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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco**

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22nd GENERAL CHAPTER

1. Letter of the Rector Major
2. Calendar for GC22
3. Outlines for study
4. Survey questionnaire
5. Suggestions for preparing for and directing the provincial chapters
6. Norms for elections
7. Information regarding GC22

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CONTENTS

1. LETTER OF RECTOR MAJOR	5
2. CALENDAR FOR GC22	23
3. OUTLINES FOR STUDY	25
3.1 Foreword	25
3.2 How to use <i>Outlines for study</i>	26
3.3 Themes	27
Form of the Congregation	27
Salesian Family	28
Our charges	28
Our pastoral action	29
The preventive system	30
Relationship between mission and communion	31
The Superior in the local community	32
The Salesian community at various levels	33
The praying community	33
Salesian religious consecration	34
The vows	35
Formation of Salesians	36
Organisation of our Society: principles and structures	37
3.4 Practical directions for <i>Outlines for study</i>	40
Criteria for revision of the Constitutions and Regulations	40
— Evangelical-ecclesial criterion	41
— Salesian historicity criterion	41
— Juridical-normative criterion	41
— Criterion for classifying the articles	42
— Criterion of experience	43
— Criterion for literary form, style and logical distribution	44
Working document	44
The work of the provincial chapters	45
Confreres' contributions	46

4. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	47
4.1 General directions regarding questionnaire on the Constitutions and Regulations	47
Who answers the questionnaire and why	47
Preamble to answering the questionnaire	47
How to complete the questionnaire	48
Collecting and counting the answers	48
Forwarding the mastersheet to the GC22 Moderator	49
4.2 Survey questionnaire to be answered	49
Literary style	49
The order of the text	49
Each chapter	50
Salesian apostolate	50
Salesian style of life	51
Our charges	51
Authority	51
Co-responsibility and subsidiarity	52
Community	52
General assessments	53
The General Regulations	53
5. SUGGESTIONS FOR PREPARING FOR AND DIRECTING THE PROVINCIAL CHAPTERS	54
Aims and duties of a provincial chapter	54
Preparation work for the provincial chapter	55
Smooth running of the provincial chapter	57
Participation of communities and confreres	58
6. NORMS FOR ELECTIONS	60
Introduction: legitimacy and validity	60
Canonical erection of communities	61
Appointments to be checked for validity	62
Reckoning the number of confreres in the province	63
Members with active and passive voice	66
Minutes of the elections	70
Special cases: doubts, mistakes, nullity, invalidity	70
Formal directives for lists of members	72
7. INFORMATION REGARDING GC22	73
Work of the Preparatory Technical Commission	73
Marginal number index	75

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Father Egidio VIGANÒ

THE 22nd GENERAL CHAPTER

GC22: Introduction - Convocation of the Chapter - An event that challenges our spiritual maturity - Various stages in the lengthy process of renewal - GC22's task, to finalise and actuate - The Constitutions, our covenant with God - Approval of the Constitutions by the Holy See - The provincial chapters - Conclusion.

Dear Confreres,

The time for the next General Chapter is fast approaching. It is a Chapter that will mark the final phase in the reflection and renewal of the last score of years since Vatican II.

For this reason I call on you to make serious preparations for this important event.

Our Constitutions stress the spiritual character and the deep human value of every General Chapter,¹ and at the same time determine the basic norms for its execution.

Article 155 of the Constitutions establishes that the General Chapter be "convoked by the Rector Major"; and article 99 of the Regulations lays down the details of the convocation: there is to be a year's notice, "by means of a circular letter, which shall indicate the purpose, place and opening date of the Chapter".

This present letter, then, is the official communication that GC22 is to take place; it also offers a number of points for consideration regarding its purpose, its scope and its special characteristics,

1. Constitutions art. 151.

in order that the whole Congregation. "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" may assiduously seek to ascertain at this given moment of history "the will of the Heavenly Father so as to serve the Church better".²

2. *ibid.*

Convocation of the Chapter

The 22nd General Chapter (GC22) will begin on 9 January 1984 at the Generalate, via della Pisana 1111, Rome. It will start with the spiritual retreat of the capitulars. Its only topic and principal scope will be the *study of the text of the new Constitutions and Regulations* with a view to their definitive approval by the Holy See. In accordance with what is laid down in the Constitutions,³ the Chapter will also elect the Rector Major and the members of the Superior Council for the succeeding six years according to the expiry terms indicated in the same Constitutions.

3. *ibid.* art. 153, 132, 145, 147.

It will also study and analyse the *General Report on the state of the Congregation* presented by the Rector Major according to article 106 of the Regulations.

I have already communicated to you that the Moderator⁴ is Father Juan Edmundo Vecchi, Councillor for the Youth Apostolate Department. All information, proposals and study contributions should be referred to him.

4. Regulations art. 100.

The *Technical Commission* has also been constituted; and together with the Moderator it has established the procedure for the preparation for the Chapter and has studied ways to promote "the active interest, collaboration and participation of all members".⁵ The contents of this issue of

5. *ibid.*

the Acts constitute the results of the efforts of the Technical Commission.

It will also be necessary to pay special heed to the further communications of the Moderator, and whatever will be communicated from time to time in the future Acts of the Superior Council.

An event that challenges our spiritual maturity

The General Council is much more than an event that falls due according to the requirements of the Constitutions: it is a *privileged occasion for us to manifest our loyalty to our vocation*. Therefore it is an *ecclesial event* and bids us as Salesians to take our stance before the People of God, "faithful to the Gospel and our Founder's charism, and sensitive to the needs of times and places".⁶

6. v. Constitutions art. 151.

As religious we must see ourselves called by the Spirit of the Lord to offer the young a valid and relevant saving action in fidelity to Don Bosco's revealing inspiration. Vatican II has been an insistent challenge to all religious institutes to refurbish in fidelity and Christian courage the special saving mission of their various Founders. The inspired message that the young expect from us Salesians today is, in the first place, the novelty of a heart afire with that pastoral charity defined by Don Bosco as *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*.

The General Chapter will be the yardstick of our spiritual maturity, of our apostolic genuineness, our ability to replan together our special kind of holiness in response to the cultural changes and the new requirements of the young.

GC22 must be totally aligned with the Holy

Spirit; it must move the Congregation to take careful stock of the particular period of man's history we are traversing; it must inspire us with a practical sympathy for the needs of the world and the wants of the poor and the little ones; and it must proceed along the lines of Don Bosco's initial project with its transcendent values inspired by the Holy Spirit and destined to develop vigorously, sloughing off its merely transient guises.

The Chapter must be characterised by certain spiritual aspects — a brotherly encounter of Salesians with the most diverse cultural and apostolic experiences; its members must be imbued with a radiant and radical *sequela Christi*, a pastoral predilection for the young, a united vocation-sense that bespeaks total fidelity to Don Bosco, a dedicated willingness to examine and assess with spiritual freedom and collaboration, and a personal and community docility to the Holy Spirit who is the true source of that unanimity for which the Chapter will strive.

That GC22 may really be *a gift of the Spirit and an ecclesial event*, both we (the Congregation) and the whole Salesian Family must get down on our knees: this means intensifying our personal and community prayer, listening to our brothers, reading the signs of the times, adding a liturgical dimension to our suffering, multiplying our daily sacrifices and generous acts of charity.

Various stages in the lengthy process of renewal⁷

7. Perfectae Caritatis 2.

GC22 will not begin its work from scratch: in fact it will be already well advanced in the

process demanded by the Church to swing the Congregation into the orbit of Vatican II. The work we are invited to do on our Constitutions and Regulations is actually a revision, a coordination, an elucidation and a finalising of more than fifteen years of labour preceded and developed by three General Chapters of particular importance in the life of our Salesian vocation.

The main stages of development are identifiable by the particular scope of each of the General Chapters. Each stage carried its special stimulus characterised by the practical needs of the times and the level of reflection achieved by the Congregation. More than fifteen years of careful and detailed work in a period of "accelerated history" is no small feat. Four earnest and complementary general Chapters cannot be brushed off lightly as mere whimsies. GC19 established an *awareness* of the signs of the times and began *preparations*; GC20 swung the *Congregation into orbit*; GC21 reviewed, rectified, *confirmed and elucidated*; and GC22 must *re-examine, clarify, complete, perfect and finalise*.

A brief word about the preceding stages — not presuming to make any general judgements but simply desiring to shed further light on the aims of the approaching GC22.

* GC19 (8 April to 10 June 1965) took place whilst Vatican II was drawing to a close. The Council had already expressed many of its ideas on renewal and its main thrusts; however, the last session with its promulgation of documents was yet to come. There was a feeling that the Chapter, and hence the Congregation, "had arrived at a turning point." "During the work of the

Chapter one always felt that all those present were anxiously watching the Vatican Ecumenical Council. The atmosphere in Rome clearly encouraged this springtime of expectancy so full of promise".⁸ GC19 certainly felt the first flush of the great conciliar event: it affected our renewed grasp of the Church's mission in the world, the deep forces of the religious life and its community and ecclesial aspect, the revision of pastoral work with its requirements for pluralism and decentralisation. However, in general, people had only a fairly limited perception of the demands of the Council; indeed not all could yet have gauged the profound ecclesiological renewal of Vatican II. Still, the chapter members breathed something of its freshness.

8. GC19: Introduction,
p. 5.

In a special way GC19 studied and deepened the understanding and acceptance of the responsibility of a General Chapter as the wielder of supreme authority in the Congregation. The Chapter spent a considerable amount of time on this matter and compiled a set of regulations that made the functioning of a General Chapter equal to the grave task required of it in the years that followed. Furthermore the general process of updating was set in motion through the treatment of such topics as the religious life, spiritual direction, the Salesian brother, and the beginnings of new structures of government (the Superior Council, Regionals, vicars, and better participation in Chapters). With the *motu proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* came the proclamation of a Special General Chapter for all religious institutes. Coming on the heels of GC19, so to speak, there was a tendency to look to the future rather than to the present, and thus quite a few forward-looking directives of GC19 never got off the ground.

9. *Ecclesiae Sanctae* II, I (3.4.6).

• GC20 (10 June 1971 to 5 January 1972) was the Special General Chapter (SGC) convoked in obedience to *Ecclesiae Sanctae*.⁹ The *motu proprio* called for a revision and suitable renewal of the norms and customs of the Congregation according to the spirit of the Founder so as to meet the requirements of the times; this was to be implemented by “an extensive and free consultation of the members” and an extraordinary General Chapter; there was also the mandate to revise the Constitutions, with the proviso that “the aim, nature and character of the Institute be respected”.

Thus the Special General Chapters of religious institutes were called on to promote the specific renewal desired by the Council.¹⁰

10. v. Lumen Gentium 44; *Perfectae Caritatis* 2, 3, 4.

Our own Special General Chapter was prepared for by no less than two provincial chapters and followed by a third; this entailed much work in assisting the confreres to adjust to the new ideas. Indeed this period engaged the Congregation in deep community study and was one of the highlights in our history. Its findings presented an extensive and profound analysis of the various aspects of our evangelical lives, our communion, the criteria of our pastoral work, the Salesian Family, etc. It sought to clarify each one of these topics in the light of the Gospel, the Council teachings, genuine tradition and the new values indicated by the signs of the times.¹¹

11. v. SGC 20.

The Chapter reformulated the text of the Constitutions, suiting the language and the set-up to the Council directives; it welded into one text the spiritual wealth of the Salesian vocation and the basic norms that regulate our Salesian life.¹²

12. v. Constitutions, art. 200.

It set out in the *Regulations* the practical way for all to live the *Constitutions*, leaving particular

matters of a local nature and the demands of special situations to be regulated by the provinces in their provincial directories.

SGC completed an enormous task with substantial success; and it was a work admired also by non-Salesian authorities and scholars.

GC21 (23 October 1977 to 12 February 1978) gathered together the result of this first "trial period" of the new Constitutions, prepared from an assessment of the practical life in relation to the text of the Constitutions. It also concentrated on an in-depth study of a number of essential Salesian topics: the Preventive System, Salesian formation, the Salesian brother, and the restructuring of the UPS. It gave the Congregation a further six years of practical trial for the renewed Holy Rule.¹³

13. GC21 373.

Regarding the text of the Constitutions, GC21 pointed out clear and positive aspects that were unfortunately not always carried out in practice; also certain wordings and arrangements that needed clarifying; and finally some matters that lacked inspiration or were not in accordance with proper norms. On the basis of this examination GC21 noted the following points:

- There was an overall acceptance of the new Constitutions by the provinces and the individual confreres "in a spirit of faith and with the will to live them as a gift of the Holy Spirit who makes Don Bosco's spirit present and active in our time".¹⁴

14. v. GC21 372.

- There was not yet sufficient knowledge, assimilation and experience of the new text.¹⁵

15. v. GC21 372.

- Experience showed there were some urgent emendations needed; these are to be found in Document 5 of the GC21 Acts.

- Certain points needed further consideration in order to work out a more satisfactory definition.

GC22's task: to finalise and actuate

GC22 will be the final effort of the postconciliar quest to draw up satisfactorily and in harmony with the life of the Church *the lines of renewal our Salesian vocation must follow* as we approach the third millennium. It is thus *not simply a point of arrival* but rather an authoritative launching pad for a *new beginning*. Its work is of extraordinary importance: an authentic examination of the long process undertaken and an adequate definition of the lines of force that will guide the Congregation in its conciliar orbit.

It will be of immense value to us to have our Salesian vocation clearly delineated, redefined and up-to-date, so that we are assured of our Salesian identity as we take up the complex challenge of our times: this is the heritage we have received from our origins and a sacred bequest we make to future generations.

Our Father had a lively concern regarding the Constitutions, for he saw them as the projection of the permanent spirit of the Founder and its translation into practical terms. He too had to outline the distinctive character of his Society of St Francis of Sales and make sure of the future of the apostolic holiness practised at Valdocco — in other words, express in the words of the Constitutions what was the reality tested by the life and inspiration of the inner heart. We are well aware of the travail Don Bosco experienced in drafting and seeking approval for his Constitutions: he had to face a long line

of vexatious difficulties both ecclesiastical and civil. Nothing held him back, however, for he was convinced that he had a task to fulfil for the Lord for the salvation of innumerable young people.

A similar fundamental mandate will face GC22, as it finalises a lengthy renewal process no less rich in challenges and prospects.

The essential continuity and lively loyalty in all three texts (that composed by Don Bosco, that of GC20 and the future text of GC22) must assure us of our bond with our Father and Founder, his original inspiration, and the gift he received from the Holy Spirit for the service of the Church, the young and the masses.

Volume XI of the *Memorie Biografiche*¹⁶ records an interesting conversation between Don Bosco and Don Barberis. It was in 1875, shortly after the approval of the Constitutions.

"You will fulfil the work I have begun", said Don Bosco, "I have drawn the sketches and you will fill in the colours"; to which Don Barberis answered, "Let's hope we don't spoil your good work, Don Bosco!"

"Oh no. My sketch is a poor copy of the Congregation; I leave it for my future sons to make a 'fair copy'."

Surely this is a challenge to us, and we accept it in the pleasing thought that it was more or less foreseen by Don Bosco.

We have gone through a lengthy period based on the draft of the renewed Constitutions and have put them through a practical test of twelve years; we have earnestly examined how the text fits in with our lives and how our lives fit in with the Salesian ideal; all this will help build a launching pad that will ensure that the "newly projected

16. *Memorie Biografiche*
XI 309.

charism of Don Bosco" in the Church will be ever more genuine and efficacious.

Soon we shall write "The end" to our period of analysis and experimentation — which has allowed us to absorb the spirit of Vatican II. Then will begin an era that will be necessarily lengthy; and it will be for the Congregation a greatly intensified spiritual phase (a charismatic phase in the conciliar sense of the word), when our work will be strong and convincing, profoundly renewed and authentically Salesian. The future of the Congregation is bound to the vitality of the charism as described in the Constitutions and which must explode into lusty life in our communities. It is up to GC22 to lay the foundations for this phase of more intense Salesian authenticity.

The Constitutions: our covenant with God

We look at our Constitutions with the eye of faith: indeed they "outline for us the essential features of our vocation and offer us a way of life".¹⁷ They formulate for us our *sequela Christi* in the service of the young. They summarise and express our unique traditions, our way of life, our distinctive ethos, our practical procedure for holiness.

We Salesians constitute a group with a distinctive spiritual character: we look to Don Bosco as our "patriarch" and *see our Constitutions as our covenant with God*.¹⁸

This covenant each one of us has signed with his *religious profession* — *the most expressive act of our baptismal freedom*. This was no vague generic promise: it was a commitment to follow Jesus Christ and live his counsels according to the Salesian Constitutions. They became for us the

17. Constitutions: Foreword.

18. Don Rua: Circular Letters, 1.12.1909.

authoritative and precise yardstick of our life and fidelity; they are our clear and objective stimulus in our daily conversion; they hold up the challenge of the Gospel to our human weakness.

The Constitutions are the *Rule of Life* for the Congregation. It is to them alone that the Church looks when it recognises our Salesian charism and life and incorporates the Congregation into its work of salvation.

Over the centuries many generations of men of different cultures have been formed in godliness by various religious Rules; these latter have expressed, formulated and proposed a practical method of the *sequela Christi* without cramping personal talents or shutting out the needs of the times. For us Salesians too there have been many generations who have learned to follow Jesus Christ according to the Gospel way traced out by Don Bosco in the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis of Sales. It would be a mistake to continue to think that our Constitutions are a mere set of norms: we must view them rather as a vast orbit of a distinctive way of holiness. The *Foreword* of the present text expresses well their nature and scope: "As disciples of the Lord we find in the law a path that leads to love. Our living Rule is Jesus Christ, the Saviour proclaimed in the Gospel. He lives today in the Church and in the world. We see him especially in Don Bosco who dedicated his life to the young". It is the Lord who is the vital centre around whom we build our whole project. He is our motivation for breaking with the world and accepting a radical way of life that points the way to being a convinced disciple rapt in the Lord. In him do we find new strength and joy each day to make a fresh start along the arduous path of holiness.

The Gospel project of the Constitutions is not generic, however. It avoids presenting our "God-experience" in an abstract form in the manner of a small doctrinal treatise on the religious life. It does not set out a logical list of general principles: but it does give a faithful description of a specific practical way of life objectively lived as a "God-experience"; in other words, that life of commitment lived by Don Bosco and his first Salesians — still able to inspire and guide our lives and our practical options. The saying at Valdocco in those days was, "I'm staying with Don Bosco"; and those early followers continually relived the spirit of Don Bosco the Founder.

To sum up — the renewed text completes the long process of revision, and will be valid insofar as it will be spiritual and concrete and an impelling force that will urge the confreres to *replan their holiness together* according to the Gospel challenge lived by Don Bosco and demanded by these post-conciliar times. Thus shall we be *evangelisers of the young* to whom we have been sent by Christ and his Church to form into *honest citizens and good Christians*.

Approval of the Constitutions by the Holy See

Don Bosco had a deep sense of the mystery of the Church and the special ministry of Peter therein according to the will of Christ. He drew his sons close to the Pope with a variety of motives, all of them inducing total loyalty and evincing the *conviction of faith* and the *bond of affection*. His attitude was not a kind of "situation-policy": it was the very supporting basis of his spirit. It was not just

the way of acting according to the ecclesiological style of the 19th century: it was an ascetical option, a deliberate and explicit element of his life-involvement in the mystery of the Church. He constantly repeated that the Roman Pontiff was the foundation rock of our faith; and he insisted with his pupils and his Salesians that the Pope was the greatest benefactor of the Congregation.

He worked untiringly that his Congregation be recognised by the Holy See. He was convinced that as long as his Society was closely linked to Peter it would safely ride out the stormy waters of his times — and indeed the tempests of the future too. His joy knew no bounds when on 3 April 1874 the text of his Constitutions received official approval from Rome. "We should welcome this fact", he wrote, "as amongst the most glorious in the annals of our Society, since through it we have the assurance that in observing our rules we rest upon a firm and secure basis".¹⁹

Papal approval was not for Don Bosco (nor for us today) a mere formal act: it was and is the seal of God, through the ministry of Peter, that authenticates our Gospel project of life and action.

It belongs to the Pope and the Hierarchy to recognise charisms²⁰ and "to regulate with wise laws the practice of the evangelical counsels".²¹

The Pope is especially assisted by the Holy Spirit in the approving of religious charisms and making an authentic judgement "on their genuineness and their proper exercise". Even though a General Chapter is the supreme authority for the Society,²² it is subject to the higher ministry of Peter and the authority of the Holy See in the approval of the text of the Constitutions.

Vatican II has accustomed us as religious to

19. Constitutions: Appendix p. 233.

20 v. Lumen Gentium 12.

21. Lumen Gentium 45; Mutuae Relationes 8, 9c.

22. Constitutions art. 152.

ensconce ourselves within the mystery of the Church. Born through the Holy Spirit who lives in the Church we develop as its members and put our labours at its service.

In this sense our exemption is an expression of our true belonging to the Church: "It is for the good of the Church"²³ that the Supreme Pontiff grants exemption to Institutes so that they may the more adequately express their specific identity and dedicate themselves to the common good with particular generosity and on a much wider scale (v. no. 8).²⁴

Let us work hard then at revising the text of our Constitutions that "service" a charism proper to the Church (our charism, as Salesians of Don Bosco); let us see the approval of the Holy See as a help to us to live up to our unique vocation more enthusiastically, and offer the local Churches in these days of cultural upheaval, our recognised distinctive identity and Salesian mission.

The Provincial Chapters

A word on the importance of the next provincial chapter that will take place in accordance with articles 177-180 of the Constitutions.

The Salesian community is world-wide²⁵ and divided into provinces that live in communion. It is through the provinces that the Congregation is introduced into the different cultures and put into contact with the various local situations, thus building up a world-scale unity of rich variety.

This makes it clear that there is no question of a genuine General Chapter without serious and responsible Provincial Chapters. We have the

23. v. Lumen Gentium
45; Christus Dominus
35-3.

24. Mutuae Relationes
22.

25. v. Constitutions
art. 56.

practical task of revising the text of our Constitutions: hence the provincial chapters are necessarily geared to the General Chapter and closely linked with it: their main aim is to involve the confreres in participating in this historical responsibility of the Congregation and in living their Salesian communion at world level.

The provincial chapters are also a help for the provincial community to increase the basic values of our Salesian identity: "The provincial chapter is a fraternal gathering in which the local communities strengthen their solidarity within the provincial community through their common concern with the more important problems of the province".²⁶

26. Constitutions art.
177.

Indeed the theme of GC22 is particularly suitable for intensifying such values,

If the provincial chapter is treated as a time of personal and community revision and a period for the discernment of our own genuine Salesianity (a kind of assessment of the efficacy of the demands of the Constitutions in renewing our personal lives) then the thought put into the chapter will be far more fruitful.

To achieve optimum results *preparations for the provincial chapter must involve every community and every confrere*. The provincial and his council and the various departments in each province must take suitable and effective steps to encourage local communities and confreres to participate in the serious examination of the text of the Constitutions so as to render it as perfect as possible.

Our dutiful involvement in the successful outcome of GC22 will be an earnest of the communion and maturity of the Congregation. Every province has had an accumulation of experiences in these past years: they will constitute an invaluable and

meaningful contribution and should be forwarded to the Moderator as basic material for the work of GC22.

Conclusion

Dear confreres, let us prepare for our next General Chapter with our eyes on our Father Don Bosco. During the long period taken in drafting the 1874 Constitutions he was ever attentive to the signs of the Holy Spirit in the simple day to day events as well as in the more serious meetings with the Pope, the civil authorities and the meticulous ecclesiastical departments appointed for the approval of the text.

We too must pay constant attention to God as he speaks to us through present-day situations.

The fundamental contribution required of all confreres will consist in study, active involvement, intense prayer and generous sacrifices of supplication; they will listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Congregation today through his inspirations and the signs of the times, and see whether the text of the Constitutions trues up with them.

Each one of us must meditate with lively faith on the text of the Constitutions and Regulations and renew our deep and practical loyalty to our Salesian Gospel project. None of us must shirk the work undertaken by the community to build up a sensitivity for this documentary revision so important for our vocation in the Church.

That our personal participation may prove fruitful, let us work hard, let us offer God our external and interior difficulties and sufferings, let us renew ourselves in sincere prayer, let us practise com-

munion and contribute our own personal considered opinions.

Provincials and their councils should work out some practical ways so that the suggestions of this letter do not remain mere theory: there could be a special invocation at Lauds and Vespers; the hymns to the Holy Spirit could be recited more frequently; suitably timed paraliturgies could be held, we could place special emphasis on our small Friday, Lenten and Advent penances. Far from being pietistic, these practices will express a wealth of meaning and will bring to the fore our desire and ardent prayer that the most important member of our next General Chapter will truly be the Holy Spirit himself.

Mary proved a true Mother in the infancy of our Congregation; her we always recognise as our Mistress and Guide; she is the Spouse of the Spirit; she is our Help of Christians: may she assist us now in this important work.

Fraternally yours in Don Bosco,

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ,
Rector Major.