

acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

No. 302

Year LXII

October December 1981

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	Father Egidio VIGANO' The challenge of the media	page 3
2. GUIDELINES & POLICIES	2.1 Father Giovanni RAINERI Salesians and the printed word according to the mind of Don Bosco 2.2 Father Juan Edmundo VECCHI Our zeal for vocations	32 51
3. RULINGS & DIRECTIONS	New Beati for the Salesian Cal- endar	55
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL	4.1 Plenary session of the Su- perior Council (June-July 1981) 4.2 The Councillor for Youth Apostolate 4.3 The Councillor for the Mis- sions	56 57 57
5. DOCUMENTS & NEWS ITEMS	5.1 Brotherly Solidarity (37th report) 5.2 Appointments (bishops, pro- vincials, delegates) 5.3 Sardinia a Delegation 5.4 Project Africa 5.5 Pope John Paul II to Roza- nystok Poland 5.6 Faith & experience in cateche- sis 5.7 re Vicar of Rector Major for FMA 5.8 Letter of Don Bosco to Fr Lasagna 5.9 Deceased confreres	58 59 63 65 67 69 80 82

Editrice S.D.B.

Extra-commercial edition

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Esse Gi Esse - Roma

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Father Egidio VIGANO'

« THE CHALLENGE OF THE MEDIA » - The Salesian mission and the media - Mass media: a new way of being present - Don Bosco, man of the media - Understanding the social and cultural changes we are involved in - Practical requirements for the Salesian - Ways and means of evangelising through the media - Formation for the media - Salesian information - Social communication involves us all - Conclusion.

Dear confreres,

My greetings to you and all friends of the Salesian Family. I am writing to you from the 17th General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The Chapter was officially opened on 15 September after a week's retreat which I had the pleasure of preaching as an expression of my service as Rector Major. The centenary of *Don Bosco's Dream of the Diamonds* occurred during that week and I made it the burden of my talks to the 150 capitulars, reflecting together on the Salesian spirit represented by the Personage of the Dream.

Our Sisters are engrossed in preparing the definitive version of their Constitutions. In mid-October they will elect their Mother General. Let us all as individuals and as communities offer prayers and sacrifices for them as they continue in their important work.

The General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is a significant event in the life of the Church and is of special importance for all Don Bosco's Salesian Family. Let us give them our constant and generous backing as brothers in the Lord.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE MEDIA

The Salesian mission and the media

During my recent journey in South America I was given a photocopy of an intriguing unpublished letter written by Don Bosco to Don Lasagna in 1877. It is reproduced in these Acts in the Document section, page 80, and is indeed a confirmation of the extraordinary and creative concern our Father had for that section of the media dealing with the printed word.

Towards the end of last June I was able to take part in the international seminar held at Turin for the formation of Salesian personnel in our publishing houses. It was an event that set me thinking seriously on what our last two General Chapters said regarding the importance of the media in our apostolic activities.

I also reflected on the pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio* of May 1971, and what was discussed by the Superior Council and inserted into the *Ratio* regarding this important matter.

Hence I see great advantage in speaking to you on the *importance we should give the mass media in our life and mission as Salesians*. The media have always played an important part in Salesian activities, and Don Bosco and his sons have been deeply involved in using their various forms for the evangelisation and social development of the young, the working classes and the missions. However, today we must do much more in this field and prepare more extensively for the future. We need a "*new Salesian presence*" in the media, for their impact on the world is continually on the

increase. GC21 reminds us that the media "have a vast and disproportionate power to persuade, a power that enhances their message for good or for ill. The media are becoming ever more a massive educating influence, shaping and creating cultures. They produce and broadcast a mass of information that sets the basis for new life-styles and new criteria for judgement. The incisive force and ever-growing penetration of the media have made them a true and authentic alternative educational process for whole populations throughout the world, especially the young and poor".¹

1. GC21 148.

The accelerated progress of the last few years has also made the media the main dictator of public opinion: indeed *the media "play a decisive role in shaping culture, social life and the mores" of whole nations.*²

2. *ibid.*

Now we are well aware that our Salesian mission is closely linked with cultural matters: the whole of our evangelising activity lives and develops within the ambit of culture; our humble work in the Church is geared to overcome the dramatic cleavage that now exists between Gospel and culture.

It is urgent that we set about imbuing with the spirit of Christ these positive and negative values that are forming the minds of the people. The signs of the times are ever new and the media blaze them abroad; furthermore, they have a bearing, even a permeating effect, on matters pertaining to our faith.

On the other hand, the *mission of Christ* and the deposit of faith are by their very nature *matters to be communicated.*

Christ is the Word and Image of the invisible God and became man to *communicate* to the world a grand and concrete project of liberation and love

for all men. "He revealed himself as the perfect communicator; he spoke as one who lived the very lives and realities of his people".³ Christ's capacity to communicate involved the very sacrifice of himself for love — on the cross, in the eucharist, in all the sacraments. The content of his communication we call *Revelation*, and it is not a doctrinal scheme of abstract profundity but consists of facts, persons and events that go to make up the concrete and objective good news we call the *Gospel* — that powerful guide of our lives and our principles.

The whole mission of the Church is to communicate this Good News, and this is why she is called the *Evangelising Church*. The Apostles are the agents of this mission; they are the Church's communicators. "Go, proclaim the Good News to all creation", Christ says,⁴ and St Paul adds, "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news'." ⁵

To evangelise means to be communicators of the Good News; and this calls for suitable language, a deep and exact knowledge of the News, dedication to communicate it for its intrinsic value, and the art of stirring up the public's interest.

Mass media: a new way of being present

Vatican II appeals to us to read the signs of the times. As we look about us and compare our modern times with past centuries (or even with the last decade) we cannot but be struck by the vast

3. *Communio et Progressio* 11.

4. Mk XVI 15.

5. Rom X 14-15.

transformation in the lives of both individuals and society. There are many causes for this transformation, and one of them is the accelerated and incisive influence of the media.

We are all involved in this phenomenon as individuals, but we are even more involved because of the ever-growing and sometimes disastrous effect the new situation has on the very ones for whom we work — the young and the poor.

However, we must not stop at theorising: our Salesian sense of responsibility must urge us on to discover more up-to-date ways of tackling the problem; we must look for new pastoral tactics, search for a *new presence*. *Indeed this a practical area needing urgent attention and is one of the new presences spoken of in the last two General Chapters.*

Planning a *new presence* for our apostolic activities requires an ability to read the signs of the times and a clear understanding of the basic tactics that influence culture.

We cannot afford to live in an ivory tower, to be passive onlookers, to carry on as though the structures of society have not been changed. If we wish to be up-to-date with modern man whom we are called to evangelise, our prime effort must be to get to the bottom of the forces that are behind today's cultural upheaval.

We must realise that we are dealing with *a phenomenon that is still in the melting pot and lends itself to research, to inventiveness and to new ideas.* With the humble attention of those who note the media's continual improvements, we are invited to study these ever more perfect techniques so as to make active and courageous use of them in our apostolic and educative activities. We can make the most of their creative ways of communicat-

ing so suitable for today, and also be ready to exploit the developments of tomorrow.

Don Bosco had an open and courageous attitude towards the media and this should be an encouragement to us. In his day the *mass media* and the printed word; but he grasped its vital importance and was in the vanguard in exploiting all its possibilities. Let us take a brief look at the way he made the press a docile and efficient means in the achieving of his pastoral aims.

Don Bosco, man of the media

Don Bosco allowed his life to be invaded by the media of his times, from their simplest to their most developed forms. He was ever ready to "tune in" and then "transmit" to others.

He was a *good receiver*, keen to know what was going on in the world, an avid reader, a book-lover — and he had a retentive memory. He was also a *good communicator*. He began from his earliest years to use the simplest means of communication, relating to his playmates what he had read, repeating the parish priest's sermons, and reading popular books to grown-ups as they gathered in the warmth of the stable during the winter season. In later years he was to invent for his boys the medium of the "Goodnight" as a friendly occasion for passing on family news.

Don Bosco was also an *author*, his first book being written when he was twenty-nine years of age. (This is remarkable when we remember that the young country boy from the Becchi had made a notably belated arrival at Chieri to finish his much interrupted elementary schooling at fifteen years of

age!) He soon became a versatile writer, graduating from newspaper articles to books, biography, history, hagiography, drama, popular science, religion and the then fashionable apologetics. He had a preference for a practical narrative style.

Don Bosco was a prolific writer. The recent facsimile edition of his published works fills 37 large volumes, and his writings number in all 1174. He was well-read and much in demand. Many of his books were reprinted and he was also responsible for quite a series of best-sellers.

For his spiritual family he initiated his *Salesian information circulars*. In 1867, when his helpers numbered 44 and had not yet received the approbation of the Holy See, he had his circular letters triplicated and sent regularly to the three houses of the Congregation. They developed into today's *Acts of the Superior Council*. A decade later Don Bosco transformed his *bibliography news-sheet* into the *Salesian Bulletin* so that his Co-operators and friends could keep abreast of Salesian activities throughout the world.

The saint's very modern interests and energies soon graduated from writing to publishing. His publishing establishment ran the whole gamut from the manufacture of paper to the finished book (he had acquired a paper mill at Mathi Torinese). He organised a pool of authors, arranged for type-setting, printing and publishing houses to be set up, and even devised a circulation network.

At 34 years of age *he ventured into journalism*. In 1849 he undersigned 61 issues of *Amico della Gioventù, giornale politico-religioso*; it ran for eight months. The new rage of the day was to market *book series* and Don Bosco seized on the concept for his publishing establishment, organised his own

various *series* and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. *La Biblioteca della Gioventù* was a series of 204 volumes and topped the million mark; the *Catholic Readings* series exceeded 2,000,000 titles during the saint's lifetime, and in its first half-century reached 9,200,000.

Our Founder also had great success with *periodicals* such as the already-mentioned *Catholic Readings* and the *Salesian Bulletin*. The latter was printed in three languages during his lifetime (and nine while Don Rua was Superior General). The *Catholic Readings* had much in common with the modern pocket booklet: small periodic editions at low cost, available over the counter or by subscription. Don Bosco certainly was well ahead of his times. But what really counts is that he made use of the media as a *means for achieving his educative project*, using the various forms for the Christian and human development of the young in need, the masses and the missions.

- *For the young* he wrote school texts (*Bible History*, *Church History* and *History of Italy*), prayer books (such as the *Giovane Provveduto*), formative books (biographies of many outstanding students and many simple pamphlets on spiritual matters), and books for recreation and the stage. It was for the young that he had ventured into journalism with his *Amico della Gioventù*.

- *For the general public.* At 31 years of age Don Bosco had already written for the man on the land his *Oenology in Italy*. Three years later his *Decimal System* appeared for artisans and country people. Indeed there followed a veritable flood of books for the general public, ranging from sacred to secular, from his *Recreational Readings* series to

his *Series for Workers* and the popular almanac *Galantuomo*.

It was natural in Don Bosco to attract followers and so *it was only to be expected that his sons should follow in his footsteps*. Many of his early Salesians were writers, or at least found time amidst their multiple labours to produce some worthwhile volume. Among those who could be ranked as more or less full-time writers were Lemoyne (his biographer), Bonetti (editor of the Salesian Bulletin), Barberis, Francesca, Trione and Cerruti.

Don Bosco saw a special place in the media for his Salesian brothers. For an activity with so many lay aspects, this work was eminently suitable for his lay confreres. They became his directors in printing and book-binding establishments, book-shops and publishing houses — in varying degrees of importance. Some were writers too. The media proved a fitting vocational achievement for them.

Thanks to an organised and combined effort, the Salesian press found its way into many places with its serene message of the Gospel and social development.

There is much to learn from this general picture.

Don Bosco was a man of the media — which in practice meant the printed word in those times. He took the situation in hand and tamed the media into docile and efficient instruments for the realisation of his apostolic plans.

In the face of this attitude and the constant and daring activities of our Father, two queries spring to mind: *Why and how did he commit himself to this task?* These are challenging questions. The *why* sheds light on our mission. The *how* is a spur to our spirit of initiative in dealing with modern situations.

Of particular significance in this regard is Don Bosco's circular sent to the houses on the Feast of St Joseph 1885 just before he left for France. In it he dilates on the spread of good literature and refers to this apostolate in the following statements. "The spreading of good books is one of the most effective means of sustaining the kingdom of Christ in so many souls." *"It is one of the principal aims of our Congregation."* "I beg and implore you not to neglect this most important aspect of our mission." "This was one of the main tasks given to me by God, and you know I felt duty bound to throw myself indefatigably into this apostolate despite my many other commitments." "Rest assured, my dear sons, that if you too are diligent in this apostolate, the Lord will shower his choicest blessings on you and your boys."⁶

6. Epistolario IV pp 318-321.

Don Bosco's reasons (the *why*) for his commitment to the media are quite clear — and more relevant today than ever. We are dealing with "a most important aspect of our mission".

Our Founder's methods (the *how*) are specifically linked to the printed word, in keeping with what was possible in his day.

The circumstances of Don Bosco's activities obviously do not mirror our situation today. We are faced with the dizzy heights of achievement of the modern manipulators of culture. The printed word is still of great importance, but is only a restricted area of our modern media. *By today's standards the ways and means available to Don Bosco were limited indeed.* The printed word could be viewed as a kind of introduction, quite adequate in Don Bosco's time; but we today must review and widen the horizons according to the new demands of our modern means. It is important that we

apply ourselves with the same dedication, daring, intelligence and constancy as did Don Bosco.

To achieve this we must cultivate that flexibility of mind that characterised his spirit of initiative.

Understanding the social and cultural changes we are involved in

Following the example of our Father we too must strive to understand what is happening about us, in order to play our part efficiently and courageously in the building up of a new culture that is open to the spirit of the Gospel.

We read in *Communio et Progressio* that "among the marvellous technical inventions that foster communications among human beings, Christians find means that have been devised under God's providence for the encouragement of social relations during their pilgrimage on earth. These means in fact serve to build up new relationships and fashion a *new language* which permit men to know themselves better and to understand each other more easily".⁷

7. CP 12.

In this regard we must realise the colossal steps made in the last few years in the means of communication.

According to Marshall McLuhan (and using his curious new vocabulary), man issued forth from his *tribal phase* of communicating mainly by the spoken word to enter the *Gutenberg galaxy* of the printed word, and then the *Marconi galaxy* of telecommunication. He has now progressed to a *cosmic or global village*, a world that the ever-growing facility of communication has reduced to the dimension of a small village. The speed of oral communication in a tiny village of years ago is now matched on a world

scale. *Man today is no longer ignorant of what is going on around him or indeed throughout the whole world.* In one way or another his imagination is affected by events of all kinds: large-scale catastrophes, social conflicts, wars, sporting events, cultural changes, the doings of people of good or evil repute — right down to the sheerest drivel that parades as news, or the latest bilge regarding the current film star.

Distance is no longer an obstacle; everyone is our neighbour and can have access to our living room.

Mass communication possesses its own peculiar language, novel and fascinating; it is also the purveyor of both positive and negative values — about which there is always lively debate.

The facts, ideas and perspectives of the media touch us closely for the reason that modern communicating methods take such a grip on the public and on our youngsters: their very personality-development is affected; so also are their basic life-principles, their attitude towards God and their fellowmen, their very vocation in life. Let us take a brief bird's-eye view of the effects of mass communication on our charges (and for that matter, on us too).

People are bombarded with a barrage of messages of all kinds, and the flak gets steadily worse as one penetrates into the "global village". The situation is reaching the stage when people actually live and breathe the media.

Naturally this bombardment has its *positive aspects*. The man in the street (and especially the youngster) is infinitely more informed regarding the world he lives in than former generations were. The sum total of his knowledge and experience received through the media is colossal. In one of

his documents the late Cardinal Gilroy speaks of man's right and duty to develop his own "vision of the world", and such a task is greatly facilitated by today's world communications, whether the vision be material, ideological or spiritual. As communication networks increase their efficiency so also is man's experience and awareness augmented.

The benefits of mass media technology are also reflected in the *classroom*. The children of the "Gutenberg galaxy" were confined to a more limited field of learning. Today's students have the advantages of sound, colour and movement. "Total language" has arrived and schools have taken a great step forward. Young students are enjoying the advantages of easier education.

On the other hand, the media's information-bombardment is often incongruous, contradictory and confusing: *which helps destroy the unity within the various cultures*. (How vastly different was the situation when villagers received their guidelines from the parish priest, the mayor or the school mistress!) These contradictions lie at the root of the destruction of civil and religious customs, and we would do well to heed this.

The media today hold undisputed sway and enjoy an ever-increasing domination. Communication comes via image and spectacle, and the modern "audio-visual man" is wide open to the very real risk of *superficiality*. This is of particular concern to the Salesian educator, for radio, cinema and television have little time for what is nearest his heart, namely evangelisation.

GC21 rightly refers to the media as the "parallel school" insofar as their influence on young people is as great as (perhaps greater than) the school itself. One has only to think of the number of hours

youngsters sit transfixed in front of the TV every day of the year, and especially during holiday time. This "parallel school" is well attended and well heeded by its pupils.

The media are not generous and unselfish services run without costs. Every station pumping out its pontifications is *backed by big business concerns* often flaunting ideological conceits far removed from the principles of the Gospel. The message is subjected to constant manipulation. The danger of this distortion is no figment of the imagination.

It is plain that the extraordinary technology of the media is seldom used in a truly positive and constructive manner. Actually the media in themselves are excellent means for individual and social improvement, for the good use of freedom, for autonomy and sharing, for human and Christian solidarity: but unfortunately our daily experience sees little evidence of this in practice.

If we want genuine education and evangelisation we cannot just continue as of yore. We cannot ignore the impact of the media as though it were non-existent. On the contrary, our task is to face the new situation, accept youth and society in their new guise, and work among them with courage, availability and the creativity of Don Bosco.

Practical requirements for the Salesian

The vast and important area of the media clamours for new ways of making our Salesian impact, and we must set about planning for this "new presence" at its various levels. This is more urgent than ever, and involves the Salesian in many ways — as an individual on the receiving end of

the media, and as an apostle-communicator. He is not only involved with its general problems as a member of the "global village", but also involved in revising and rethinking his whole position so as to gain new insights into his critical understanding and even his religious consecration.

Point one, then: *social communication is not to be identified with either mass or group media*. From the Christian point of view "the chief aims of social communication are the unity and advancement of men living in society".⁸ It directs the use of the media to "focus attention on the hopes and problems of men in order to seek out ways of solving them as soon as possible and unite men in an ever closer solidarity".⁹ In other words, "*Social communication tends of its very nature to multiply contacts within society and to deepen social consciousness*".¹⁰

Hence social communication is a most valuable aspect of social living, a factor that builds up culture itself, even though it is so closely bound up with technical progress and the particular local way of life.

Point two: the actual *mass media* on the other hand, are fundamentally only the means (albeit highly sophisticated) used by social communication. Naturally we shall not be so superficial as to think that this distinction greatly simplifies our problem. The distinction between the two is valid, but in practice they are dove-tailed together and quite inseparable. It is this very inseparability that has given rise to the "new language" that is so efficient in accelerating the emerging culture. The secret of handling this mutual permeation is *to insist on giving pre-eminence to the nature and purpose of social communication*: we must see that the media obey these functions in the service of man. To achieve

8. CP 1.

9. CP 6.

10. CP 8.

this demands that we intensify and perfect a colossal work of education and evangelisation.

It is patent that the media really do transmit tastes and ideas to masses of people; their communications are legion; and they really ought to be striving to fulfil the primary aim and nature required by a healthy and just social communication.

We could list the various media under the following headings: books, newspapers, reviews, advertisements, cinema, radio, television, records, sound cassettes and videotapes — and the future is promising “space telematics” that read like science fiction; one has only to think of the wealth of information available from the “universal data bank” (to be had by dialling a telephone or videophone).

If in practice we allow ourselves to identify *social communication* with the functions of the *media*, we run the risk of being unconsciously *overwhelmed by the media or else rejecting them indiscriminately*: the result would be a lack of understanding of the true nature and purpose of social communication. Thus many become profoundly “conditioned” by the fascinating novelties of the new techniques and never learn to judge the value of their frequently negative message: they become superficial, accept disordered conduct and submit to all sorts of ideologies and power politics.

Then there are the few who for spiritual reasons totally ignore the media, closing their minds to their very existence, if not actually despising them. This attitude excludes all apostolic inventiveness and responsibility regarding social communication.

A committed Christian, and especially a religious of the active life, needs to do some serious homework on two things:

- his faith must *develop a critical faculty*

regarding the present way the mass media are functioning; and

- his hope must *make every apostolic effort* to imbue the new culture with the Gospel by suitable use of the means our technological age offers.

There is assuredly a special urgency today for a good healthy critical attitude so that the permanent values of the Gospel in the hearts of individuals and in public opinion be not nullified.

As a small stimulus to our critical faculties the following suggestion is worth trying out; it was made by a writer of world renown. He asks how a Christian should read the newspaper and answers the question himself: "As Christ would read it". Then he adds, "And how would Christ read it?" His decisive reply is, "He would look for news of his Kingdom!"¹¹

This may sound like pious verbiage, but if we try it out in our own personal use of the media, reading the papers or watching TV, it will become plain that such an attitude calls for a profound change of mentality: a deep and disturbing concern about how the *media manipulate communication*. *The result will be a sincere and practical apostolic reaction, a spiritual commitment, a discriminating use and an intelligent and mortified non-use of the media.*

It is not an exaggeration to state that unfortunately much time is wasted in the use of the media, that too much is absorbed that is harmful to the faith and that fills the imagination with thoughts not at all suited to our consecrated life.

Finally, the Salesian must consider certain practical requirements regarding social communication; and in line with the last two General Chapters there are three main priorities at different levels:

11. Michel Quoist: *Appointment with Christ*, SEI 1973, pp 23-24.

- ways and means of *evangelising* through the media;
- *formation of confreres* for the media; and
- regular and improved diffusion of *Salesian information*.

Ways and means of evangelising through the media

The relationship between social communication and evangelisation, or more concretely, the use of the communicating facilities of the media for spreading the Gospel, must have a profound influence on a Salesian as he sets about his distinctive apostolate of "evangelising by educating". GC21 has provided us with a few practical pointers.¹² We must not only *educate for the media* (i.e. train our young to subject the media's offerings to a balanced and critical judgement), but also *evangelise with the media*. This opens up a wide area of initiatives in our educative, cultural and teaching activities in the Christian animation of youth groups, catechesis and the liturgy of the word..

12. GC21 149-153.

The sound use of the media in education requires a solid effort to achieve competence in the following:

- an effective utilisation of the various facilities of the media;
- a clear knowledge of one's objectives;
- an enthusiastic and effective creativeness;
- a calm, unbiassed critical faculty for judging the message of the media;
- an awareness and understanding of their influence; and

- an ability to master the technology and communicating devices (the "language") so as to "get the message across".

All parents and educators can and must exercise a fundamental role in this field, and this is all the more urgent in today's pluralistic and totalitarian society.

There are two aspects in our educational commitment that should be underlined.

1. The Salesian must have a clear and accurate realisation of the true nature and primary aim of social communication. In this lies the secret of the beneficial blending of *social communication and media*. The real point at issue is actual relationship between human beings, the growth of communion, mutual understanding, fathoming the new techniques of communication with the new "language" that transcends grammar (McLuhan says, "The media language is already the message").

2. Of special importance to the Salesian is the *natural energy* of the young; and it can find an outlet in cinema, television, radio, records, cassettes, reading, cartoons, and so on. *Special mention should be made of the theatre. Communio et Progressio* says, "Theatre is one of the most ancient and lively forms of human communication".¹³ "The partnership of the theatre with the mass media of communication has brought about forms of dramatic expression that have been aptly called the 'multi-media'".¹⁴ "The Church has always shown considerable interest in the theatre, which in its origins was closely connected with manifestations of religion. This long-standing interest in the theatre should be maintained by Christians today and full use made of its possibilities."¹⁵

13. CP 158.

14. CP 159.

15. CP 161.

We Salesians should have a greater esteem for this activity and make better use of it; it plays no mean part in our educational tradition.

In developing the healthy natural activity of the young we should afford them plenty of scope for initiative and imagination, and encourage their sense of responsibility for communicating with one another. All this adds up to a quality that is distinctive in Salesian education — without of course belittling the still necessary classes to be given in the basics of grammar, culture, science and trades. Don Bosco in those days of impromptu theatre gave the boys free rein for creativity and improvisation. There are plenty of good reasons today for opening up opportunities for the young to develop their spontaneity in today's media.

Having made these two points I wish to note that *Communio et Progressio* calls on us to help and further "vocations for communicating the Christian message"; it also urges collaboration in the local Church's efforts to set up production centres and radio and television stations. It is well for us to remember that also in this field of apostolate our preference will be for the young and the masses.

Various provinces have already initiated a number of undertakings, and some are of first class quality: audiovisual production centres, publishing houses, Salesian radio and TV programmes, youth periodicals, training schools for the media. However, they are still few in number, and (given the size of our Congregation) not sufficiently expressive of our mission. In his day, Don Bosco, true prophet, had put the Congregation in the vanguard of the then media. Our updated loyalty to our Founder must urge us on to increase our action in his charismatic apostolate. He exploited to the full what

was available in the 19th century, and we must show the same dedication and inventiveness today.

We must see the vast area of social communication as *an apostolate of interesting and efficacious "new presences" for the Congregation and the Salesian Family*. These initiatives will be in keeping with our charism and full of promise. It goes without saying that they will not be easy; nor will they tolerate a perfunctory approach. They will open up wide and promising horizons. Here is a special niche for our Salesian brothers; a programme of co-ordination with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; a mighty challenge for all the Salesian Family. *Sons and daughters of Don Bosco, let us unite!* Let us take to heart the tireless creativeness of our holy Founder for the salvation of the young and the masses.

Formation for the media

This topic is explicitly dealt with in the new *Ratio*, where we find a systematic basic plan of guidelines that run the whole gamut from initial to ongoing formation.¹⁶ The document goes on to say: "There must be a serious preparation in the area of social communication at least and especially in what concerns *formation to be a good communicator and good receiver*. The Salesian receiver and communicator will be able to adopt a critical approach and therefore be unrestricted and capable of discussing at a linguistic and cultural level the material served up by press, radio, cinema and television; he will also be able to express, expound and bear witness to his own faith, and as an educator, pass on to the young its theological ethical,

16. *Ratio*: Appendix 3
pp 322-326.

social and cultural content, making due and proper use of the language and means of both mass media and group media".¹⁷

17. Ratio 60.

This is truly up-to-the-moment formation and totally in keeping with our Salesian apostolate.

— It is in keeping with *our consecration*: we are religious-in-the-world, and our faith distinguishes clearly and firmly the cockle from the wheat. We are also religious-not-of-the-world, and our *sequela Christi* insists on temperance and the good example of practical spirituality and mortification both as persons and as communities.

— It is also in keeping with our *evangelising apostolate*: pastoral charity urges us to help the young and the masses to make proper use of the media, to grasp its communication techniques, to view it critically, to assess the values it offers, to supplement or complement its images. The Salesian must encourage intelligent initiatives among his charges so that they themselves may become agents of sound educative communication.

The formation of our personnel in this matter demands more than a dabbling good will: perfunctory formation for the media is not good enough. *Systematic practical programmes are required* that will assure the confreres of a certain competence. GC21 bids us slough off certain negative reservations and attitudes that have proved unacceptable and apostolically sterile. As Don Bosco did a century ago, we must *shun a mere passive defensiveness*; we need a true change of mental outlook. Never let us forget that social communication is one of the principal services of our mission; articles 27, 28 and 29 of our Regulations leave no doubt about this.

Provinces and formation centres should immediately draw up a basic plan along the lines set out by the *Ratio*; they should put it into practice in all seriousness, even if gradually. Practical objectives should be aimed at: the *Salesian as receiver*, the *Salesian as communicator*, the *Salesian specialist*, the *Salesian producer*. Each phase of formation should have its special programme; good teachers should be found and advantage taken of the help of skilled professionals.

Salesian Information

In July 1977, the centenary year of the Salesian Bulletin, Father Ricceri wrote a circular on *Family News*¹⁸ in which he stressed the importance of the diffusion of Salesian information. What he said is just as valid today.

In the face of the accelerated growth of the media, Father Ricceri noticed an appalling lack in the diffusion of Salesian news. Such a state of affairs weakens to danger point the sense of belonging to the Congregation and the Salesian Family. He stressed the need of an effective plan for communicating among ourselves "without triumphalism but with calm objectivity". He reminded us that "out of sight out of mind" was valid not only for engaged couples and spouses but also for religious, their Congregation and their ideals.

The recent *Ratio*, in an effort to promote greater knowledge of our Family values has prepared a rich and detailed bibliography of recommended Salesian reading.¹⁹ We need this plentiful information regarding the origins, history and present life of our Congregation and the Salesian Family: otherwise our

18. ASC 287.

19. *Ratio*: Appendix 1, pp. 307-315.

life-blood does not circulate as it should, we do not feel the effect of our Salesian charisma, and we lose our sense of belonging.

On the other hand, with adequate diffusion and communication of Salesian values and information we have greater vitality and enthusiasm for our vocation and greater family happiness.²⁰

If we carefully consider these authoritative guidelines, we see that there are *three levels* of information.

— *Salesian history* is an absolute necessity for all members of the Family of Don Bosco. We know in fact that “the charism of the Founder is an experience of the Holy Spirit” transmitted in time with its practical traditions.²¹

— *Reflection on Salesianity*, theological conviction of our vocation in the Church, a deeper understanding of the spirit of Don Bosco, of his Preventive System, etc., — all are essential for our activities: “nothing is more down-to-earth than a clear idea”.

— Up-to-date *family news*, especially through our periodicals, will weld past to present, eliminate geographical separation, and give continuity and integration to the project of Don Bosco as it unfolds in time and throughout the world.

We are already progressing along these lines with our Salesian information, but there is always room for expansion and improvement.

Regarding the first two levels (which could be both termed “Salesianity”), we must *produce, circulate, translate, adapt and assimilate such material, and in ever-growing quantities*.²² Among the causes of a certain loss of direction and vagueness in regard to the Preventive System in our communities, GC21

20. Various Authors: Communication and the Salesian Family; *Colloqui sulla vita salesiana* series, no. 8 LDC 1977.

21. MR 11.

22. v GC21 19.

23. GC21 99 & 153d.

24. GC21 342.

says that "another possible explanation could be the scarcity of documentation and specific literature in the local languages".²³ Hence the Chapter directed that "provincial conferences or linguistic groups must see to the provision of an adequate and up-to-date Salesian bibliography in the vernacular. In addition it is hoped that study groups will be found at regional level which will be able to provide in due course Salesian publications and other services".²⁴

Regarding the third level (Salesian news), the letter of Father Ricceri (ASC 287) is well worth re-reading. Don Bosco is still news in our time; and the Congregation and the Salesian Family have need of family news.

The diffusion of this news needs both suitable means and trained Salesians. At the Generalate there is the *Secretariate for the Media*; throughout the world there are the many editors of the *Salesian Bulletins* and *Provincial Newsletters*; and there are innumerable confreres and members of the Salesian Family who see to the various publications for the animation and knowledge our Salesian lives need.

I wish to place on record my deep appreciation of all who work in this special area. We must recognise that Salesian information has already a band of dedicated workers who regularly prepare material through a number of official channels such as the following.

25. Const. 149.

26. v ASC 291.

- The *Acts of the Superior Council* (ASC), "the official organ for the promulgation of the Council's directives and for Salesian information",²⁵ is published every three months under the direction of the Secretary General.²⁶

- The *Italian Salesian Bulletin*, a Salesian bi-monthly family review of news and views "edited

according to the directives of the Superior Council", is under the aegis of the Councillor for the Salesian Family.²⁷

27. Reg 32.

- The *Salesian News Agency* (ANS) is a monthly news release from the Press Office of the Secretariate for the Media. It carries the latest news of Salesian happenings throughout the world.

- The *Dossier BS* is another news release from the Secretariate for the Media with written-up material offered to the local Salesian Bulletins.

- The *Provincial Newsletters* carry family news of their respective provinces and are under the responsibility of the individual provincials. They have been in existence for some time and have had a noticeable influence in building up communion between the various houses.

We should also be concerned to feed Salesian information beyond the Salesian ambit — this is an area frequently neglected. Not only at the centre, but wherever there is a Salesian work, we should "furnish well-presented and accurate information to outsiders in order to build up a positive and meaningful image of the Salesian apostolate both local and worldwide". It is also important to write to newspapers, and send photos, articles and interesting items of the Salesian apostolate for the young and the missions. Radio and TV could be invited to use notable Salesian material in their broadcasts and telecasts. Naturally we must avoid any semblance of triumphalism; but a little advertising of something good in a world so full of wretchedness and sadness will not go amiss. Indeed Don Bosco set us the example; and, after all, our blessed Lord has told us, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven".²⁸

28. Matt V 16.

Social communication involves us all

We have seen that social communication has some influence on the lives of modern man everywhere; and it has a particularly strong impact on culture. The Salesian, with his special apostolate, finds himself necessarily involved too.

- Positively it offers information, education, relaxation, study, reflection and social action.

- Negatively it is guilty of superficiality, ideological brainwashing, justification of evil, pornography, consumerism and false ideals.

In practice the Salesian finds himself daily with the instruments of social communication in his hands: books, newspapers, records, cassettes, films, slides, radio and television. Of course certain uses of the media are in the hands of specialists only; but to a certain extent, as we have just seen, every single person has some degree of commitment and responsibility in social communication. In this latter sense *we ordinary persons are involved in the following ways*: we must be

- serious researchers in the area of social communication;
- trainers of our educators and operators;
- zealous workers in social communication for our charges (writers, journalists, publishers, producers and technicians for films, radio and TV);
- purveyors of Salesian information;
- intermediate workers (such as delegates for the provincials, directors of publishing establishments);
- educators of "receivers" (i.e., the young and the masses); and

- simple “receivers” and users ourselves.

Social communication certainly involves everybody: and us Salesians especially, since it affords us more efficient means for evangelisation. It would be a sad error of judgement to consider confreres engaged in media specialisation (such as publishing houses, radio, audiovisuals) as second-class Salesians doing marginal work irrelevant or extraneous to the Salesian mission. These Salesians can and do contribute to the Salesian mission no less than those in the classroom, the oratories, the parishes. They work with the most modern methods and the highest efficiency-potential for the spreading of the Gospel in the Salesian way.

Let us all stir up our interest in social communication and widen our horizons. Let us increase our competence and see that in our provinces and houses the directives of the Church and the last two General Chapters are carried out.

Conclusion

Dear confreres, Don Bosco, man of vision that he was, was well aware of the ever-increasing impact of social communication. Right from the early years of his apostolate he worked with enthusiasm in this particular field. He said of the printed word, “*In these matters Don Bosco wants to be in the vanguard of progress*”. He was possessed of a saintly daring. He was indefatigable in his use of social communication to further his mission, and thereby so vexed the enemies of the Church that attempts were even made against his life.

We can do no less today. To quote Father Ricceri, “We are sons of a book-binder, a com-

29. ASC 287.

positor, a printer, a journalist, an author, a publisher",²⁹ and we must honour this heritage. We must apply ourselves seriously and not be satisfied with mere dabbling or dilettantism: today social communication is a science, a technology and a difficult art, and calls for dedicated and competent devotees. There is also a high risk factor: in many aspects media work is thoroughly pagan and must be baptised; and it is capable of corrupting us and leading us from our vocation and faith.

30. CP 129.

Nevertheless it is a way we must traverse, for the Church leaves us no option: "We would not be obedient to Christ if we did not make suitable use of the possibilities offered by the modern media to extend to vast numbers of people the announcement of the Gospel message".³⁰

31. CP 187.

Let us be responsible and active members of the People of God who "walk the path of history. They are essentially both communicators and recipients and advance with their times, looking forward with confidence and enthusiasm to whatever the development of communications in a space age may have to offer".³¹

Dear confreres, let Don Bosco be our inspiration and let us accept the challenges of the times. With immense confidence in the Lord,

Father Egidio VIGANÒ,
Rector Major