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

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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Father Egidio VIGANO

### THE SALESIAN MISSION AND THE WORKERS' WORLD

**SUMMARY:** Thinking over the journey - A call from the southern hemisphere - The importance of the workers' world - Back to our salesian origins - An innate partiality - The **Gospel of Work** - An earnest challenge that must be faced - The practicalities of our 'lay aspect' - A few practical suggestions - In Mary we put our trust.

Dear Confreres,

I have just returned from a very strenuous journey (my longest) that literally meant circling the globe. My various voyages have given me a first-hand knowledge, though necessarily incomplete of course, of our salesian presence in the various nations of the world. In a special way I have been impressed by the appeal that comes to us in ever-growing strength from the southern hemisphere: for besides *Project Africa* we have our young foundations in Polynesia, Melanesia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Truly there are still vast missionary horizons that extend even beyond the already immense areas covered by our present endeavours: they surely issue a challenge to our generosity — a generosity that will eschew all semblance of the easy life, of relaxing our efforts — a generosity that will forge ahead with renewed efforts to increase the efficacy of our works; that will seek a deeper spirituality, more vocations, greater relevance in our apostolate, and a more bounteous largeheartedness.

## Thinking over the journey

When I returned to Rome I took up the *Memorie Biografiche* to refresh my reading regarding Don Bosco's concern for some of the lands that I had visited for the first time. I was greatly impressed as I re-read his dream of the missions in 1885.<sup>1</sup> Our Founder says he journeyed through a "circular zone around the southern part of the globe" (obviously the southern hemisphere). He continues, "My journey began at Santiago, Chile, and ended by returning to that same city".

As I see it, Don Bosco is speaking of Australia and "the innumerable island groups" of Oceania, where great numbers of children raised their arms and cried out, 'Come and help us. Why are you not completing the work your fathers began?' " And our Founder adds, "It seemed to me that this indicates that Divine Providence is offering the salesians this part of the world to be evangelised — but at a future date".

Don Bosco's biographer says that our Father often pondered over this dream, spoke of it with pleasure, and saw in it a confirmation of his preceding dreams on the missions.

I too have thought much about those parts of the dream that mention explicitly Don Bosco's concern for Australia<sup>2</sup> and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).<sup>3</sup> These prophetic pages of the *Memorie Biografiche* are well worth re-reading — especially regarding Don Bosco's last years.

Again to quote our Founder: "I can see the progress that our Congregation will make... What marvellous development there will be in a hundred years... Our Congregation was founded to meet the needs of the present times and will spread throughout

1. *Memorie Biografiche*  
XVII 643-647

2. MB X 1268; XVIII 378  
3. MB XII 314-315; XIII  
161; XVII 30-31



4. MB XVII 31

the world with incredible speed".<sup>4</sup> We today see the truth of these words.

5. MB XVII 645

"If I could preserve and keep alive fifty of our present salesians for five hundred years", he says, "they would see what a stupendous destiny Providence has in store for us if we remain faithful."<sup>5</sup> Don Bosco was indeed a great prophet and a man of boundless hope.

6. MB XVII 645

My recent journey means that I have now visited all five continents. I have been more than ever impressed by the fact that our Father was truly a man of God and that through him the Spirit of the Lord raised up from the ordinary people an apostolic family committed in a special way to the service of the young. In Don Bosco's words, "We shall always be well accepted, even by wicked people, because our special field of action is such that appeals to both good and bad".<sup>6</sup>

We are a Congregation of the people for the people, and our lives are attuned to the poor and the humble; we bring them the Gospel in a way that is in keeping with their situation; we have a profound respect for the dignity of each person, and his particular culture; we are convinced of the urgency of proper human development (especially for the humble and needy) according to the practical tenets that flow from the mystery of Christ.

Cardinals and bishops have expressed to me their admiration and gratitude for our vocation and its efficacious understanding of the ordinary people; they have pressed for further salesian foundations in their local Churches.

### **A call from the southern hemisphere**

I was frequently struck by the compelling need for our particular educational concern for the work-

ing-class world. The southern hemisphere has so much poverty and underdevelopment, and our services are needed there to teach the people progressive work techniques so that they can tackle the gross problems of economic injustice and better their conditions of life. Seeing so much backwardness certainly set me thinking how necessary it is for us to respect the various ways of rationalising work by the use of modern technology — without of course going in for the latest and most sophisticated inventions.

After all technology is a child of human intelligence — it spells progress and development, the chance to live with dignity and to achieve. It would be a mistake to identify it with capitalist or marxist tyranny — although unfortunately this great gift of man's intelligence is more often in the selfish hands of governments or cartels than at the service of common brotherhood. Still, such need not necessarily be the case, and only comes about through the unjust appropriation of technology by those with wealth and power. Thus it is that since the last century there has developed a widespread attitude to work that is motivated more by self-interest and power than by moral principles and social justice.

And so I would say that one of the most urgent tasks in evangelisation is to make use of all possible ethical means to retrieve technology and work-organisation from the clutches of selfish people and put them at the genuine service of humanity; we must strive hard to imbue this important human activity with ethics and charity; work must be placed in a setting of love. How fitting is the liturgical prayer, "Lord God, who entrusted the earth to men to till it and care for it, and made the sun to serve their needs, give us grace this day to work

7. Liturgy of the Hours:  
Monday Lauds, Week 4

faithfully for your glory and for our neighbour's good".<sup>7</sup>

I have come to the conclusion that our salesian vocation, in its humble and practical way, is truly involved in this urgent and extensive task. Salesians are to be found working among people in the most impoverished circumstances, and training their children in the responsibilities and skills of the work force; they work in industrialised areas and imbue the education of the young with a critical judgement and a dynamism that courageously endues their work with the penetrating Gospel message of Christ.

Our work within the Church demands that we train the consciences of our charges and thus help to restore work to its proper moral ambience so that it will be guided and enlivened by love and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Again and again requests have been made to me for trade schools; and therefore how urgent is the need for numerous and competent brothers; and it is imperative too that we involve our Salesian Family and the Catholic laity in this desperately pressing task.

And now this leads me to invite you to give your combined attention to a practical aspect of our youth apostolate that we could call *the evangelisation of work*. Although this aspect involves many confreres more directly than others, it is nevertheless of vital interest to all.

I have already been asked to treat of this subject by several salesians who took part in a number of discussions dealing with our apostolic efforts in educating for the work force. Furthermore, the important encyclical *Laborem exercens* calls for our close examination because of our present and projected educational efforts in this area.

The topic is of such importance and relevance that we are necessarily deeply involved. At first sight we could well be intimidated by the enormity, complexity and continuous evolution of the task. However, this letter does not purport to delve into the uttermost depths of the matter, but simply to stir up the interest of the salesian "oratorian heart" — and that is already something well worthwhile. I am convinced that we are faced with a cry "to battle stations" in response to the signs of the times, a pressing call of the Spirit of the Lord that demands our deep and earnest attention.

### **The importance of the workers' world**

We are well aware that work in all its forms is basic to the life of man. It has contributed to the moulding of both the individual person and society, not only externally but in the deep recesses of each person's being wherein he fashions himself and civilisation. We speak of the "world" of work, the "culture" of work, to show that its influence extends well beyond the mere production of material goods. Indeed the phenomenon of work is surrounded by an aggregate of various forces: positive and negative values develop, principles and relationships are formed, and a vision of man and his destiny takes shape. It is understandable then, that the phenomenon of work has attracted the attention not only of those who seek to better society but also those who announce the divine message of salvation.

With documents full of wisdom and foresight the Church's magisterium has intervened many times during the present century, addressing itself to the workers themselves, to the protagonists of social evolution, and to those who labour in the apostolate.

8. *Laborem exercens*, 14  
September 1981

Recently for instance we have had Pope John Paul II's important encyclical letter<sup>8</sup> that is a masterpiece of the magisterium's perception. It is a document that concerns itself with the profound human meaning of work, seeks to apply a renewed ethical system in lieu of the fusty materialistic ideologies, and points out to Christians the urgency of developing a *spirituality of work* as they collaborate in their various ways to attain the just aims proposed by the workers' movement.

Thus it is that the phenomenon of work, together with the themes of the family, life, and civil freedom all combine and become an integral part of the present Pope's pastoral concern with Man which he inaugurated with his *Redemptor Hominis*.

Our Congregation has always been sensitive to such important matters; and today it is making every effort to respond to these appeals. In recent months (from 1980) various zones have become more and more concerned with the salesians' apostolate among the workers, and have gathered statistics, held meetings and drawn up specific educational projects. The Spanish seminar in September 1981 and the Italian in February 1982 were followed by a European convention on the salesian mission among the young workers of Europe (May 1982); there was also a similar convention in August 1982 at Buenos Aires for the La Plata area.

Indeed the theme of work is linked in a special way with our particular type of evangelising activity, with the lay aspect of our apostolic community, with the preference we give to helping the young, and above all with the desperate call for our presence among those most in need.



### **Back to our salesian origins**

It is well worthwhile to look to the past as we plan for the future.

Don Bosco has mapped out our path for us. Our Founder had a close affinity with the workers' world, both in the rural context and the first beginnings of modern city life before and during the industrial revolution.

The problem of finding work for mere survival was a normal experience in the Bosco family at the time of John's birth. The latest historical studies have reconstructed the movements of Don Bosco's forebears as they went looking for employment or sought to rent a little land for tilling. The young John Bosco was born and bred to rural life and all the disadvantages it then entailed; the hardships of such a life were accepted as quite normal.

As in his autobiography we read of his father's death and his early studies, we realise how Don Bosco's childhood was dominated by this bleak way of life that was so strongly bound up with labour — as indeed was the case with all the peasantry of the time. In his ten years as a student at Chieri he had to earn his livelihood by taking on various jobs. His seminary years were of course almost exclusively devoted to study; but during the summer vacation he never wavered in his interest in work; he appreciated its dignity and exhibited his practical creativity.

As a young priest who chose the young as his apostolate, he was in constant contact with droves of young seasonal workers who came to Turin in search of employment. In those days Turin was rapidly expanding and already experiencing the problems of the eve of the industrial revolution: migration, child labour, exploitation and ignorance.

Don Bosco set about tackling the problems of the many young people of the area and devised ways and means to deal with their more pressing needs; meantime he was busy working out more substantial initiatives for their human, cultural and spiritual improvement — thus contributing his humble but practical mite to the transformation of society.

The first Oratory, though open to all, was primarily for young workers. The young lad who constituted the first step in the building up of the moral and religious work of the Oratory could fill in his identity card as follows: Bartholomew Garelli, orphan, illiterate, migrant labourer. As Don Bosco wrote, "Generally speaking, the Oratory was made up of young lads employed in cutting stone, plastering, bricklaying and making pavements. Some came from far away places".<sup>9</sup>

Indeed such was the character of the Oratory that in 1842 there was a solemn celebration in honour of the stone masons.<sup>10</sup> With the help of some priest friends, Don Bosco actually began a night school for his young labourers. He also undertook social education, concerned himself with work contracts for the boys, and visited them where they were employed.

This attention given to the young labourers led to the next stage of offering them board and lodging. The future craftsmen lived with Don Bosco and would go into the city to learn their trade; similarly the young students used go for classes. Don Bosco's next step was to set up tiny workshops in the house: they constituted a courageous small-scaled epic. In 1853 he established a diminutive workshop for boot repairs (it measured a few square metres) with the simplest of tools bought at low cost; the workshop

9. v. *Memorie dell'Oratorio di Francesco di Sales*, Editrice SDB, Rome, p. 129

10. v. *ibid.* p. 130

consisted of a number of pupils and their instructor was Don Bosco himself. We read in the *Memorie Biografiche*, "With the help of some benefactors he bought a few benches and the necessary tools and set up the cobbler's shop in a small passageway in the Pinardi house near the church bell. When the students were out at school in the city, Don Bosco would sit at the bench and teach his young artisans how to use the awl and the waxed thread for mending shoes".<sup>11</sup>

11. MB IV 659-660

Our Founder courageously felt his way along these lines till 1862, when the first "model" of the early salesian schools assumed its distinctive appearance. The whole project is spiced with anecdotes, adventures and ups and downs that the brevity of this letter must forgo. One smiles to read that the first tailor shop was located in the space left by the removal of the old kitchen, and that Mamma Margaret was its first teacher! Likewise one marvels at the dubious efficiency of the printing set-up on which Don Bosco based his editorial and publishing dreams.

These were budding workshops for which Don Bosco was primarily and totally responsible. Their beginnings were dictated by the steadily mounting requirements of a community of young people, and the running costs of the house that was already nurturing the seeds of a Congregation destined to engage in a worldwide apostolate. Don Bosco had to train young people to take their proper place in the work force; he had to cope with the expenses of his many young guests; he also had to further his apostolic plans and concern himself with the widening structures of an expanding Congregation. The addition of each workshop was a milestone not only in the progress of his educational development

but also a step forward in technical ability that would better society.

Initially Don Bosco's helpers were layfolk, and he drew up various contracts with them; he eventually arrived at the conclusion that only with religious personnel would his educational activities and development be adequately efficacious. Thus it transpired that he encouraged priestly vocations among his students and similarly pioneered the vocation of the salesian brother for his artisans in the work force.

The final stage saw the school of arts and trades, with its own salesian staff, character and educative project — and duly accredited by the 4th General Chapter. The vocation of the salesian brother had by now developed its special distinctive character; meanwhile the Congregation, with some thirty years of experience, drew up its directives and programmes in a document entitled *Directions for the artisan sections in salesian houses, and ways to develop the vocations of young artisans*. Therein we see the development of the initial 1853 regulations for workshops.<sup>12</sup>

At the time of Don Bosco's death the Congregation had also a highly developed mission thrust, and was engaged in various kinds of educational activities; however, there were two characteristic works that were always part of its image and remained so in the hearts of those who implanted Don Bosco's apostolate in other countries: these were the *Oratory* and the *Trade School*.

Don Bosco had given his complete response to the urgent call of his times, and left us solid guidelines for an efficacious apostolate among young workers: he left us Valdocco as a model school; an educational plan (the document of GC4); certain

12. 1853: **Regulations for craftsmasters** (MB IV 661)

At the same time, but undated because developed piecemeal: **The first draft of the Regulations for the house annexed to the Oratory of St Francis of Sales**. This draft contained directives for workshop assistants (ch. 5, art. 9), workshop overseers (ch. 7, art. 1) and workshop directors (ch. 9). Between 1853 and 1861 the Regulations were gradually perfected (MB IV 735-755).

organisational principles (*Regulations for the Workshops*); general directives for heads of arts and crafts; a special kind of member in the salesian community distinctively "designed" for these (and other) activities (the salesian brother); and a charisma that has a particular understanding of work, trades, spirit of sacrifice, and awareness of social problems.

It would be interesting to trace out the Congregation's evolutionary development after Don Bosco's death and in the first half of our 20th century — which is largely a history of pioneering and technical and pedagogical progress.

One is struck by the coincidence that in most of the new nations asking for the salesians the number one request is for trade schools.

It would not be difficult to group together the factors that have determined our growth and development, our stagnation, and in some cases our retrogression.

Don Bosco's feeling for the workers included also a deep interest in certain problems germane to their condition: emigration to other continents, growing social problems, and the manifold activities related to popular culture and evangelisation.

### **An innate partiality**

The spiritual and apostolic action of our Founder and the direction taken by the Congregation after his death are a guide to us as we consider the practical commitments of our mission. Today's situation (especially as regards the children of the more indigent families) brings to light, among other values, a charismatic affinity, an innate leaning towards the phenomenon of work and the needs of the young who are preparing to enter the work force.



Far from being heedless of other characteristics of our mission, we can perceive, deep within our basic predilection for the young and the needy, an inclination one could call innate to our salesian vocation: a leaning towards that complex world of the worker, a world clamouring for the light of the Gospel, a world of primary and vital importance in our modern times.

We see this salesian partiality as we examine our *specific mission*: the bias is present in our *animating spirit*, in the *form of the Congregation*, in the present urgent *options regarding our apostolate*. A few thoughts to illustrate this:

— This innate salesian preference is first of all obvious as we look closely at our *distinctive mission*. Ever since the 1859 manuscript of the Constitutions, when listing our favoured charges and the main works of the Congregation, *second place after the oratory* is always given to youngsters “destined for arts and trades” and those activities undertaken to help them. This privileged place has been regularly preserved in all subsequent reformulations. The present Constitutions refer to the young in general as the special subjects of our mission; then the young person preparing for the work force is mentioned: “Working-class boys who are starting to earn their living often have difficulty in finding their place in society and in the Church, even though they may not live in conditions of extreme poverty. Just as Don Bosco had a special solicitude for young workers, we too must guide them to find their rightful place in their own social, cultural and religious environment”.<sup>13</sup>

This concern extends also to the adults of the working classes. As the SGC says, “The direction of our mission is not vaguely towards all adults, but

13. Const. 11

specifically to the lower classes". Today this category includes "specific environments differing one from the other, such as rural, migrant, etc."<sup>14</sup>

14. SGC 54

The typical elements of our mission involve evangelisation and human development, and the Constitutions expressly state, "As circumstances permit, we must offer our charges food for the body, training in a trade and food also for their minds".<sup>15</sup>

15. Const. 18

Among the varied and creative activities of the Congregation throughout the world there are distinctive services for the young specially linked with the world of work; these services have transcended time and frontiers and constitute a *true salesian characteristic*.

— We also find this special partiality for the workers in our distinctive salesian ethos — which is so closely bonded to work that it becomes a kind of second nature in the apostolate.

It is true that our ethos embraces all kinds of work, for Don Bosco's idea of work included every sort of apostolic form and service — preaching, writing, studying, administering the sacraments (especially hearing confessions), and so on. But it is also true that our Founder has canonised the principles and way of living proper to the fine working class people of his day: good Christians in the world, possessed of a culture that was already in slow decline but genuinely imbued with the Gospel and thus full of willing vivacity, sacrifice, service, practicality, competence, solidarity, devotion, etc. Don Bosco wanted us to become inspired witnesses of these virtues, adapting them and making them a permanent part of the restless new world of the worker that was steadily developing. He had imbued his apostolate among his impoverished young workers with this unique ethos. Thus, according to

the spirit of our Father, our insistence on human and Christian values will have the strong practical overtones of manual and technical work. This will engender in the Congregation a generous enthusiasm in spreading the Gospel in today's world where human work is assuming an ever-growing and ever-widening importance.

16. v. MB XII 466-467;  
XIII 326

The motto of the Congregation is *Work and Temperance*,<sup>16</sup> and the Constitutions remind us that "untiring and self-sacrificing work is a characteristic left us by Don Bosco and is a concrete expression of our poverty. In our daily toil we aim to be one with the poor, who live by the sweat of their brow, and we bear witness to the world of today that work has a human and Christian value".<sup>17</sup>

17. Const. 87

This distinctive spirit, which admires and assimilates the overall values of work, inspires and supports in us a special apostolic sensitivity for the needs of the young who are part of the work force. It led Don Bosco to provide us with a practical pedagogy that encouraged work. "Dear boys", he used say, "remember that man is born to toil"; and he presented work not as a punishment but as an intrinsic value in the integrated development of the personality, its moral rectitude and its capacity to love.

The Congregation has grown up in this atmosphere. When GC21 spoke of the specific aspects of the salesian school apostolate it enumerated the following among the permanent traits: "The salesian school will be linked with the workers' world, for the school teaches pupils the distinctive spirituality of work and maintains a cordial bond with the working classes. In many places it teaches the illiterate, holds evening classes for working people, provides training in trades and prepares

young workers to enter the labour market with qualified skills.”<sup>18</sup>

18. GC21 131 (2, 3, 6)

— We can gain even further insight into our natural bias for the workers when we examine the very *structure of the Congregation*. It is made up of “ecclesiastics and laity”, with a great number of craftsmasters, technicians and tradesmen who render its life and activities utterly distinctive. Indeed I have already spoken to you at length on *The lay element in the salesian community*.<sup>19</sup>

19. ASC no. 298

It should be emphasised that the distinctiveness we speak of belongs to the very structure of our *Congregation* and not simply to a group of confreres, “Our vocation is essentially a community vocation: hence there must be an effective communion that goes deeper than mere friendship between persons. More profoundly significant is the mutual relationship of the two basic elements, priestly and lay. Every confrere (priest, cleric or brother) lives his vocation in a close and integrated relationship with the other — non separately as though the vocation of each were independent of or indifferent to the other. These two basic choices call for a mutual and vital rapport between the different persons who live them. The two aspects grow and develop together in a life of communion; each is an advantage to the other; the one seeks to imbue the other harmoniously as both strive towards that “splendid modernity” and common mission that constitute the distinctive character of our *Congregation*.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed the communion of life that belongs to the *Congregation* is such that the salesian brother can also carry out duties that are of a pastoral nature, and the salesian priest can also engage in spontaneous manual work — which sometimes, especially on the missions, can be worthily compared

20. ASC no. 298, p. 6

with what the Benedictines have achieved in other periods of history.

Thus it is that the lay element imbues the very nature of the Congregation, and consequently gives a practical touch to the life and mission of all of us. It is not a case of "lateral" collaboration by one group: it is an *intrinsic orientation* in our kind of apostolic community; our pastoral method has a conscious slant towards secular conditions which leads us by our very vocation to take a personal and community interest in the grave problems of the work force.

21. ASC no. 298, pp. 32 et seq.

The appeal is an urgent one. "Our civilisation is rich in technology but poor in wisdom, open to consumerism but closed to sacrifice; it smothers the worker with a subtle and penetrating materialism."<sup>22</sup>

22. ASC no. 298, p. 37

— Finally our natural preference for the workers manifests itself in our special sensitivity regarding certain pastoral activities that are urgent here and now among the workers. GC20 and GC21 have laid out practical lines for our renewal in these matters.

GC20 insists on "an interest in the social and historical problems of the labour force, an effort to seek out its educational, human and Christian values, and a concern to collaborate with movements dedicated to the evangelisation of the workers' world".<sup>23</sup>

23. SGC 74

Let us remember too that "pastoral action and witness amongst the workers is one of the tasks that characterise our vocation to be of service to those most in need. Priests and brothers called to this mission must first deepen their knowledge and understanding of the working classes and their problems, worries and hopes, and the causes of their attitude towards the Church and the faith".<sup>24</sup>

24. SGC 413

GC21 exhorts us to be specialists regarding the



conditions of the young, and to give our practical support within the local Church, bearing particularly in mind "their specific needs and their problems as students or factory hands, farm labourers or white collar workers. Special care should be given to those young people who live in conditions of economic underdevelopment and abandoned deprivation".<sup>25</sup>

25. GC21 no. 29

GC21 further develops this theme and points out the direction of the salesian community's apostolic thrust, having regard for certain practical tendencies in the lay element of the community; indeed the work force constitutes the most significant area of interest for the salesian brother. "Considering the importance and the influence of the work force in many nations, it is clear that activities connected with this area will certainly be the most notable field of action for the brother in these regions, even if not exclusively so. Don Bosco had already stressed that one of the distinctive tasks of the brother was to imbue the world of labour with Christian values."<sup>26</sup>

26. GC21 183; 184

Dear confreres, you see clearly that our vocation has this innate propensity for the world of the worker and thus we are urged to give our special attention to the young worker who most needs our help. We must ask ourselves if the Lord is not calling the Congregation today to apply its particularly relevant activities to this special apostolate.

A glance at our present pastoral works reveals an interesting and varied number of practical efforts in this particular sector: trade and agricultural schools, hostels for young workers, youth centres, parishes, animation of specialised groups, development centres, and a host of other activities entrusted to particular persons who operate with the backing of their respective communities. The projects vary but the aim is exactly the same: to carry the message

of Christ to the worker and thus bring him freedom and better his conditions.

— *The Gospel of Work*

Unfortunately it would appear that for years the Gospel has generally halted at the borders of the world's vast working environments, even though it has reached a fair number of workers in the seclusion of their families and in other private and individual circumstances. Rightly does *Laborem exercens* propose that today's faithful have the important task of proclaiming the *Gospel of Work*<sup>27</sup> as a means to change their way of thinking, evaluating and acting, and to give to work the value it has in the eyes of God.

27. v. *Laborem exercens*  
7, 26

Yes, the Holy Father insists that we proclaim the Gospel of Work. What does this imply?

— In the first place we are called on to *recognise the distinctive and objective solidity of the workers' world*: it can have a humanising effect on individuals and society and make for progress; it can cause uncertainties, conflicts and dangers; and it can be blemished and disfigured by dictatorial ideologies. Labour is history's manifestation of man's vocation in the universe. It is not something vague, ordinary and facile, that never raises complications in other areas; to confine labour within the bounds of ethics and charity is no easy task.

It is not enough to take refuge in a vague moral system to suit "one's state of life". Labour has its own laws, relationships, advantages and intrinsic way of reasoning, the result of which is that "by no means secondary phenomenon" we call technology. "If the biblical words, 'Subdue the earth' addressed to man from the very beginning are to be understood

in the context of the whole modern age, industrial and post-industrial, then they undoubtedly also include technology, which is the fruit of the work of the human intellect and an historical confirmation of man's dominion over nature."<sup>28</sup>

28. *Laborem exercens* 5

The Gospel of Work is more than a systemised set of themes and aims: it implies an *apostolate of the industrial society*, and we must sincerely allot it a place in the history of man's growth, recognising that the old rural relationships and customs have been changed, though not necessarily to man's detriment. The Gospel of Work has also a teaching and critical role to play regarding the progress of man and his technologies. Until we can make our way into this vast and dynamic industrial world we shall not be able to bring the Gospel to it — just as it was not possible to evangelise the rural world until the Church penetrated its activities and its way of thinking.

— Deep down at the heart of the complex problems of this workers' world is Man himself, the subject, the origin and the end of it all: "which means that the primary basis for the value of work is man himself... One rightly comes to recognise the preeminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one".<sup>29</sup>

29. *Laborem exercens* 6

One can arrive at this knowledge through human reasoning, and the word of God can shed further light on it: thus our "intellectual conclusion" becomes a "conviction of faith".<sup>30</sup>

30. *Laborem exercens* 4

Jesus Christ became man among real men and women, and not in some kind of ideal and abstract human society. In Christ is revealed the design of the Father and the historical and eternal project of the true and complete Man. "Whilst being God, Christ became like us in all things; he devoted most

31. *Laborem exercens* 6

of the years of his life on earth to manual work at a carpenter's bench. In itself this circumstance constitutes the most eloquent *Gospel of Work*.<sup>31</sup>

32. *Laborem exercens* 27

Christ's example is not only a moral example: it is the first revelation of the genuine plan of God for Man, and his saving presence in our efforts to rule and transform the world. Thus when work is incorporated into "Christ yesterday and today", it acquires another dimension and quality. The mystery of his death and resurrection<sup>32</sup> endows work with a definitive meaning; when the fruits of work have been inspired by the love for man and obedience to the Father they transcend the trammels of time.

33. *Laborem exercens* 24

— Finally from the *Gospel of Work* there emerges the need for a *spirituality of work*, and it is the Church's duty to give priority to devising one.<sup>33</sup> In creation there is a gap between *matter, spirit and grace*, and *divine life*, and per se it is unbridgeable: it demands the active presence of man to give the world a true sense of organic unity and marvellous sublimity. It is within man himself (as though in an atomic nucleus) that God has implanted the organic and dynamic unity of *matter, spirit and divine transcendence*; only he can unravel God's total plan for creation.

Obviously a spirituality is not just a kind of thin layer of acts or prayers to be applied to some extraneous reality, as though one were gilding a bronze statue. It is a genuine leavening of the reality by *spirit and grace* deep within its concrete characteristics and needs; it will not impair its just and distinctive autonomy, but enleaven it with the charity of the Holy Spirit.

The basics of such a spirituality are described in *Laborem exercens* in nos. 24-27: the ability to grasp and participate in God's design for man; a competent

commitment to it; a decisive stance in its regard; an effort to transfigure the world and offer it thus to the Father; and union with the redemptive love of Christ.

"Especially in this modern age the *spirituality of work* should show the *maturity* required to cope with the tensions and restlessness of mind and heart. Far from thinking that the conquests won by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's greatness and the flowering of his wonderful design."<sup>34</sup>

34. *Laborem exercens* 25

This was exactly the line of thought that was running through my mind during my recent journey, as I saw the flagrant inequalities among the peoples I visited. How necessary it is for us to be efficient apostles as we imbue human work and technical progress with the principles of the Gospel in order to solve these massive problems of injustice in the workers' world.

It is urgent that people absorb and develop the *Gospel of Work* and the *Spirituality of Work*. Technical progress is the fruit of man's intelligence and is not of its nature the enemy of the poor; but it needs the Gospel message if it is to become their friend.

One who carries this Gospel message has to work in concrete situations and according to the exigencies of the moment, but his leaven is from above and transcends history and ephemeral problems (nevertheless he will need to keep his feet firmly on the ground). As we examine the action of the Church and the saints (and particularly Don Bosco with his specific contribution to the working world), certain things become obvious: education and evangelisation in the latter half of the 19th century



were aimed at workers on the land or in small domestic industries — at the most “pre-industrial” or “neo-industrial”. However, there was no prejudice that limited the field of activity to these areas only. Indeed Don Bosco (and even more so the Gospel he preached) reached out totally into the workers’ world; his horizons were to extend progressively into the future. Thus his project must be attuned too to our post-industrial era with its computers, its telematics and its most advanced and sophisticated technologies that seem to take over the muscles of man and make him use his creative intelligence for the improved functioning of these same technologies.

It is not suggested that education and evangelisation in the work force should be bound to either an elementary trade or the latest technological development; it is instead a matter of proposing the freedom of Christ and the progress of man in all conditions, at all levels and all stages of the work situation.

Thus the salesian is available for the elementary labour of primitive farming and crafts in the Third World or elsewhere; and he is also available for the most advanced developments where young people are to be found.

The salesian will give particular attention to announcing the Gospel above all to the poor, bringing ever greater freedom to the nobodies of society and helping them too to enjoy economic betterment and the fruits of technology (which are by no means the heritage of only the more industrialised societies of the world). Indeed the salesian who is committed to the workers’ world will understand that “announcing the good news” means helping man to progress, qualifying him for his trade, awakening

his awareness that he too has a right to technology, striving to obtain for him a just brotherly share of economic benefits, preaching the equality of the sons of God — together with all that is most essential for the Gospel: in a word, the total salvation of the individual person and all mankind.

### **An earnest challenge that must be faced**

There are so many young people in the workers' world both in underdeveloped and progressive countries, and their situation is a challenge to us. Youngsters preparing for the work force need an integrated education to help them cope without anguish and dismay with their new difficulties and problems, and understand and live Christ's message in a context that at first sight may seem to them quite incompatible. In more highly developed countries especially, there are innumerable factors and situations (such as continually progressing work systems and machinery, new inventions and variations in the different trades) that demand increasingly higher levels of training and also the capacity and flexibility to learn and use the new techniques. Then there is the sad decay of the traditional ethics of work: the individual, the cartel, the State, all see work as a mere utility, a means for various degrees of comfortable living, and a cause of bitter conflicts. The resulting unjust disparities, abuses, ruptures, hatreds, and violence have led to heartless and never-ending dissension that is distressingly lacking in justice, truth and brotherliness.

The heavy burden of these problems has roused the work force to demand that human work be treated not only as a material production of goods but also as an active, conscious and genuine parti-

cipation in both production and its consequent cultural and social progress. This means that the worker has some say in determining the ends and the just destination of the products, as well as the satisfaction that his contribution is accepted as part of the social and fraternal framework. Therefore educating for the work force today also calls for an adequate social training in political awareness, civil participation and communion.

Today more than ever before, the worker must have a sense of social justice and be able to play an active part in his city's progress; he must understand the human significance and usefulness of his personal contribution.

This is an aspect of education that is extensive, new, subtle and difficult, and if it is neglected, the training we give our young people will not correspond to their continually evolving social conditions.

In short, when young people enter the work force they find themselves in situations that severely test their human, civil and Christian principles, and that aggravate the very real difficulty of harmonising their personal, social and Gospel requirements; and this problem is to be found (in different ways) in progressive as well as underdeveloped countries.

All the above is a simple and very incomplete sketch of the general situation. It constitutes an earnest challenge to us who are committed to education and catechetics; it presupposes of course that the salesian formation we impart is not a mere parking area where our young pupils remain for a while more or less passively before driving out into the highway of life.

It is our inevitable duty to accept this challenge in the solidarity of our communities no matter how difficult and demanding it may appear. We have

to deepen and further our educational and pastoral concepts as directed by GC21 so as to arrive at an educational plan that is well devised, mature and continually updated. We must see ourselves as called to labour assiduously with humility and hope in the building up of a new and genuine *culture of labour*. This demands a continued effort to be well-informed, discerning and wisely critical of all that originates in and expresses the workers' world. It means too that we overcome the temptation to be comfortably ignorant and smugly satisfied with our hoary old superficial judgements.

Devising a *culture of work* demands much more than a few fine words: it means translating plans into a *pedagogical method* based on a rethinking of the organisation of our educational institutions (this is the task of an appropriate educational community), and a down to earth search for a formation that combines technical training with human progress and Christian living.

Let us be constant in our efforts to apply the Preventive System: it is our pedagogical method of working out an harmonious blending of a life of faith and work, of Gospel and technology; and it thus produces young workers with solid Christian principles.

For some years now there have been just complaints that our past and present catechisms for the young cater more, in language and content, for the youthful *student* and are out of touch with the experiences and needs of the young *worker*.

We are truly grateful to all confreres throughout the world for their past and present efforts to announce the Gospel of Work to our young workers.

### The practicalities of our lay aspect

The challenge is enormous and urgent. All of us, insofar as we are the People of God, are conscious of our involvement in this immense task. The whole Church seeks to tackle it despite its endless difficulties. Our own salesian contribution is tiny — we seem to be armed merely with the five pebbles of David. Let us never cease to pray and beg the Lord for greater hope, enthusiasm, initiative and love so that we may achieve something of Don Bosco's large-heartedness, practicality, enterprise and brilliant apostolic talent. We are confident that "through Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit, God the Father will vivify and sanctify the universe."<sup>35</sup>

35. Eucharistic Prayer  
III

Let us shoulder this responsibility with courage and tackle it earnestly and realistically; and we can make a start with being more concerned about the *lay aspect* of our salesian vocation. With this in mind, I wish to single out three practical results that derive from this particular dimension.

1. *The salesian brother.* Reference has already been made regarding the importance of the lay element in the essential make-up of the Congregation — it confirms our innate bias towards an apostolic commitment to the working classes. In Don Bosco's words, "The Congregation of St Francis of Sales is a gathering of priests, clerics and layfolk, *especially craftsmen*, who wish to unite to do good among themselves and for the benefit of others".<sup>36</sup>

36. MB XII 151

Some years ago one of our research authorities gathered together the documentation on the salesian brother available up to that particular point of time. His purpose was to sum up succinctly the origin and development of the concept and the "reality"

of this unique type of confrere, and to attempt a "brief description of this special vocation in the light of its essential religious and educational commitments". The title of this work is indeed suggestive, and would seem to be a fine descriptive summation of the salesian brother: *A new kind of religious for the workers' world*.<sup>37</sup>

Don Bosco said to his brothers, "There are things that priests and clerics cannot do, and you are the ones to do them";<sup>38</sup> and I really believe that these words apply most frequently to this special *workers' world*, for the lay confrere shares the workers' mentality and qualifications.

Don Rua, speaking of the salesian brother, said, "One of the greatest needs of modern society is the Christian education of the worker";<sup>39</sup> and Don Albera adds that this special vocation is "of the utmost urgency for the Society, for without the lay confreres it will not be able to achieve its lofty social aims required by the times".<sup>40</sup>

Thus as we meditate on the special salesian role in the workers' world, one of our first practical resolutions should be that the whole Congregation seriously and profoundly *review and renew its mental attitude regarding the lay element in the salesian community* — and to increasingly publicise, promote and consolidate the vocation of the salesian brother.

Truly there is a basic need for this *change of mental attitude*; and I sought to explain this in my circular letter of October 1980.<sup>41</sup> It would be well worth re-reading the letter and absorbing its important concepts and their consequent demands. The lay aspect of our distinctive salesian ethos is an essential element and affects every salesian (not only the brother), for it is a vital element in our style of community and apostolic activity. The vocation

37. P. Braido - Rome PAS 1961

38. MB XVI 313

39. Circular letters of Don Rua to the Salesians — Turin 1965, p. 207 (24 June 1898)

40. Circular letters of Don Albera to the Salesians — Turin 1965, p. 505 (15 May 1921)

41. ASC no. 298

of the lay confrere is a vivid reminder to us of our clear and distinctive apostolate in the Church, and a spur to use every effort to overcome a vocation crisis that could harmfully mutilate the Society by clipping its wings and curtailing its activities.

2. A second factor is the important role played by the *many layfolk* in the Salesian Family and among our co-workers and sympathisers. For years the Congregation has consistently insisted on their ecclesial role and the many ways they can help us; plans and directives have been given us regarding their very real influence, the basis of their participation, their need for ongoing formation, and their relationships with our communities.

Recently the Holy See issued a document called *Lay Catholics in schools: witnesses to the faith*<sup>42</sup> and it should be a help to us in harmonising the various recommendations we have received. It authoritatively confirms what has been broached from time to time in recent years, namely that lay help was originally accepted by religious because of the need of qualified personnel as educational institutions grew in numbers and deepened their scope; but that today this is no longer the case, and their collaboration has a theological basis: the Church is now seen more clearly as a "working communion of different vocations"; there is a new understanding of pastoral action; and we now have a new grasp of the laity's cooperation in both. "The most basic reason for the important positive and enriching role of the Catholic laity in educational institutions is theological",<sup>43</sup> the document tells us; their presence in the schools is needed;<sup>44</sup> the signs of the times demand this new attitude towards the laity;<sup>45</sup> when priests, brothers, nuns and layfolk are all present together in a school they present students with a

42. Sacred Congregation  
for Catholic Education,  
Rome, 15 October 1982

43. Ibid. 2

44. Ibid. 3

45. Ibid. 4



living image of the richness of the ecclesial community and this leads to a better understanding of the reality of the Church".<sup>46</sup> The vocation to educate involves the laity in the formation of men and women who will make the 'civilisation of love' a reality"<sup>47</sup> by presenting culture in the light of faith.<sup>48</sup>

46. Ibid. 43

47. Ibid. 19

48. Ibid. 20

Already it is plain what the contribution of the laity will be in our educational communities: life experiences, professionalism, Christian witness. It is also obvious that the following points need special attention: careful choice of persons for the particular educational project, ongoing formation, and active involvement.

I recommend that every community ponder this document of the Sacred Congregation so that it may be put into practice. Let us remember that we are not merely "engaging outside personnel": we are involving the laity in the apostolate — convinced Catholic layfolk educating according to Don Bosco's system of pedagogy.

3. The presence of the laity brings us to the third factor: the *animating role of the salesian community*.

In our present educational structure many factors demand our guidance, personal encouragement and wise coordination: complex responsibilities, manifold pressures, dynamic pluralism, inevitable new undertakings and the facile circulation of new ideas. Education is forever being menaced by high-pressure ideologies in public opinion or social organisations, by dangerous fragmentation, excessive eclecticism or functionalism, and unfortunately sometimes by plain incompetence.

Education demands a clear and constant revision of values put forward, a unity in method, and

especially a reinforcement in the quality of the personnel; and these are not just "extras": they are top priority responsibilities.

Confreres, especially those specifically responsible, must be kind and constant in carrying out this *ministry of animation*. It is a task that calls for competence and knowledge, demanding more than simple enthusiasm or organisational ability. It is a task that requires high professional qualification, a deep understanding of the distinctive nature of our mission, a profound awareness of our apostolic aims, and particularly a basic community experience that makes participation second nature.

*Rectors* especially, according to salesian tradition, must know how to transform their confreres into a genuine *community of animators*.

#### — *A few practical suggestions*

The above thoughts give rise to a number of suggestions for the provinces and especially for those engaged in specific activities among youths in the work force. Here and now I am interested in recommending only a *few broad lines* to follow that are basic to many other lines of action.

1. The first essential is the *specific training* of more salesian personnel for the workers' world. Our Congregation's history shows that throughout the years it was normal for notable numbers of confreres to be prepared for this particular apostolate. Recently, because of the vocation crisis and the urgency to give special attention to certain new religious and pastoral problems within the Church and the Congregation, our horizons have shifted to other sectors of the apostolate; meantime the workers' apostolate (which we thought was being attended

to) was relegated more or less to second place. Thus greater numbers of confreres were trained for other works and the number of "trainees" for the workers' world tended to remain status quo. Perhaps too there was the added difficulty of the taxing preparation entailed. It may help and stimulate us to face the fact that maybe we can rise to the occasion of a simple challenge, but tend to hang back a little at the heavy challenge that demands so much in the way of competence.

In these times of ours the special training of confreres for this type of work needs to deal with the following aspects: pastoral interest and concern, sensitivity to the signs of the times and the values found in the world of the worker, professional qualification, the knack of getting the laity involved, animation skills, especially regarding the educative community, dialogue with the local people, communion with the local Church, and so on.

For years these new requirements have been discussed and there is no doubt that progress has been made. Certainly there do exist communities with qualified confreres who are working well with their lay helpers and who are good animators; they obviously know where they are heading for, they practise co-responsibility, they dialogue with the local people and they work in common with the local Church.

It is also true, however, that quite often the situation has to be tackled by amateurs. God bless them for their willingness — but our foresight in planning our initial and ongoing formation should provide for preparatory training that will ensure greater competence in all these aspects.

2. It is equally important that we take a good hard look at our present works; they should fit

in with the salesian ethos and be developed systematically, with proper balance and according to an overall provincial plan. I refer here to the number of apostolic enterprises for the workers each province provides for, and how many it plans for the future — especially those of an educational nature. In some provinces certain works have been developed more because of casual offers and choices than according to salesian criteria: and this has led to a progressive lessening of our commitment to the workers' world.

We really must consider the matter seriously. Our recent Chapters have insisted on giving preference to the working class areas and "deepening our awareness and understanding of the working people, their problems, anxieties and hopes, the causes of their attitudes to the Church and the faith".<sup>49</sup>

The provincial and his council have the responsibility of suiting our mission to the local needs and striking an harmonious balance in the incorporation of our apostolic endeavours into the local situation; this task has devolved on each province as the result of decentralisation.

3. Lastly, it is vital that we renew our vocation apostolate regarding the salesian brother. As already stressed, the future of our educative presence among the working classes is closely bound up with the *vocation of the salesian brother*. Although the brother is not limited to this particular ambience, it is where his natural bent and expression lie. The golden days of flourishing trade and agricultural schools were also the days of innumerable fine brothers and thriving training centres where they learned their trades, met and mixed with the workers, and consolidated their services to them, etc.

This is not a repetition of what I was saying earlier in this letter: then I was speaking of a

*change in mental attitude*; now I am referring to the *vocation apostolate* as part of provincial strategy.

It is urgent that we act with courage and initiative and devise practical ways of reviving and implementing this vocation drive. The vocation of our brothers should be presented to the young lads in all its richness as a modern and remarkable way of being a salesian, and patterns and experiences should be used to bear this out, yet without pressuring the young people. Every province must see that youngsters called by the Lord to this kind of vocation are given the opportunity for dialogue, guidance, animation and personal assistance so that they may view this option as free, attractive, clear and full of joy.

Provinces that have set up practical and suitable structures for vocations (aspirantates, vocation communities, special groups and organisations) have very soon seen the excellent results thereof. Again I quote Don Rinaldi: "Let us publicise the beauty and grandeur of the vocation of the salesian brother, and let us train brothers in great numbers for all kinds of arts, crafts and professions".<sup>50</sup>

50. ASC 24 July 1927,  
p. 577

### **In Mary we place our trust**

This letter began with a most significant journey of the Rector Major, then Don Bosco's prophetic and missionary dream of 1885 wherein he circled the southern hemisphere. From this hemisphere we heard the cry of the Third World, whose peoples look to one of the ways of freeing themselves from the tormenting trammels of underdevelopment and unjust inequality: training and technology enlightened and guided by implanting the principles of morality and the Gospel in the industries of the whole world. Technical progress is in itself a good thing; but it

is enmeshed in structures and ideologies which are not even ethical, let alone Christian, and which thus merely serve the ends of cartels and governments.

The Holy Father has pointed out that "*human work is a key*, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we really try to see that question from the point of view of man's good. The social question keeps reappearing in ever greater complexity; and if its gradual solution must be sought in 'making life more human', then the key (human work) acquires fundamental and decisive importance".<sup>51</sup>

51. *Laborem exercens* 3

Thus the Church's mission calls urgently for an evangelisation of the *culture of work* in keeping with modern needs. We must adapt matters to the actual situation (particularly in the Third World countries and in the missions); we must give the poor, especially the young, the keys that will open up the way to a just progress which is the right of every person and nation and which will bring them social and spiritual freedom.

We have seen clearly that we salesians have a humble but demanding share in this work of the Church. It is a mission that is arduous, complex and difficult; but despite this we must not be found wanting.

Let us muster our forces, make a fresh start, reorganise our team work, and be big-hearted and courageous as was our Father and Founder.

Let us not rely only on our own puny efforts, but put our confidence and enlightenment into the hands of him who has called us and gives us the strength to live up to his call in ever-growing generosity.

Let us express this confidence in Christ by our special filial devotion to Mary: let us go to Christ

through Mary. May the Help of Christians guide us and support us in a task that is indeed burdensome but desperately urgent.

In his *Marialis Cultus* Paul VI tells us to look to Mary in the light of modern situations and see how "she mirrors the aspirations of the people of our time". Thus we shall see "with pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth, while completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others: on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God raises up the humble and oppressed and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions; she was a woman of strength who knew poverty and suffering, flight and exile, and whose motherly role was extended and became universal on the day of Calvary".<sup>52</sup>

52. *Marialis cultus* 37

We honour Mary as Help of Christians because we see in her life the arduous conditions of poverty (she was a humble housewife and married to a carpenter); we see her anxiety to help others (e.g., her cousin Elizabeth); and above all we see her tireless motherly zeal for the whole universe: her love extended beyond Calvary's hill, and assumed into heaven she lives with Christ as the Help of all humanity and Mother of the Church.

Mary is forever active and dedicated to all of us wayfarers; she is so concerned with the poor and needy as to merit the title "Our Lady of the Workers", as another facet of her title "Help of Christians".

Considering how urgently necessary it is that we make our valid contribution in the workers' world let us confidently put under the protection of our Mother and Mistress our efforts to renew this apos-



tolate that is so essential to our mission in the Church.

May this act of confidence in Mary be an expression of our sincere resolve to be bearers of the *Gospel of Work* to the young — a Gospel understood and proclaimed in the light of the mystery of Christ, and presented as a response to the signs of the times and especially the appeal of those most in need.

May Don Bosco intercede for us.

My kindest wishes to all for a happy and holy Christmas and every blessing for the New Year.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "P. E. Viganò". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized script.

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ  
*Rector Major*