Word of God. As we recall the ancient glories of Christian Africa, we should also bear in mind the Greek Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian Church, for they share in common with the Catholic Church the doctrinal and spiritual patrimony of the great Saints and Fathers not only of their own country but of all the ancient Church. These Churches have laboured and suffered much to keep alive the name of Christianity in Africa over the centuries".<sup>8</sup>

All this is important history and must not be forgotten. But most of the young African nations have barely a century of Christianity to celebrate; indeed many are far more recent still. One could say that the African "inculturation"<sup>9</sup> or absorption of the Gospel of Christ is only a matter of a few decades, but is progressing in leaps and bounds.

In the eleven years that have elapsed between the journey of Paul VI to Kampala and John Paul II's visit to Kinshasa, the number of African Catholics has practically doubled, from 25 to 50 million. Africa is witnessing the growth and development of a vast and promising ecclesial "happening" in keeping with the great ecclesial and missionary vision

8. v Paul VI "Africae Terrarum" 3-4.

9. v Cat. Trad. 53 for an explanation of this word.

of Vatican II. This has led to a review of missionary methods.

Almost everywhere now there are local Churches with African Bishops. Nowadays, rather than "implant" the Church, the strategy is to incorporate good solid co-workers into the young local Churches, with their African cultural characteristics; they will help them grow, strengthen them in their acceptance of the Gospel and enrich them with those charisms the Holy Spirit has aroused in the universal Church to suit the manifold forms of vitality of the various nations.

### **The Holy Father and Africa: a meeting of souls**

From 2 to 12 May the Holy Father Pope John Paul II visited the Churches and peoples of six nations of Central Africa: Zaire, Congo, Kenya, Ghana, Upper Volta and The Ivory Coast. They were celebrating the centenary of their evangelisation. In years to come, Christianity in Africa will look on this journey as truly historic. For us Salesians it is an authoritative confirmation of our GC21 mandate, and an encouraging presage for our Project Africa.

In this apostolic and prophetic journey of the Pope there are two aspects that should set us thinking: his sensitive appreciation of so many human values in the African culture; and his obvious desire for the "inculturation" of the Gospel, making the Church in Africa truly African.

*A wealth of genuine human values*

The Pope has noted with intuition and joy the many human values and the great religious sensitivity of the African peoples. He has referred to Africa as a "vast spiritual reservoir for the world".

In his touching farewell address at Abidjan he said, "Goodbye, Africa. I have long had a special love for you; and after my election to the See of Peter I wanted to come to you at the first opportunity. Farewell to the peoples who have made me so welcome, and to all others whom some day I hope, God willing, to greet affectionately in person. I have learned many things during my stay in your continent; you have no idea how instructive it has been.

"Africa gave me the impression of being in every way a vast powerhouse, with a future full of promise (with maybe too its attendant risks). You have an African heritage which must be safeguarded and suitably developed. It will be no easy task to control such a ferment of progress so that its forces make for a promotion that is genuine.

"Dear brothers and sisters of Africa, you must not imitate certain foreign standards that hold man in contempt in the pursuit of selfish ends. Do not be deceived by the allurements of certain ideologies that promise a paradise that is always around the corner. Remain yourselves; be Africans."<sup>10</sup>

Other nations have much to learn from this African "powerhouse" and its important human values. The Holy Father lists them on various occasions: "their kind-heartedness, their wisdom, their respect for man, their sense of God";<sup>11</sup> "their strong sense of community in the various groups that make up their social structure", their "innate

10. Ivory Coast Farewell Address 12-5-80.

11. Address to President of Zaire, 2-5-80.

12. Address to Diplomats at Nairobi, 6-5-80.

propensity for dialogue”, their “spontaneous joy evinced in their celebrations”, their “respect for life”.<sup>12</sup> “Their undeniable cultural unity has preserved intact the widest variety of customs”, they have “a conception of the world in which the sacred holds pride of place”, a “profound awareness of the bond between nature and its Creator”, a “spontaneity and joie-de-vivre that express themselves in poetry, song and dance”, a “culture rich in an all-embracing spiritual dimension”. Hence “Africa is called upon to stir up new ideals and insights in a weary and selfish world.”<sup>13</sup>

13. To President of Ghana, 8-5-80.

14. To Diplomats of Kinshasa 4-5-80.

Unfortunately, however, the Holy Father found it his duty to note “with stunned sadness”<sup>14</sup> the evil influence of sin, ignorance, superstition, and the acceptance of foreign materialism that befouled their liberation from colonialism and was destroying their cultural development. “Materialism in all its guises always enslaves man; it makes him a soul-less serf in search of worldly goods; worse still, it shackles him body and soul to godless ideologies. In the final analysis man becomes a slave to man.”<sup>15</sup>

15. Address at Kinshasa University 4-5-80.

Neither capitalistic consumerism nor atheistic marxism will do. It is significant that also at Puebla the Pope and the Latin American Episcopate announced to the Third World that neither of these two materialistic ways was the way of the Gospel.

The Holy Father really penetrated to the heart of Africa; and all believers throughout the world listened and agreed with him.

### *The Africanization of the Church*

The Pope referred often to the values of African culture, especially in his addresses to State Presidents, diplomats, intellectuals and university stu-

dents. When he discussed the Africanization of the Church, he spoke mainly to the bishops and their close co-workers, especially the priests.

There are two closely linked topics, and they call for study, research, courage and loyalty. The Africanization of Christianity, according to the Holy Father, is a matter of "vast and profound dimensions; and they have not yet been sufficiently explored. There is the matter of suitable language for presenting the Christian message so that it reaches the spirit and the heart of Africans; and the matter of catechesis, theological thought, and the most suitable expression of the liturgy and sacred art; and finally, community ways of Christian living".<sup>16</sup>

16. To Bishops of Zaire, 3-5-80.

In all places the mission of the Church is to make disciples. Through the Holy Spirit the Church is striving to raise up genuine African Christians. She has the power from God to make genuine disciples of the Risen Christ by conserving, purifying, transfiguring and promoting all the riches of their specific cultural heritage.

Speaking of the necessary and slow process of the Africanization of the Church, the Pope made frequent reference to the excellent foundations laid by the missionaries; the unfathomable fruits of the African martyrs; the importance of native vocations and the urgent need of a well-trained laity committed to ecclesial development; the indispensability of the consecrated and religious life in its various forms (especially among the women as a witness to the dignity of women in the Church and in society). "African women", the Holy Father said, "have been willing bearers of life and guardians of family values. Similarly the radical consecration of women to the Lord in chastity, obedience and poverty is

17. To Bishops of Ghana, 9-5-80.

an important means to transmit the life of Christ to the local Churches, and a testimony of a wider human community and a divine communion.”<sup>17</sup>

18. To Osservatore Romano 14-5-80.

John Paul II recognises with pleasure that in this matter Africa is already progressing, and is indeed well advanced. “Their maturity”, he said, “is a maturity of youth, of joy, of being themselves, of being in the Church as *their Church*, the Church lived with authenticity in an African way.”<sup>18</sup>

The matter of Gospel “inculturation” is a central factor in the magisterial message of the Pope in Africa; but it is a delicate and difficult task and demands continual attentive and discerning reflection. A number of citations from the Holy Father will make this very clear.

First and foremost, this “inculturation” is an age-old process through the centuries and has always accompanied and characterised the important epochs of Christianity — as in the beginning when coping with Hebrew, Greek and Roman culture, and other cultures in the ensuing centuries.

19. To Bishops of Zaire, 3-5-80.

It should also be noted that *faith can never be reduced to a culture*. “The Gospel does not identify itself with any culture; it transcends them all.”<sup>19</sup> Hence the need to single out the transcendent and permanent values in the Gospel, to ensure the primacy of the Mystery of the Risen Christ when dealing with the propositions of any culture. The definitive value of the Mystery of Christ is for all time, present, past and future.

Certainly when the genuine Gospel meaning and the primacy of Christ come into contact with any culture there are sure to arise certain new problems on the part of that culture. These are difficulties that call for close and understanding examination. In every case they must be tackled and

solved in the light of the faith of the universal Church, "which is the same for all peoples of all times and in all places".<sup>20</sup> "In such cases it is the cultures that have to be raised, transformed and impregnated by the original Christian message of divine truth... in accordance with the total truth of the Gospel and in harmony with the magisterium of the Church."<sup>21</sup>

Preserving intact the deposit of faith goes hand in hand with concern for the unity of the Church throughout the world — by means of loyal dialogue with the Church of Rome and the Successor of Peter. "This is also where collegiality comes in: giving every Bishop a share of the responsibility for the rest of the Church. By the same token, the Bishop's local Church, over which by divine right he exercises ordinary jurisdiction, is also the object of a common episcopal responsibility when dealing with the two-fold dimension of the implanting of the Gospel in that same local Church: the first duty is to preserve intact the deposit of faith and the unity of the Church in the world; and the second is to garner from the cultures their particular expressions of Christian living, celebration and thinking through which the Gospel will be implanted in the hearts of the people and their cultures."<sup>22</sup>

It is to be borne in mind that this "inculturation" is guided by authentic key principles, and that there are practical limitations. These exclude indiscriminate cultural practices: "inculturation" must not be reduced to mere insularity or nationalism; there must be no weakening of the Catholic faith or of the total communion all Churches should have with Rome and among themselves.

Finally, in regard to the Africanization of the Church, stock must be taken of the practical situa-

20. of Christian marriage and priestly ministry in addresses to families (3-5-80) and priests (4-5-80) at Kinshasa.

21. To Bishops of Ghana, 9-5-80.

22. To Bishops of Ghana, 9-5-80.

tion of today. History is witnessing the transition from the missionary era of foundation (“*implantatio ecclesiae*”) to the present young local Churches engaged in a “penetrating and personal evangelisation” of their own cultures — i.e., the “founding Missions” now yield to the sensitive task of “personal evangelisation” by the local Churches. It is true that the Catholic faith does not identify itself with any culture; but it is also true that “the Kingdom the Gospel announces deals with human beings who are profoundly imbued with their own particular cultures. The building up of the Kingdom surely must draw from these human cultures”.<sup>23</sup> And this is achieved through the local Churches.

23. To Bishops of Zaire, 3-5-80.

All this has a practical bearing on the kind of presence and activity of today’s missionaries; and especially on our own particular commitment to increase our ecclesial charisma in Africa for the evangelisation of the young as GC21 has directed us.

### **The new presence of Don Bosco’s charisma**

I have cited some of the Pope’s special references to African evangelisation during his visit to that continent because they shed considerable light on the way we should go about our own labours there. We go to Africa to collaborate with those young Churches, enriching them with the permanent and vital charism of Don Bosco. It is a charism that is eminently suitable for those African nations. Indeed many times during my journeyings I was struck by the thought that the African youngsters, so numerous and so much in need, have an overriding claim to the Vocation of the Salesian Family. I can still hear the words of a Bishop preaching in

Rwanda: he maintained that Africa and Don Bosco were made for one another, and that the Salesian Vocation would be inseparable from the African youth apostolate.

Statistics show an explosive increase in the number of young people throughout the continent; they are lively, perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, docile; they love music and art; they are deeply religious, keen to improve themselves, but neglected though inadequate social structures. (I was deeply saddened at the unbelievable sight of a little six-year-old in a juvenile prison!) They are at the mercy of idleness, ignorance, material and moral wretchedness and so many aberrations. They are in desperate need of help.

The place for Don Bosco's charisma is in the local Churches — to collaborate in bringing the Gospel to the young, to mould them into "honest citizens and good Christians".

A hundred years ago the Salesian Vocation went to South America and established itself in strength. Fifty years later it turned to Asia and has flourished in a number of countries there. Today it goes to the Black Continent and will humbly implant itself in loyalty to Don Bosco and become vigorously African. Our Project Africa has been placed under the motherly protection of Mary Help of Christians.

Confreres due for Africa and those already there will be quickened by the renewed missiology of Vatican II, by the directives of the Magisterium, and in particular by the Pope's recent pastoral and missionary journey.

I have spoken in this vein (especially at Libreville, Kansébulu and Butare) with young African confreres and confreres who have worked for years in Africa. I should like now to touch briefly on

certain ideas that derive from Conciliar and Papal directives and apply their guidelines to suit the charisma of our Family.

*First of all we work for an "African Don Bosco", that is, for a vital and stable presence of our charisma in Africa: on the one hand, Don Bosco must be totally and genuinely himself; and on the other hand, he will truly possess the essential traits and culture of Africa. We are not "temporary missionaries" who go to a region, set up the Church and then move on. Where we have carried out this necessary groundwork, we have always had the intention of remaining on permanently and making our Salesian vocation a vital part of the local Church.*

In Africa we propose to *carefully foster and guard the distinctive character of our charism.*<sup>24</sup> Such a character is one of God's gifts, and essentially is not identified with any particular culture; these gifts are bestowed on the universal Church by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of being "inculturated" in the various peoples for the good of their local Churches.

Our short history of a hundred years shows us how adaptable our vocation is to the various cultures so different from that in which Don Bosco was born and lived.

This "distinctive character", however, is no mere theory or abstraction: rather is it "*an experience of the Holy Spirit that involves a particular style of holiness and apostolate*";<sup>25</sup> it is vitally lived and transmitted by confreres who practise it daily in their Salesian communities. Hence basically we rely on the *witness of communities* that genuinely live out the two great integrated programmes of Don Bosco, namely, the *Constitutions* and the *Preventive System* (both studied in depth and updated

24. v Mutuae Relatio-  
nes 11.

25. v Mutuae Relatio-  
nes 11.

in the last two General Chapters, SGC & GC21).

In Africa it will be the same as in Europe, Latin America and Asia, and indeed everywhere else: all the precious values of our *distinctive character* together with its *particular style of holiness and apostolate* must be jealously safeguarded as we work intelligently and creatively "inculturating" our Vocation. This will need to be thoroughly studied by all Provinces in future General Chapters; it will demand solid communion and dialogue with the Rector Major and the Superior Council (after all, their function is the ministry of unity).

So that Salesian communities may live out the charism of Don Bosco and give genuine witness, our missionaries must be *bearers of all that is wholesome*; they must be men of the fibre of our first great missionaries who carried our charism into new lands (Cagliero, Fagnano, Costamagna, Lasagna, Cimatti, Braga, Matthias, et al.); they must rival the enthusiasm of these men for the living traditions of our Vocation; and in the *formation of the new generations of African Salesians*, local cultural values must be kept in harmony with what is demanded by the following of Christ, religious consecration, the Salesian spirit and our mission for youth and the working classes.

Fundamental to every Salesian, no matter what his culture, is *holiness* and all its practical implications, its courage, its humility. Whether Don Bosco is African, Asian or European — if he is not holy he is not himself. Gospel holiness without the local culture would be just a kind of "heavenly colonialism"; and the promotion of cultural values without adequate permeation of our "distinctive character" would falsify our vocation and destroy our spiritual Family.

To date we have no experience in the field of Africanization of the charism of Don Bosco, so it will be *necessary to put in a lot of research, study, dialogue, comparative work and checking* — all backed by solid and trusting prayer.

Hence those responsible for present workers in Africa, and others soon to join them, will need initiative; they must lift up their eyes beyond the existing necessary Provincial structures and promote and further informed dialogue between Africans. This study and interchange of experiences should be done in union with the Rector Major and his Council; in this way suitable common principles will be worked out for the development of the Salesian apostolate. During my recent journey I was able, with Father Vanseveren and Brother Romaldi, to sit in on a discussion of this sort. I am convinced this kind of questing is positive and rewarding.

### **Our Founder saw us in Africa**

When I got back to Rome I was interested in finding out what Don Bosco had desired and dreamed regarding the Salesian presence in Africa. It is interesting and encouraging to recall some of the circumstances.

In 1886, towards the end of his life, Don Bosco was chairing a meeting of the Superior Council two days before the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. Father Francis Dalmazzo, the Procurator General, was present and had tabled a proposal for a Salesian foundation in Cairo. After the Procurator General had presented the background facts, Don Bosco said, "I should like to accept the proposal. We shall send a few Salesians to Cairo as soon as

possible. Meantime I must tell you frankly that this Mission is one of my projects, one of my dreams. If I were young I would say to Don Rua, 'Come, let us go to the Cape of Good Hope, to the African people, to Khartoum, The Congo; or better still, to Suakin, Sudan, as Bishop Sogaro suggests; the air is wholesome there!' With this in mind, a novitiate could be set up in the Red Sea area".<sup>26</sup>

26. MB XVIII, 142.

Bishop Sogaro, Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa, had been a guest at the Oratory (14-15 November) the preceding year,<sup>27</sup> 1885, and was endeavouring to stabilise the missionary ventures in the countries where he was going. Don Bosco spoke to him of the religious vow of obedience in this regard and also mentioned his desire to send Salesians to Africa. In fact we see that he immediately thought of setting up a local novitiate even before deciding on any definitive plan for Africa. He wanted his Salesians to go there, to remain there, and to develop in an African way, even if there were already other missionaries on the spot.

27. MB XVII, 508.

He spoke in this vein also to Father Cerruti during a visit to Alassio in March of the same year, 1886. "For a good half hour he conversed only of missionaries and missions. He specified places in South America, Africa and Asia, where his Salesians would eventually be sent and would establish themselves. "You will tell me", he said, "that other Congregations are already there. That is so. But we would go to help them, not supplant them; this must be always borne in mind. They usually tend to the grown-ups; our specific task must be to look after the young, especially the poor and abandoned".<sup>28</sup> His biographer tells us that quite frequently he was found poring over a map of Africa, studying Angola, Benguela and the Congo.

28. MB XVIII, 49.

29. Lemoine - Amedei,  
Vita di S. Giov. Bosco,  
Vol. II; pp. 612, 613;  
SEI 1953.

30. MB XVIII, 820.

31. MB VII, 825; MB  
IX, 711.

32. MB IX, 471; 734,  
770, 940; MB XVI, 252;  
MB XVII, 472.

33. cf MB III, 568.

34. MB XI, 408.

35. MB XI, 409.

He often spoke of Angola, saying that we ought to accept that mission if it were offered to us.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed we are able to read about Don Bosco's friendship and his various important contacts with many of the great nineteenth century missionaries of Africa. One was the remarkable Piedmontese Capuchin, Cardinal Massaia, who, on the death of Don Bosco, wrote from East Africa, "If I had only had such a man with me on the mission field!"<sup>30</sup> Another was the ever-active Bishop Daniel Comboni, founder of the Sacred Heart Fathers and the "Nigrizia Sisters",<sup>31</sup> convinced preacher that Africa's hour of salvation was the responsibility of the whole Church. Then there was the brave Cardinal Charles Martial Lavigerie, founder of the White Fathers and other missionary institutes; he was the apostle of North West Africa and and battled for the abolition of the Slave Trade;<sup>32</sup> and there were others too.<sup>33</sup>

The missionary heart of Don Bosco was well known throughout the world. His biographer says, "Even in remote lands the Oratory was looked on as a seedbed of missionary vocations".<sup>34</sup>

These words of Father Ceria give cause for great joy, for it seems that since the Chapter mandate, our Generalate has recaptured the spirit of those early days; letters and personal visits bring us continual requests from so many countries, as if we had an inexhaustible supply of missionaries.

However, the present crisis brings us up against serious problems.

Even in Don Bosco's time objections were made, the main one being the need for the Congregation to consolidate.<sup>35</sup>

We know that this did not stop our Holy Founder. His great-hearted plans, his daring undertakings, were linked to certain famous dreams.

Walter Nigg has an interesting passage regarding these dreams: "They were a message from Don Bosco's interior life, and at the same time a way of rapport with God... These dreams were real for Don Bosco — he never doubted them"<sup>36</sup>. This "dream-reality" of Don Bosco tuned him in perfectly with the plans of God.

We know of two dreams of Don Bosco regarding Africa. One of them took place in July 1885, the other in April 1886.

The first dream is of a long and strange journey Don Bosco made with Luigi Colle. He wrote to Luigi's father, "Luigi took me to the heart of Africa... to a very high mountain". During the whole journey Don Bosco seemed to be high above the clouds and surrounded by vast spaces. Then he was able to make out his position. "I seemed to be in the centre of Africa and saw the Angel of Cam, who said, 'The curse will be lifted and God will send down his blessing'."<sup>37</sup>

Surely this first dream proclaims Don Bosco's confidence in the growth of his missions.

The second dream was in Barcelona. The shepherdess reminded him of his original dream when nine years old, and pointed out how the Congregation had developed — Valparaiso, Santiago, Peking. Then she said, "Draw a line from Peking to Santiago. The centre of the line passes through the middle of Africa. That will give you an exact idea of the extent of the work the Salesians must accomplish". "But how can we do all this?" "This task will be achieved by your sons and their descendants... Do you see fifty missionaries ready to go? Look closer and you will see more and more again. Draw a line from Santiago to the centre of Africa and what do you see?" "I see ten mission stations."

36. Walter Nigg: *Un Santo per il nostro tempo*, LDC, 1980, pp 78, 79.

37. MB XVII, 643-645.

“These stations you see will be places for novitiates and studentates and will provide great numbers of missionaries... Now look over there and you will see ten other mission stations from the middle of Africa to Peking... and further down, in Madagascar. These places and many others will have houses, studentates and novitiates.”<sup>38</sup>

38. MB XVIII, 71 et seq.

This leaves no doubt that Don Bosco's hopes ran high and that his intense desire was that his sons would be in Africa in generous numbers to develop there as one of the mighty works of the Church in Africa — “with houses, studentates and novitiates”.

### Exciting appeal to the whole Salesian Family

I repeat: *Project Africa is for us Salesians today a veritable grace from God.* To support this statement I cite below a number of authoritative quotes that are a challenge to our faith, our hope and our charity.

Vatican II proclaimed that “the grace of renewal cannot grow in communities unless each of them expands the range of its charity to the ends of the earth, and has the same concern for those who are far away as it has for its own members”.<sup>39</sup>

39. Ad Gentes, 37.

Paul VI's missionary message for October 1972, promulgated the preceding Pentecost Sunday, confirmed this, saying, “Today we see so many individuals and institutions in the Catholic Church tragically floundering about in a kind of *spiritual vacuum*. Perhaps the reason is that there has been a prolonged absence of the missionary spirit”.<sup>40</sup>

40. Acta Apost. Sedis LXIV, 1972, p. 449.

On the same tack, our own SGC assures us that “this missionary revival will serve as a kind of thermometer for the pastoral vitality of the

Congregation and an antidote to the *blight of easy living*. We must bestir the missionary conscience of every Salesian, restudy our present methods and totally involve the Congregation, so that by following the example of Don Bosco we may multiply the number of our evangelisers".<sup>41</sup> And to achieve this objective "the SGC *appeals to all the Provinces*, and even to those who are poorest in numbers of Salesians, so that by obeying the invitation of the Council<sup>42</sup> and following the courageous example of our Founder, they may contribute from their own confreres, either temporarily or permanently, to the announcing of the Kingdom of God".<sup>43</sup>

41. SGC, 463.

42. Ad Gentes, 40.

43. SGC, 477.

The missionary courage of our Father and Founder is well summarised in the following quotation from SGC: "Don Bosco wanted his Congregation to have a strong missionary character. In 1875 it was he who chose from among his Salesians the ten who would be sent to South America. Before he died he had already sent off ten missionary expeditions. At the same time the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians also left for the missions, where they have since worked side by side with the Salesians. At Don Bosco's death in 1888 the Salesians overseas numbered 153, almost 20% of the membership of the time".<sup>44</sup>

44. SGC, 471.

Dear confreres, let us lift up our eyes and be convinced that the Holy Spirit has prepared a vast programme of evangelisation in Africa in our day, and that we are urged on by his impulse. We have accepted the GC21 African mandate with joy. Despite the grave crisis we are going through, Project Africa is an earnest of the dawn of renewal in the development of our Salesian Vocation.

This is indeed the acceptable time. How would Don Bosco react today?

He would certainly call on our whole Family — Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco Volunteers, Co-operators, Past Pupils, and all the various groups that follow his spirit. He would inspire in all a great enthusiasm to heed the call of Africa and participate in some way or other. Particularly would he stir up interest (as he was wont to do with the Bulletin and in other ways) in the Co-operators, the Past Pupils and friends of the Salesians to help achieve this important project and give timely aid to the Africanization of his charism.

I call on all confreres, especially Provincials and Provincial Delegates, to be intelligent and constant animators of the various groups of the Salesian Family in this new missionary venture.

Our daring Project Africa is not the result of hard-headed organisation or sentimental ingenuousness: it is bonded to the Holy Spirit who inspired the Chapter members; it is the fruit of that perennial youth and that great-hearted courage which God bestows from age to age on his Church through his passionate and creative love.

Let us then dare to be up and doing in the Spirit of Christ!

Here is what John Paul II said to the missionaries themselves. In the cemetery of Makiso at Kisangani, Zaire, over the tombs of the dead missionaries, he prayed in these moving words: "We bless you, Lord, for the testimony of your missionaries. It was at your inspiration that these apostolic souls left their homelands and their families and came to this country, then unknown to them, to bring the Gospel to those whom they had already accepted as their brothers. We bless you, Lord, for giving them perseverance and patience in their

fatigues, their problems, their innumerable pains and suffering".<sup>45</sup>

45. Zaire, 6-5-80.

Later in Zaire, during his visit to the Mission of St Gabriel, Kisangani, the Pope spoke these words of admiration and encouragement for all the missionaries of Africa: "These mission dwellings bring to my mind the humble beginnings of your work: the missionaries and Christian communities frequently so few in numbers, the lack of material goods, the poor teaching equipment... Yes, my dear friends, you are full of faith and love, and in these virtues lie your riches, your creativity, your drive... You do not simply preach the Word and pass on: you remain in the midst of those whose life-style you have adopted. You stay on patiently, even if sowing the seed of the Gospel takes you a long, long time, and you do not have the joy of witnessing its germination and its harvest. Your torch of faith and love seems to burn in vain. But nothing is lost when given in this way. All apostles are linked together in a mysterious solidarity: you prepare the soil for others to reap the harvest. Continue to be faithful servants... Dear missionaries, the Church rediscovers herself alongside you because she herself must be totally and forever *missionary*. So it is that the *salt* and the *yeast* the Gospel speaks of spread far and wide and penetrate deep down".<sup>46</sup>

46. To missionaries at Kinsangani, 6-5-80.

I wanted to quote these words of the Holy Father so that they may be read and pondered by those generous souls who have heeded and will heed the missionary invitation of the Lord.

## Conclusion

Dear confreres, apart from Africa we have so many other missions: in Latin America, in Asia,

and now (thanks so the Filipino, Indian and Australian Provinces) also in Oceania. When we think of the scarcity of personnel in many of these places, and the dwindling numbers in once-flourishing Provinces; when we recall the resulting distress, the appeals for men and means made by Provincials and Hierarchy; then we can only conclude that our African commitment will have to face up to grave problems.

This is true. But before thinking of lessening our efforts, we must increase our generosity. There is no future for our Congregation if we simply rest on our oars in pleasant contemplation of certain fine basic aspects of our Congregation (such as our courageous missionary activity): we need to build up a mystique round these aspects — and it must be a mystique linked to projects that are practical.

I have already referred to objections made even to Don Bosco, that the necessary consolidation of the Congregation seemed to be threatened by the undertaking of such a great missionary drive. In December 1875 Don Bosco spoke to his Superior Council thus: “As regards the Congregation, this is the way I see things: I am being repeatedly told that the Congregation must consolidate. But if we really work hard, things do improve. We can move slowly with consolidation — and it will be the more durable. Besides, we can sense that consolidation is actually taking place. As long as there is this great impetus, this great work, we ought to go ahead full speed. Our Salesians are all keen to work hard”.

At times when he listened to important propositions that presented difficult problems, his reply would be, “Only one thing is lacking”. “What is that?” “Time! Life is too short. We must do

quickly what little we can before death overtakes us.”

That is why, in spite of the small numbers, he yearned constantly for new ventures, and on a vast scale at that!

Father Berto used find him poring over maps and studying places to be won for the Gospel. He was heard to say, *“What a great day it will be when our Salesian missionaries work their way up through the Congo station by station and meet their confreres who have travelled along the Nile. They will be able to shake hands and praise the Lord”*.<sup>47</sup>

47. MB XI, 409.

Don Bosco’s reaction should inspire us to pray to God to make us worthy to continue with the missionary zeal of our Father and Founder. Let us put into practice his advice to the first missionaries.<sup>48</sup> And since to be faithful in the face of great-hearted enterprises we need miracles, let us make use of the strength of the two great pillars he pointed out for us for our development: the risen Jesus and the risen Mary. Let us be serious and zealous in making our lives centre round the Eucharist and Our Blessed Lady, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians. It will then be our turn to see miracles!

48. MB XI, 389, 390.

My affectionate regards and my profound gratitude to all missionaries, past, present and future. I remind the Provincials that those confreres leaving for the missions are not a loss of personnel for their Provinces, but a genuine earnest of more numerous vocations to come. I recall to all that our missionary activity is a vital and essential aspect of the “Oratorian heart” that beats in the breast of every Salesian.

Once again I recommend dear Father Dho to your good prayers. We shall pray for him, mindful

that we can ask him to put in a word on behalf of our Project Africa.

The harvest is great. May the Holy Spirit raise up many labourers in all our Family.

Affectionately yours,

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ,  
*Rector Major.*