

# acts

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

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# 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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Father Egidio VIGANÒ

## THE RENEWED TEXT OF OUR RULE OF LIFE

Introduction – 1. The turning point of the Second Vatican Council. – 2. The four general-chapter stages. – 3. New perspectives in the rewritten text: Nature of the Constitutions; Emphasis on the charismatic aspect of our vocation; Reference to the Founder; Adaptation to the new Code of Canon Law; Concrete nature and compass of our Rule of life. – 4. General structure of the Constitutions: Foreword; Don Bosco; 1st Part: Identity; 2nd Part: Commitments made at profession; 3rd Part: Formation; 4th Part: Animation and government; Conclusion: Our particular law and fidelity. – 5. Religious profession at the embryonic stage of a new era. – 6. Some principles providing inspiration for renewal: Apostolic consecration; The oratory criterion; The necessary community aspect; Familiarity with Jesus Christ; Formation to unity in a plurality of cultures; The 'form' of our Society and the guide of the community; Perseverance in the way that leads to Love. – 7. The urgent need for a concrete and methodical plan. Conclusion: The Marian date of the promulgation.

Rome, 29 October 1984

Liturgical commemoration of Bl. Michael Rua

*My dear confreres,*

Cordial greetings from each and every member of the new General Council. May you have joy and plenty of work!

The unexpected death of the late lamented and well-deserving Fr Roger Vanseveren, Regional Councillor for Northern Europe and Central Africa, has been a cause of pain and suffering for all of us. We have prayed for him with affection and gratitude and we trust in his brotherly intercession.

The first act of the present plenary session of the Council was to designate his successor. After an adequate process of discernment and with the consent of the Council,<sup>1</sup> I have entrusted the office to Fr Domenico Britschu, to whom we wish good health and a period of service marked by kindness and generosity.

The new General Council is therefore made up of the following confreres:

Fr Gaetano Scrivo, Vicar General;

Fr Paolo Natali, Councillor for the formation of salesian personnel;

1. cf. C 142

Fr Juan E. Vecchi, Councillor for youth pastoral work;

Fr Sergio Cuevas, Councillor for the salesian family and social communication;

Fr Luc Van Looy, Councillor for the missions;

Fr Omero Paron, Economer general; and of the Regional Councillors: Fr Luigi Bosoni, Fr Domenico Britschu, Fr Martin McPake, Fr Thomas Panakezham, Fr Jose A. Rico, Fr Carlos Techera and Fr Ignacio Velasco.

In addition, with the consent of the Council I have appointed the following:

Fr Francesco Maraccani, Secretary General;

Fr Agostino Dziedziel, Delegate of the Rector Major for Poland;

Fr Luigi Fiora, Procurator General and Postulator General.

### **The renewed text of our "Rule of Life"**

We are beginning a six-year period of service during which the principal goal to be reached is the knowledge, love and practice of the renewed Constitutions and Regulations. We might define it as "the period of the relaunching of our 'Rule of Life'".

The main part of this circular letter is being finished on the day, 29 October, when in the liturgy we commemorate Blessed Michael Rua, Don Bosco's Vicar in the last years of his life, and by divine providence also his first successor. The great Pope Paul VI told us that Don Rua "has been beatified and glorified precisely because he was the successor of Don Bosco in the sense that he was also his continuation as son, disciple and imitator; he made (with others, it is true, but he was first among them) of the example of the Saint a school; of his personal work a widespread institution covering, one might say, the whole world; of his life an epic, of his rule a spirit; of his sanctity an archetype or model; he turned a spring into a stream and then into a river".<sup>2</sup>

2. *Don Rua vivo*, LDC 1973, p. 9

This penetrating description of the *Beatus* spotlights

our programme for the six years now ahead of us.

We look with gratitude to Don Rua, the faithful witness, the "personification of the Rule", and we entrust with confidence to his intercession our task of getting to know and assimilating the Constitutions and Regulations so as to make of our Rule of Life, as Paul VI suggested, a "spirit".

It is encouraging for us to look at our saints and servants of God and so many confreres who achieved holiness precisely by making of the Rule a "spirit". The salesian Rule has not changed. The text of the present Constitutions has been rewritten so as to present to us in a better and more updated way the same original plan which has already produced such fruits of holiness.<sup>3</sup> It is the "fair copy" of the earlier Constitutions; they have their roots in our living traditions; they keep alive the original Valdocco experience; they preserve its heart and spirit, its genuine charism. The renewed Constitutions will be a spur for us too along the road to holiness!

3. cf. C 25

And now to dispose minds and hearts to a better acquaintance with the rewritten text, I offer you some reflections concerning the vital importance of the Constitutions and general Regulations.

Fundamentally, what has provoked the work of re-elaboration is the turning-point or crossroads that characterizes our present age, and it is from this situation that we must begin if we want a correct and stimulating understanding of our plan of life.

### 1. The turning point of the Second Vatican Council

It all began with the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. The *motu proprio* "Ecclesiae Sanctae"<sup>4</sup> has indicated both the criteria of revision and the aspects and basic points to be given special attention. The work that has been done has an ecclesial stamp, not only in respect of the final approval of the Holy See but from the very beginning and throughout the whole process. It should be noted that a revision that has been so universal (it has involved every religious Institute), so all-embracing (it has extended to every aspect of religious life) and so profound (it has gone to the very

4. ES, II-I, 12-14

roots of religious life), can be truly called unique in the twenty centuries of the Church's history.

Its explanation is to be found in the cataclysmic beginning of a new era which followed the second world war: "Today", the Council has told us, "the human race is passing through a new stage of its history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world... Hence we can already speak of a true social and cultural transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well. And as happens in any crisis of growth, this transformation has brought serious difficulties in its wake."<sup>5</sup> With good reason a well known modern analyst recently wrote a work with the title: "Two thousand years of a Church in discussion".<sup>6</sup>

5. GS 4

6. Gustav Martelet, ed. du Cerf, Paris 1984

Since the sixties we have been floundering in the upheaval of the Council's aftermath, trying to find the way to enter upon the third millennium.

The signs of the times pose many serious questions for us. Among the most urgent of them, those about which the Council gave practical guidance in its replies and which are of more immediate interest to us, we can number those of 'secularization', 'liberation' and 'inculturation'. It is a question of new ways of looking at things, which have far-reaching and complex implications and which touch in one way or another on just about everything. They find expression in different degrees in different parts of the world, but their influence is in fact felt universally. Vatican II has highlighted their positive qualities, but has drawn attention too to the many dangers inherent in them. The challenge is great. If we are not to lose our sense of direction and become dazed and bewildered it is indispensable that we rethink the fundamentals of the christian identity itself and of religious life.

To the challenge thrown out by the process of 'secularization' the Council replies with the idea of the Church as a "mystery" and in it, for us, of "religious consecration".

To the questions posed by the process of 'liberation' corresponds the deeper understanding of the "mission" of the Church, which has to be translated into new ways of carrying out pastoral work. These new departures

assume special expressions for religious Institutes of active life, in which "consecration" and "mission" interpenetrate in an active unity.

To meet the complex phenomenon of 'inculturation' the Council points out the nature of the People of God (the universal Church) as a communion of "particular Churches" dedicated to the service of men in the plurality of different nations so as to become incarnate in the different cultures and be a source of stimulation for them. A similar idea necessarily applies to religious life, in which it calls not only for the delicate process of decentralization and adaptation but also for the deeper one of inculturation, but lived in the communion of one and the same spirit in an organic Society.

To this end the Council, in relaunching the charismatic dimension of consecrated life, underlined the importance of the spiritual experience of the Founder as a model. In that experience are found the characteristic criteria for the response to the questions posed. "The appropriate renewal of religious life", says Vatican II in this regard, "comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the Institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time."<sup>7</sup>

7. PC 2

The redrafting of the text of our Constitutions is part of the great ecclesial upheaval guided by the Spirit of the Lord through the salvific event which was the Council.

## **2. The four general-chapter stages**

The path followed by the Congregation in the past twenty years is marked by four General Chapters:

— The GC19 (which took place between 19 April and 10 June 1965, shortly before the concluding session of Vatican II) carried out, amongst other work, a deeper investigation into the nature and functioning of the general chapter. It served as a first preparation and an indispensable preamble to subsequent chapter work.

— The GC20 (10 June 1971 - 5 January 1972) was the special chapter prescribed by the *motu proprio* "Ecclesiae Sanctae" and it marked the longest and most

laborious stage in the rethinking and rewriting of the text; it remains the fundamental Chapter in all the work that has been done.

— The GC21 (31 October 1977 - 12 February 1978) was a further period of revision and consolidation. It rounded off the explanation of some particular aspects of our identity (e.g. the Preventive System, the role of the Rector, the figure of the Coadjutor Brother) in harmony with the doctrine and directives of Vatican II.

— The GC22 (14 January - 12 May 1984) was the final contribution and the last lap which brought to an end the long period of experimentation which lasted for two six-year periods and gave to the Congregation the Constitutions and Regulations in renewed and organic form for presentation to the Apostolic See for approval.

It is interesting to note that the four stages constitute a single continuous and complementary process. This means that the re-worked text transcends not only the efforts of restricted groups of confreres, but also of the four general chapters themselves. In each of them, at six years distance from the previous one, a significant number of the members were new; each time there were new lived and studied experiences; each chapter was able to moderate any former influences which might have been the result of particular consequences. Longer and deeper consideration made it possible to correct any inaccuracies or lack of precision; time made possible a deeper and more mature study of some delicate aspects; a speeding up of change led to a clearer distinction between permanent and transient values, between those stemming from identity and those from merely cultural aspects. And as a result of all this there was a constant growth in the awareness of the ecclesial and worldwide dimension of Don Bosco's gospel project.

The Congregation can well consider this work as an expression of its very soul. Every province has felt itself involved; confreres from different cultures have made their contributions in communion and fidelity, so as to bring Don Bosco to life again by means of a vital updating, conceived not as a 'restoration' but rather as a 'new beginning'.

### 3. New perspectives in the re-elaborated text

These brief references to the lengthy work carried out by the chapters within the wider transition of the Church should arouse in us a clear and lucid awareness of an intervention of the Spirit of the Lord in the life of the Congregation. It has not been a question of caprice or the dictates of fashion, but of growth in fidelity.

It is natural that we should ask what new perspectives are to be found in the reworked text. A full reply to such a question can be given only after detailed study. Here it will be sufficient for us to refer briefly to some of the more significant aspects:

- The first aspect is without doubt a qualitative change in the *manner of understanding the concept of 'Constitutions' itself*. The Constitutions are the authoritative presentation of a project of evangelical life<sup>8</sup>; they indicate the fundamental principles of our way of following Christ, its ecclesial dimension, its charismatic originality enshrining the spirit of the Founder, its healthy traditions and its effective service-structures.

8. cf. C 196

They present a harmonious blending of gospel inspiration with clear-cut practical structures. They are the fundamental document containing the particular law of the Congregation. Rather than laying down as a first priority detailed norms to be followed, they set out chiefly a spiritual and apostolic way of bearing witness in the spirit of the beatitudes. They help in re-reading the mystery of Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco. For this reason it has been necessary to redesign their general structure in an order and style that make their reading become a prayer and a stimulus to a life-commitment. If the one reading them does so "in faith"<sup>9</sup>, or in other words through "new" eyes, he will draw from them light and strength.

9. C 196

- A second novelty is *the emphasis given to the 'charismatic' aspect of our salesian vocation*. In the context of the vision of the Church as 'mystery', the Constitutions disclose the experience of the Holy Spirit lived out in our vocation: if the Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation", in it we are the "signs and

bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are very poor".<sup>10</sup>

10. C 2

Evident from the very first article is the presence and initiative of the Spirit of the Lord, as also is the motherly intervention of Mary and the strong emphasis given to the ecclesial aspect which makes us feel inserted in the heart of the Church and at the service of its mission.

This perspective enlightens us and leads us to face up in a salesian manner to the social and cultural transformation it poses.

• A third new aspect is *the explicit and impelling sense of the Founder*. The renewed Constitutions direct our gaze to Don Bosco and lead us to love him in his particular style of sanctification and apostolate: "We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace. He lived 'like a man who could see the unseen'".<sup>11</sup>

11. C 21

Vatican II urged religious to concentrate their attention on the figure of their Founder, as a concrete and original expression of the many diverse forms of life and sanctity of the Church.<sup>12</sup> From the Church he was born and for the Church he lived.

12. cf. LG 45, 46; PC 2b; AG 40

Constant reference to Don Bosco is thus seen as "an ecclesial necessity". Our way of "being Church" is precisely that of reactivating in time and space the model of the Founder, as though he repeated to us each day: "Take me for your model, as I take Christ".<sup>13</sup>

13. 1 Cor 11,1

Pope Paul VI, in his important Apostolic Exhortation on renewal of religious life (June 1971) emphasized this aspect very clearly: "The Council rightly insists", he wrote, "on the obligation of religious to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity. In this it finds one of the principles for the present renewal and one of the most secure criteria for judging what each Institute should undertake... For while the call of God renews itself and expresses itself in different ways according to changing circumstances of place and time, it nevertheless requires a certain constancy of orientation."<sup>14</sup>

14. ET 11-12

This "constancy of orientation", drawn from Don

Bosco, has inspired the redrafting of the Constitutions in order to revive in us the fervour for "pastoral charity". If it is true, as Paul VI says in the document already quoted, that "every human institution is prone to become set in its ways and is threatened by formalism", and that "exterior regularity would not be sufficient in itself to generate the worth of a life and its inherent consistency",<sup>15</sup> it means that contemplation of the Founder should lead us to enter into his heart so as to understand his gospel inspiration as the living and permanent sense of our charism.

15. *ibid* 12

Deserving of special mention in this connection is the chapter on "the salesian spirit" found in the 1st Part of the Constitutions as a constituent factor of our identity. It gives shape and life to every aspect of our way of following the Lord.

From the Foreword down to the last article, through every Part and section, the text manifests the living heart of our Father: his charism, his spirit, his mission, his pastoral creativity, his capacity for communion, his religious witness, the manner of his union with God, his formative pedagogy, his brilliance as an organizer, his fatherly style of animation and government, his inborn desire to remain always with us, as though proclaiming from the very first page: "I would like to go with you myself, but since I cannot do so these Constitutions will take my place. Keep them as you would a precious treasure."<sup>16</sup>

16. Constitutions, Foreword

- Still another novelty is *the adaptation of the Constitutions to the new Code of Canon Law*. The fact is that Vatican II set in motion a series of changes so far-reaching as to require a complete redrafting of the Code. This has had a very positive consequence for us.

A constitutional text has no longer to conform to a detailed juridical uniformity which could flatten it out and render it lifeless by a series of detailed norms going into minute details. The Code of Canon Law today wants to see, and it promotes and safeguards, the traits and characteristics proper to each Institute, which constitute its spiritual and apostolic heritage. It does give some general principles concerning religious life but provides, and even requires, that there be the

necessary elbow-room for the expression of each Institute's specific spirit. It lays down, and this is a good thing, that the constitutive principles of a Congregation must be expressed clearly and precisely; that within it are realized co-responsibility and subsidiarity; that the 'form' of the Institute corresponds to the genuine desire of the Founder; that the organization of communities at various levels and the manner of exercise of authority be clearly defined and at the service of its vocational purpose.

In this way the new Code, which can be considered rather as a further Council document, has given incentive to the fundamentals of a correct autonomy by inviting the Congregation to a careful rewriting of its particular law.

We can say that the new text of the Constitutions and general Regulations conforms well to these requirements.

- Finally the text clarifies and defines *the concrete nature and the compass of our 'Rule of Life'*. The so-called particular or proper law of the Congregation "is expressed in the Constitutions, which represent our basic code, the general Regulations, the deliberations of the general chapter, the general and provincial directories, and in other decisions made by competent authorities".<sup>17</sup>

The directives given in these documents together constitute our 'Rule of Life'; they guide our daily practice, define the limits of the exercise of authority and spell out exactly how the gospel path is to be followed.

The GC22 has the special merit of having reorganized all the material in the general Regulations. The rewritten text follows the same structure as the Constitutions (in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Parts) thus facilitating its use. Various articles have been transferred, some gaps have been filled, and a style more in keeping with their normative nature has been adopted. The result is that the general Regulations now exhibit a quite new perspective; they flow harmoniously from the Constitutions, for the observance of which they give practical directives which provide a concrete method of application.

Don Bosco, with his pedagogical insight, gave real importance to method in behaviour and activity. The sense of an updated "religious discipline" is indispensable. It bears witness and gives vital strength to our sincere membership of the Congregation. There is an urgent need for us to salvage the ascetical, ecclesial and pedagogical significance of our 'Rule of Life'.<sup>18</sup> A proper discipline is necessary, as an expression of the evangelical sense of an ascesis which makes of the Rule a "spirit".

18. cf. GC22, 90, 91

#### 4. General structure of the Constitutions

The rewritten text of the Constitutions has been divided into four 'Parts'. This general structure is a matter of some importance for an understanding of the contents. The GC22 decided on this arrangement (and it is one of the most significant changes that were introduced) after careful consideration and discussion.

A glance at this structure is useful "for understanding how the individual Parts form an organic whole, mutually balancing and throwing light on each other", to quote the 'aid' prepared by the general chapter.

The Constitutions begin with a 'Foreword' and end with a 'Conclusion'.

##### • *The Foreword*

The first thing that strikes the eye here is an authentic photograph of Don Bosco in the act of handing the Constitutions to Fr John Cagliero, leader of the first missionary expedition to Latin America. The date is 1875, the year of the first Italian edition of the Constitutions. The photograph is accompanied as a commentary by two quotations, one from Don Bosco and the other from Don Rua. It provides a visual introduction with a historical flavour to the meditation of the text.

It gives us an immediate insight into what has always been meant by "staying with Don Bosco", receiving his spiritual testament as a legacy. Don Rua's penetrating comment reveals an intense affectionate communion in a cordial family relationship with a

Father ever present among us; a Father who guides and encourages, who enlightens and intercedes, so that we never cease, wherever we are or whatever work we may be doing, to be tireless and faithful “missionaries of the young”.

- *The 1st Part (25 articles)*

This Part describes in a general and rudimentary way the identity of the Salesians of Don Bosco in the Church: the initiative of God who calls us, the specific mission of our vocation, the apostolic consecration which is our characteristic, the ‘form’ of our Congregation, its animating spirit and the religious profession which guides the fundamental option of our baptism towards the goal of holiness.

This is a part which has been completely redrafted and gives the genuine salesian tone to the entire text. It presents a unified vision of our style of sanctification and apostolate. Its fundamental merit is that it leads us immediately to the Founder as our model, to discover in his heart the secret of the “grace of unity” which is the force that brings to birth pastoral charity.

No longer is there any disharmony between ‘consecration’ and ‘mission’, but a mutual and indivisible compenetration which makes us simultaneously and in a salesian sense apostles who are religious and religious who are apostles. Our ‘consecration’ involves our entire life, and the ‘mission’ qualifies all the witness we give. Rightly does the title of the third article speak of “apostolic consecration”, indicating by this comprehensive and portentous expression one of the more decisive aspects of our identity in the Church.

The term ‘consecration’ in the text never indicates the offering or donation we make of ourselves to God (where *we* would be the subject acting; in this sense we were accustomed to say: “*I* consecrate myself to *thee*”! It refers in the first place to the action of God: of “the Father who consecrates us with the grace of his Spirit”<sup>19</sup>; or in other words, who through the action of the Church<sup>20</sup> blesses us and takes us entirely for himself, pledging himself to protect us and give us his daily help and guidance so that we may move forward

19. C 3

20. cf. C 23

on the gospel path we have professed. The object for the reception of the benefits flowing from the divine action is our own professed person, in so far as in reply to his call we offer ourselves totally to him, so that our whole existence becomes a "consecrated life".

Because of this the term 'consecration' comes to have the secondary and passive meaning of our existence itself as a life which has been "consecrated". In fact the consecrating action of God involves the various commitments made in the donation of ourselves through profession; it proclaims the coming into being of a pact of more radical friendship and of a particular covenant between the Father and ourselves. This is the sense in which the text asserts that our consecration, or our "consecrated life", contains as inseparable elements "our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels"<sup>21</sup>, i.e. all the constitutive aspects of our religious project.

21. C 3

We are concerned in very truth with a new perspective, one that is truer and more encouraging: it is a fine thing to consider our own life-plan as a gift (a charism!) which develops in us with the support and animation of the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

22. cf. C 3,25,195

In turn, the term 'mission', in the text, does not imply mere activity or external action. It has a biblical connotation which ties in with the trinitarian mystery of the sending by the Father of the Son and the Spirit into the world, plunging us into the very mystery of the Church and its specific task in history. Our mission is to be interpreted in the light of that of Christ and the Church: just as the Father "consecrated" the Son and "sent him into the world",<sup>23</sup> so at our profession he himself "consecrates us and sends us out to be apostles of the young".<sup>24</sup>

23. cf. Jn 10,36

24. C 3

This is why on the one side the mission appears as a constitutive aspect of our consecration, and on the other our consecrated life is defined and specified in detail by our mission, and must be involved and realized in it. In this way there is born in the salesian heart a dynamic manner of belonging with complete availability to God "seen in the act of saving the world". The heart feels itself irresistibly drawn towards pastoral

work, precisely because of this total attachment to a God who is a "saviour".

The expression "apostolic consecration" is therefore dense in meaning and very enlightening; it reaches and clarifies the deepest roots of our identity, there were based that throbbing pastoral charity which produces a mutual and permanent interchange between interior life and external activity. It calls for special interior attitudes (the "salesian spirit") and a religious profession of an original kind.

The committing of oneself to the salesian mission implies an explicit awareness of a bond with two poles in continual and dynamic tension: God the Father who sends us and those to whom we are sent.<sup>25</sup>

25. cf. SGC 24

Rightly the constitutional text places the mission at the centre of our identity; it calls for a contemplative dimension in us each day as we are sent out to work, and asserts that the mission "sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families".<sup>26</sup>

26. C 3

The contents of its three chapters render this 1st Part of fundamental importance. It provides us with our identity card.

- *The 2nd Part (70 articles)*

This part unites in an organic manner material which occupied three Parts of the former text of the Constitutions (1972). The purpose of this was to emphasize the unity and mutual relationship between the various basic commitments made at profession: the salesian mission, its community context, the radically evangelical way in which it is lived out, and the indispensable need for prayer which gives life to its every aspect.

One of the great merits of this part is to be found in the way it presents the mutual penetration of these various aspects of our vocation, and their continual and intimate interrelationship. The pastoral commitment, community dimension and religious vows are always presented in constant correlation with each other, and their very inseparability characterizes in a peculiarly salesian way each individual aspect.

The locating of 'dialogue with the Lord' as a

concluding synthesis to this Part draws attention to both the intimate linkage between prayer and every aspect of our vocation, and the vital importance (as both source and vertex) of prayer itself as a permanent incentive "to celebrate the liturgy of life"<sup>27</sup> in pastoral action, in fraternal community and in the practice of the evangelical counsels.

It should be noted here, as also in the 1st Part and elsewhere, how the text highlights the consoling presence and motherly role of Mary in the birth, growth and realization of our salesian vocation.<sup>28</sup>

• *The 3rd Part (24 articles)*

This part is dedicated to the formation of the confreres. The GC22, following the indications of the GC21<sup>29</sup> and of the provincial chapters which insisted on the nature and urgency of "ongoing formation", was responsible for the organizational and directive ideas contained in the whole Part. We are dealing here with a process of continuous growth, albeit with different phases and a gradual rate of maturing.

Formation is based on grace<sup>30</sup> and looks always to Don Bosco as a model in the following of the Lord: "The religious and apostolic nature of the salesian calling dictates the specific direction our formation must take".<sup>31</sup>

The text emphasizes the personal and community aspects of the obligation which is always exacting, attentive to the difference between the 'lay' and 'clerical' components, and open to the characteristics of different cultures.

The formation process is both complex and delicate, and so only its fundamental aspects appear in the Constitutions; they will be further specified in the Regulations and in another document (the 'Ratio') which provides an authoritative interpretation of the principles and general norms.

This Part draws its inspiration from and refers back to the two previous ones: each confrere in fact matures progressively, "learning by experience the meaning of the salesian vocation" so as to become a "pastor and educator of the young in the lay or priestly state which he has embraced".<sup>32</sup>

27. C 95

28. cf. C 1, 8, 9, 20, 24, 34, 84, 87, 92, 98, 196

29. cf. GC21 308

30. cf. C 96

31. C 97

32. C 98

- *The 4th Part* (71 articles)

This part deals with the service of authority in the Congregation. The nature of the topic requires a certain breadth of treatment and a style of expression which must of necessity be more concise and juridical. In the redrafting of this Part particular attention was given to two special points: the evaluation of the experiments that had been going on for more than twelve years from the time of the SGC, which had made a careful study of the structures problem, and their adaptation to the new Code of Canon Law.

The Part begins with a chapter on "General Principles and criteria", which indicates the nature of the service of authority in the Congregation, "exercised in the name and imitation of Christ", in the style of reasonableness and family spirit characteristic of Don Bosco, and directed to "animating, orientating, making decisions, giving corrections, so that our mission may be accomplished". The priestly aspect of this service "according to our tradition" is also spelled out.<sup>33</sup>

33. cf. C 121

The text also indicates the delicate aspect of "unity" which is inherent in the nature of salesian authority, and the indispensable elements of "participation and shared responsibility" and of "subsidiarity and decentralization", always in the light of the unity and identity of the salesian vocation.

- *Conclusion* (6 articles)

The articles of this concluding part have been enriched by some new content and more penetrating spiritual considerations in a final synthesis. After describing the extent of our "particular law", its binding character and possible separation from the Congregation, the text emphasizes the importance of fidelity and perseverance as "a response which we continually renew to the special covenant that the Lord has entered into with us".<sup>34</sup>

34. C 195

The final article in the renewed text of the Constitutions is one of lofty inspiration, and is a worthy synthesis which crowns everything. Substantially it reproduces the Foreword to the previous edition (1972), which finds here a more fitting and meaningful place.

In it Jesus Christ is proclaimed our supreme living Rule, Mary our guide, Don Bosco our model, and the Constitutions “a way that leads to Love”.

We are disciples of “predilection”, “called by name”, who if we are able to translate the contents of the Constitutions into the way we live our lives, will become in the world “a pledge of hope for the poor and the little ones”.<sup>35</sup>

35. cf. C 196

### **5. Religious profession at the embryonic stage of a new era**

The Council has observed that we are at the dawn of a new era in history. The Church is living through a period which is a real new beginning; there is an air of novelty about which calls for clear identity, vital energy, courageous creativity, fidelity in discernment and humility in revision and reassessment. What we are asked to do at the present day is not to praise or criticize the articles of a fine updated text, but rather with the simplicity and enthusiasm of our origins to relaunch a charism in the Church.

The work of redrafting the Constitutions has not been just doctrinal, juridical or literary, though contributions have been made in all these sectors by competent people. The wisdom of the experience of all the salesians, who live in different cultures, has been sought out and brought to bear. In its light we have singled out the permanent values of that “experience of the Holy Spirit” that was lived by Don Bosco and passed on to us for safe keeping and to be deepened and developed “in harmony with the Body of Christ in continual growth”.<sup>36</sup> This is why the new Constitutions call especially for the awareness on our part that we are at the beginning of a new era and that we need to pledge ourselves to make a new beginning. We have to relaunch the salesian project of Don Bosco. If we fail to do so we shall be left on the margin of history.

36. MR 11

Sensitivity to this idea of relaunching is based fundamentally on a *revived understanding of the vital significance of religious profession*.

It is the deepest expression of our freedom, an expression which by God’s grace has the effect of giving

concrete witness to the fundamental option made at our baptism. It is rooted in our way of following Jesus Christ, and hence becomes the lens through which we read the Gospel and the point of departure for all our choices and commitments.

It is not something extra added to our lives nor is it a secondary or collateral element, but rather the focus and measure of everything. The fact of being authentic salesians in Christ helps us to discern and assess the multiple activities and attitudes we may take up.

Rightly therefore in the text of the Constitutions has the religious profession been given a new location which makes its importance easier to grasp.

Chapter 3 of the 1st Part is dedicated to this topic. It serves as a bridge between the 1st and the other Parts of the Constitutions. Above all it synthesizes and specifies in each confrere the vocation of the "Salesians of Don Bosco in the Church",<sup>37</sup> and then goes on to set out in the profession formula<sup>38</sup> the topics that will be developed in the succeeding Parts as concrete realizations of the choice that has been made.

It is important for us to understand the overall significance of our profession. It cannot be reduced solely to the making of the three vows. The concrete meaning of each of them is intimately bound up with the salesian vocation: "I make the vow", it says in the formula, "to live obedient, poor and chaste, *according to the way of the Gospel set out in the salesian Constitutions.*"<sup>39</sup>

The response we give to the Lord who calls us is to offer ourselves totally to God, *pledging ourselves* to "devote all our strength" especially to needy youth, to live in the Congregation "in communion of spirit and action with our brothers", and in this way to share "in the Church's life and mission". Our obedience, poverty and chastity are not something separate from the concrete and integral sphere of our vocation but are vitally inserted into it so as to become its most radical synthetic expression.

Don Bosco used to speak of "*professing* the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales", and said that "*by professing them* we intended to promise God to aim at the sanctification" of our soul.<sup>40</sup>

37. cf. Constitutions, 1st Part

38. cf. C 24

39. C 24

40. cf. GC22 92

When we remember too that profession is the diligently fostered and long prepared expression of a mature freedom ("one of the most lofty choices a believer can consciously make"), which has an ecclesial character because "made publicly in the eyes of the Church" to live out its holiness, and that a "mutual commitment" with the Congregation<sup>41</sup> is involved, it can be seen even more clearly why profession is something quite basic and fundamental.

41. cf. C 23

The Constitutions, to which profession refers, describe the model "experience of the Holy Spirit" into which incorporation takes place. They are not a general treatise on religious life useful for spiritual reading. They are a typological description (i.e. the authentic presentation of a 'model') of what the Council called the "distinctive character" of our project of evangelical life approved by the Church. They indicate the spiritual traits and existential activities which must distinguish and characterize us among the People of God. These aspects of course presuppose and require the constituent elements of every christian or consecrated life, which of necessity we have in common with other religious and members of the faithful.

The distinctive character is constituted by existential aspects and shades of difference, set out in detail in the constitutional text and explicitly taken up and accepted in the act of profession as practices in the following of Christ: something indeed which is not insignificant and cannot be ignored by the professed. For us the way of being disciples and living out our baptism is by practising our "Rule of life". To become true christians we must live as good salesians. The SGC already told us that "there are not two levels: that of religious life which is a little higher, and that of christian life which is a little lower. For the religious, testifying to the spirit of the beatitudes by his profession is the only way for him to live out his baptism and to be a disciple of the Lord."<sup>42</sup>

42. SGC 106

In religious profession, finally, we discover the overall and compelling significance of our special Covenant with God. Its intrinsic linkage with the Constitutions guides us to holiness in the course of our daily affairs according to the model of our Founder

proposed by the Church. By means of the Rule, profession serves to provide us with a means of gospel comparison for judging our style of life; it helps to build up the unity of the Congregation, promoting its organic growth beyond the limits of social and cultural differences, and launching Don Bosco's charism in new directions.

At this time of new beginnings a clear awareness of the significance of our religious profession ensures for us vitality in spiritual growth and the daring and supernatural fertility of our origins.

## **6. Some principles providing inspiration for renewal**

I think it opportune at this point to list some productive themes which are found in the Constitutions. I think they are indicative for clarifying the mind and channelling personal and community efforts at renewal in the right direction.

The re-elaboration of the text did not always proceed smoothly, not only because of understandable cultural differences among the capitulars but also because of different lines of approach and a slow and progressive maturing of some of the content. Enriching discussions led to a deeper investigation of some topics, and a better understanding of the contents brought about a convergence into a prized and significant unanimity.

Following the order of the four Parts, let me now dwell briefly on some of the inspirational principles which I think more enlightening for an assimilation of the contents.

- *Apostolic consecration*

We have already given some indication of the fundamental importance of this matter; we will now take it up again from the point of view of the consequences to which it gives rise.

*The 1st Part* gives expression through synthetic and penetrating statements in various articles<sup>43</sup> to the originality of that "grace of unity" which the SGC had already pointed out as the first characteristic we must

43. e.g. C 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 12, 19, 21, 24, 25

cultivate: "The Holy Spirit", we read in the Acts of the Chapter, "calls the salesian to an option of christian existence which is at the same time apostolic and religious. Thus he gives him the grace of unity to live the dynamism of apostolic action and the fullness of religious life in a single movement of charity to God and to his neighbour. This type of life is not something fixed and prefabricated, but is a 'project' in permanent construction. Its unity is not static but is a unity in tension and in continual need of balance, of revision, of conversion and adaptation."<sup>44</sup>

44. SGC 127

The difference between the concepts of 'consecration' and 'mission' should not lead, among us, to a position of dangerous dualism which emphasizes one aspect at the expense of the other. That would do damage to our identity at its very roots. The rewritten text of the Constitutions overcomes this danger with an intelligence born of faith and offers us, as we have already shown, "a deeper idea of the concept of both 'consecration' and 'mission', one which is both more complete and more in line with experience. In the Constitutions we do not follow any generalized form of either a 'theology of consecration' or a 'theology of mission'; we follow a 'theology of the salesian', based on the concrete spiritual heritage left us by Don Bosco."<sup>45</sup>

45. GC22 40

The 'grace of unity' brings to our minds in an original form the fertile completeness of both our mission and our consecration. They mutually compenetrates in a unified experience of life. Such a synthesis does not derive from the abstract quality of a "concept" but from the evidence of a "model": the life of Don Bosco.

Every religious Institute of active life should be able to probe into and develop the deeply significant content of the famous para. 8 of the conciliar decree "Perfectae caritatis". It concerns an overall and characterizing principle of quite extraordinary importance for every religious and apostolic spirituality.<sup>46</sup>

It remains clear that the "pastoral charity" which is considered the "centre" and "synthesis" of the "salesian spirit"<sup>47</sup> contains in itself and expresses the "grace of unity" which synthesizes our whole life "in a single movement of charity towards God and our brothers".<sup>48</sup>

46. It is not possible here to provide deeper clarification. I have tried to do so in a paper I gave with others to the Union of Women Superiors General: *UISG Bulletin*, special number, n. 62, 1983; the same paper was also published in *Vita Consacrata*, vol. XIX, 1983, pp. 648-673

47. cf. C 10

48. C 3

Our "apostolic consecration" came about on the day of our profession; it was given to us as a "source of grace and a support for the daily efforts to grow towards the perfect love of God and men".<sup>49</sup>

49. C 25

It is really indispensable to reflect on this intimate reality which implies at one and the same time the divine initiative in respect of each one of us, and our free and radical response to God.

To understand properly the great values contained in our way of being and feeling 'consecrated' and translate them into factors in our life, it is not sufficient to stop at considerations of the overall extent of our apostolic consecration. It is certainly a great step forward to have grasped its extension as regards both God's consecrating action and our offering or donation: or in other words, as the text has it, that our consecrated life includes inseparably "our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels".<sup>50</sup> But it is absolutely indispensable to go beyond this and see the spark before the fire of love, the first dazzling indication of everything that is to follow, where passionate friendship explodes and the covenant is ratified, where the electrifying grace of unity galvanizes the heart. I mean that it is necessary to delve ever more deeply into the very soul of the consecration as a meeting of two loves, of two freedoms which fuse and become one: the "Father who consecrates us",<sup>51</sup> and we who "offer ourselves completely to him".<sup>52</sup> In this mutual coalescence of friendship the initiative and even the very possibility of a covenant comes from God, but is confirmed by our free response; he it is who has called us and helped us to respond, but it is we who give ourselves; he it is who consecrates us, who envelops us with his Spirit, who captures us for himself and makes us become entirely his, who floods us with grace so as to bring all our resources to bear on his great design for the salvation of the world, but it is we who centre ourselves on him, listen to him and keep our eyes on him. All this gives rise in us to a very close and characteristic relationship with him, one which fills our psychology or inner being as 'consecrated persons', which becomes the subject of our contemplation, the

50. C 3

51. C 3

52. cf. C 24

object of our affections and the mainspring which unleashes our tireless exertions.

What does the knowledge that I am a 'consecrated person' mean to me? This brings us to the crux of the whole matter, the point where spiritual superficiality can be rooted out (or where unfortunately it can be born!) My awareness of being 'consecrated' turns my heart and mind towards "God, the object of my highest love", to whom I have "made myself over completely" so as to free myself "from hindrances that could hold me back from loving God ardently and worshipping him perfectly".<sup>53</sup> He accepts me, he blesses me, he helps me to become entirely his. I belong to God and no longer to myself; I think of him and gaze on him; with him I commune and make plans; I feel myself caught up in his plan of salvation; I collaborate with all my strength to spread his Kingdom; in my innermost depths, even before I have set my hand to anything external, I have the feeling that I am already active and busy; I discover an interior element in all I do, and I foster it continually because it constitutes the permanent point of departure for all salesian activity. And I come to see that the entirely gratuitous initiative of the Father is responsible not only for the birth of the Congregation in history and the holiness of Don Bosco,<sup>54</sup> but also for my own vocation and my sanctification; and I see as well that the covenant and the communion that stems from it, not only nourishes my continuous dialogue as an attentive son, but guides and animates my way of life and the intensity of my actions.

In the light of this blinding revelation one can understand the extraordinary importance that a permanent attitude of union with God has for every consecrated person. It is an attitude which enables the salesian "to enjoy an experience of God's fatherhood". He is always engaged in "a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father to whom he feels close. He is attentive to the power of the Spirit and doing everything for God's love he becomes, like Don Bosco, a contemplative in action."<sup>55</sup> He is contemplating not a God whom we might describe as generic and wellnigh shapeless, but a God with a well-

53. LG 44

54. cf. C 1

55. cf. C 12

defined physiognomy in a very concrete historical perspective. The salesian contemplates God not to escape from reality but to imbue reality with biblical depth. That is why in our solemn Act of Entrustment to Mary Help of Christians we proclaimed: the salesian adores God who is infinite Love and who created and redeemed the world; a God who is a Father historically "rich in mercy"; who is the Son, made incarnate among us and our "Redeemer"; who is the Spirit inserted into our human affairs and fortunes as the powerful "sanctifier"; a God in fact truly immersed in all of man's reality. The ceaseless practice of this contemplation and union will lead the salesian in his work and in his whole existence "to celebrate the liturgy of life".<sup>56</sup>

56. C 95

It is not a matter of unattainable ideals or slick slogans. The consecrating initiative of God — as the Constitutions assure us — gives us strength and lovingly guides us by his providence.<sup>57</sup> It is a fine and consoling thing to know that our apostolic consecration is sustained and made fruitful from its very beginning by the "power" of the Holy Spirit; indeed the Lord grants us, as the Apostle says, "to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man".<sup>58</sup>

57. cf. C 3, 25, 195

58. Eph 3,16

The pastoral charity of the salesian charism therefore implies something deeply original with a "novelty of vision" and a "novelty of consecration" fruitfully linked in an "apostolic consecration" which bears with it the grace of unity.

Evidently the renewal of our daily contact and practice will require an urgent daily commitment to adoration and listening, eliminating that spiritual superficiality which corrodes our identity. The apostolic consecration prompts us to ensure the presence of the contemplative dimension in such a way that salesian activity appears always as a vital expression of inner depth; and to carry out our apostolic work in such a way that it transforms our religious life objectively into an uninterrupted liturgical offering.

- *The oratory criterion*

In the 2nd Part three inspirational factors are deserving of emphasis: the oratory criterion, the

necessary community aspect, and familiarity with Jesus Christ.

The first is found in condensed form in the new art. 40: "Don Bosco's Oratory a permanent criterion".

The original Oratory is considered an apostolic model for reference. It is a model which is not identified with a particular structure or institution, but which at the same time excludes nothing that the concrete situation might suggest. First and foremost it calls for a specific pastoral manner for assessing our various works, be they new or in need of renewal. This way of looking at things was characteristic of the heart of Don Bosco from the first appearance of this charism, and all through his existence.

At the centre of this 'oratorian heart' there is the predilection for the young which gives meaning to our whole life.<sup>59</sup> It is a "gift of God" which springs from a "pastoral charity" realistically attentive to the urgent needs of society, so that we can meet them by means of our apostolate for the young and working classes.

The inspiration provided by such a criterion throws light on the ecclesial tasks in which Don Bosco wanted the Congregation to be engaged.<sup>60</sup> They are: the evangelization of the young, especially the poorer ones and young workers;<sup>61</sup> the care of vocations;<sup>62</sup> apostolic initiatives in working-class areas,<sup>63</sup> "especially by means of social communication";<sup>64</sup> and the missions.<sup>65</sup>

To acquire a faithful understanding of the extent of this criterion it is well to keep in mind some constitutional requirements at three different and complementary levels:

— the choice of those to whom our mission is directed by preference, the young who are poor, and at the same time those who show signs of a vocation;

— the spiritual and educative experience of the Preventive System;

— the ability to gather together numerous people to share responsibility for our mission, chosen from the laity and the young people themselves.

It is therefore a question of a complex but concrete criterion which invites us to transcend the material nature of the works and enter into Don Bosco's heart so

59. cf. C 14

60. cf. C 6

61. cf. C 26,27

62. cf. C 28

63. cf. C 29

64. C 6; cf. 43

65. cf. C 30

that we can make judgements and programmes from the specific aspect of his pastoral charity.

Our times and the great variety of situations in which we work demand of us a new kind of presence, both where we already are and where we shall be asked to go. Revision is necessary, with replanning and new ideas, if we are to be truly in harmony with the inspiration of our origins.

Fidelity to the 'oratory criterion' in our mission is an impelling task with ever new beginnings. We cannot look upon our present works as a fixed and definitive answer; every day, and especially at a time marked by so many changes, new problems are coming to light; there are new situations calling for ecclesial options. In our process of discernment and decision-making our blueprint is the first Oratory, "which was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves".<sup>66</sup>

66. cf. C 40

• *The necessary community aspect*

Another inspirational principle that we find in the 2nd Part is that of the community dimension, proper to the salesian style of life and pastoral work: "To live and work together is for us salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation".<sup>67</sup>

67. C 49

The salesian 'house' was born with a genuine and intense family spirit, even among confreres of different nationalities and mentalities. This is one of our traditional and genial characteristics: "In an atmosphere of mutual trust and daily forgiveness, one experiences the need and joy of sharing everything, and relationships are governed not so much by recourse to rules as by faith and the promptings of the heart."<sup>68</sup> If the conciliar directives have reminded Religious that they must be "specialists in communion" among the People of God, we can rejoice at the knowledge that this is precisely a quality inbuilt into a salesian community which has grown in the spirit of Don Bosco.

68. C 16

But the community aspect goes beyond brotherhood and a family style of life. A particular concrete requirement of the constitutional text is that there shall

be shared responsibility with regard to pastoral activity: "the apostolic mandate which the Church entrusts to us is taken up and put into effect in the first instance by the provincial and local communities";<sup>69</sup> "each of us is responsible for the common mission, and participates in it with the richness of his personal gifts";<sup>70</sup> "pastoral objectives are achieved through unity and joint brotherly responsibility".<sup>71</sup>

Our pastoral and educative project is a community endeavour in its formulation, in its realization and in its revision. Every member has his own personal task, not as an expression of individualism or apostolic independence, but as part of a general undertaking: "The provincial and the rector, as promoters of dialogue and teamwork, guide the community in pastoral discernment, so that it may accomplish its apostolic plan in unity and fidelity."<sup>72</sup>

In addition the community requirement broadens salesian brotherhood and shared responsibility and cultivates in the confreres a lively sense of belonging to the whole Congregation by both vocational identity and unity in communion: "Religious profession incorporates the salesian in the Society, making him a participant in the communion of spirit, witness and service that is its life within the universal Church".<sup>73</sup>

From this inspirational principle many practical consequences must be drawn for our renewal.

• *Familiarity with Jesus Christ*

Another principle of this kind, developed especially in the 2nd Part (but not only there, as we have seen), is that of our friendship with Christ: a daily familiar relationship which consists in the desire "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection".<sup>74</sup> "The salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father".<sup>75</sup> Our religious profession is a response "to the love of the Lord Jesus who calls us to follow him more closely",<sup>76</sup> and the union with God which permeates the whole of salesian life is rooted in a "simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ".<sup>77</sup> This productive theme is evidently tied in with what we have already said about apostolic consecration.

The constitutional text treats with particular care

69. cf. C 44

70. C 45

71. C 44

72. C 44

73. C 59

74. Phil 3,10

75. C 11

76. cf. C 24

77. C 12

two vital aspects of this familiar relationship with the Lord: the following of Christ in the practice of the evangelical counsels, and the easy and sincere meeting with him as an individual and in the praying community.

• It is of interest to emphasize in the first place that the salesian way of following Christ, as expressed in the Constitutions, gives pride of place among the vows (as did Don Bosco) to the attitude of obedience: <sup>78</sup> our life of mission tends first and foremost to make us sharers in the obedience of him <sup>79</sup> who offered himself to the Father for the salvation of mankind. The gospel sense of religious obedience is accompanied by that of poverty <sup>80</sup> and the oblation of oneself in consecrated chastity for the Kingdom.<sup>81</sup>

78. cf. C 64 ff

79. cf. Heb 5,8

80. cf. C 72 ff

81. cf. C 80 ff

It is a question therefore of living a friendship with Christ by a practical witness which carries the fundamental baptismal option to its radical consequences: "I make the vow for ever to live obedient, poor and chaste according to the way of the Gospel set out in the salesian Constitutions".<sup>82</sup> It is our deepest expression of friendship.<sup>83</sup>

82. C 24

83. cf. commentary on the dream of the ten diamonds: ASC 300; also *Un progetto evangelico di vita attiva*, LDC 1982

• Secondly, the meeting with Christ is centred in the articles of the Constitutions on prayer,<sup>84</sup> the eucharist,<sup>85</sup> reconciliation and penance<sup>86</sup> and discernment.<sup>87</sup> These are concrete and compelling topics which help us to avoid the great danger of spiritual superficiality.<sup>88</sup> And here is revived the first spark of the "grace of unity".

84. cf. C 85-87, 89, 93, 95

85. cf. C 88

86. cf. C 90

87. C 90,91

88. cf. GC22 66

The daily attitude of dialogue with Christ nourishes friendship and familiarity with him to such an extent that we appear among men as "signs and bearers" of his love. The problems arising at the present day from secularization, liberation and inculturation call for extraordinary care of our familiarity with Christ. We have an urgent need to revise and deepen our knowledge of what the Constitutions say about the practice of the evangelical counsels and about prayer, the eucharist, reconciliation and discernment. The stimulating fire of this "grace of unity" which is the secret of our apostolic consecration springs from these sources.

Let every province, every local community, every confrere, meditate with willingness and attention on the pertinent articles of the Constitutions; let him get his priorities in proper order so as to meet his most urgent needs; let him live each day “through Christ, with Christ, in Christ”.

• *Formation to unity in a plurality of cultures*

*In the 3rd Part* there is an inspirational principle which penetrates all the contents: the careful formation to unity of our personnel.

It is important to be able to incarnate salesian identity in local culture by means of a versatile methodology. We strive everywhere to bring to life and render incarnate the spirit of our Father and Founder Don Bosco, the one model for all: identity of vocation “dictates the specific direction our formation must take, a direction necessary for the life and unity of the Congregation”.<sup>89</sup>

89. C 97

It is an arduous task, and is particularly intense in the period of initial formation, though it is always pressing and relevant all through life.<sup>90</sup>

90. cf. C 118,119

“Pluralistic contexts”, “rapid transformations”, the “evolutionary character” of each person, the “quality and fruitfulness of our life” call for a continual renewal of our membership of the Congregation and of our witness to the genuine spirit of Don Bosco.<sup>91</sup>

91. cf. C 118

The process of inculturation requires at one and the same time both that the values to be embodied are clear and well understood and that an accurate and just discernment can be made of the demands of local cultures. An effective correlation between cultural incarnation and unity of salesian identity is indispensable.

Evaluation of cultures need to be permeated by a clear transcendent vision. The way in which the manifestation of the “signs of the times” has grown in the last ten years, and the near-universal interchange between different cultures, puts the spotlight on each one of them. The truths too of the mystery of Christ and the creative vitality of the charisms of his Spirit, bring an agitation for revision, for purification, for a new

drive that can benefit the cultures themselves. Without an objective sense of transcendence the danger can arise of a harmful provincialism or nationalism.

Fr Voillaume has made the pertinent comment: "Today we are witnessing a tendency to call into question the unity of a Congregation under the pretext of developing the regional or national characteristics of its foundations. Such a tendency is ambiguous. It is lawful in so far as it is a reaction against the uniform commitment to a universal expression of religious life too dependent on a single mentality, but at the same time it risks calling into question one of the characteristics of the Kingdom of God, which is its location above or beyond every culture, in the fraternal unity of the People of God which should know neither race nor frontier."<sup>92</sup>

A charism which is not open and adaptable to the values of different cultures will become fossilized; it can have no future. But any culture closed against the challenge of the signs of the times, interchange with other cultures and the transcendence of Christ and his Spirit, risks becoming nothing more than a museum piece or a watered-down interpretation of universality. This makes it clear just how delicate and exacting is formation activity in the Congregation.

The new Constitutions give us guidance in discerning and realizing a proper correlation between our vocation and cultural diversities: "The principle of unity in the Congregation", they tell us, "is the charism of our Founder, which of its richness gives rise to different ways of living the one salesian vocation. Formation is therefore one in its essential content and diversified in its concrete expressions: it accepts and develops whatever is contained in the various cultures that is true, noble and just."<sup>93</sup>

The most valuable contribution of the Constitutions as a whole is that they provide an authoritative description of the "one salesian vocation" which in every province must inspire and guide the initiatives of initial and ongoing formation. Let us make of them a launching pad for the unity and future of the Congregation.

92. R. Voillaume: "La vita religiosa nelle conversazioni di Benis Abbès", ed. Città Nuova 1973, p. 95

93. C 100

• *The "form" of our Society and the guide of the community*

In the 4th Part the Constitutions deal with the service of authority; this is an important theme which belongs to the very 'form' of the Society.

94. cf. C 4

This 'form'<sup>94</sup> includes constituent traits which express and ensure, even from a juridical point of view, its own distinctive characteristics among religious Institutes in the Church. For this reason it is given adequate definition in various articles of the Constitutions starting from art. 4. In recent years "some rethinking has taken place about the basic points regarding the category of 'form' and brought to light the amplitude of its theological and spiritual grandeur. A charism in fact is manifested and reinforced in specific services and institutionalized aspects which sustain it and guarantee the permanence of its spiritual heritage."<sup>95</sup> The constitutional text in fact suggests to us the manner in which all the members form in the community "one heart and one soul", and how the service of authority which promotes and shapes its identity must operate among us.

95. GC22 84

"According to our tradition", asserts the text, "communities are guided by a member who is a priest, and who by the grace of his priestly ministry and pastoral experience sustains and directs the spirit and activity of his brothers".<sup>96</sup> This characteristic element of our community tradition ensures the pastoral originality which distinguishes us from others.

96. C 121

Strictly speaking our Congregation is not "priestly", nor is it simply "lay", and neither is it properly "unclassified". The members are "clerics" and "laymen" who "complement each other as brothers in living the same vocation";<sup>97</sup> each one is aware that he is a member who shares responsibility for "everything", before thinking of himself as clerical or lay. The clerical and lay components "do not imply the extrinsic summation of two dimensions each running on parallel lines and eventually putting together the efforts of each group, but rather a single community which is the true recipient (as we have seen) of the one salesian mission. This requires a particular formation of the personality of each confrere, so that in the heart of each 'clerical

97. C 4; cf. 45

salesian' there is an intimate feeling of being linked to and coinvolved with the "lay" dimension of the community, and in the heart of each 'lay salesian' there is in turn the same feeling in respect of the community's "clerical" dimension.<sup>98</sup> Hence it is of great importance for us to promote at one and the same time an awareness of the need for harmonious growth of clerical and lay members in the spirit of our salesian traditions.<sup>99</sup>

98. GC22 80

99. cf. *ibid* 8,9

And so the service of authority in the Congregation is tied in with this originality of 'form'. It fulfils a delicate function of ensuring identity in spirit and unity in apostolic action. Its specific role is that of promoting and directing that "pastoral charity" which is the centre and synthesis of the salesian spirit and the soul of all our activity. The grace of priestly ordination (which is "the sacrament of pastoral charity") enriches it and strengthens the capacity of service; it ensures that an authentic 'pastoral' criterion shall guide all our participation in the evangelizing mission of the Church.

It is a question of a contribution that is useful to every member because it is intimately connected with the oratory criterion. It promotes the apostolic participation and shared responsibility of all,<sup>100</sup> in the manner appropriate to each one's vocation, role and capacity; it gives a pastoral qualification to the principle of subsidiarity and decentralization<sup>101</sup> and guarantees its proper use "in communion with the Rector Major"; it ensures the apostolic nature of every salesian presence; it gives a particular tone to the lay and priestly dimensions of the community which mutually complement each other in a proportion adequate to the requirements of different situations.

100. cf. C 123

101. cf. C 124

This inspirational principle calls all of us to a profound change of mentality in our understanding of the peculiar concept of our community, and requires an urgent strengthening of its lay component as well as a deep renewal of priestly animation and direction.

• *Perseverance in the way that leads to Love*

In the Conclusion (and also in the Foreword) to the Constitutions we find another inspirational principle

which must permeate the whole of salesian life: that of fidelity and perseverance.

In his spiritual testament which Don Bosco left us in writing, he says: "If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our Constitutions".<sup>102</sup> At our religious profession each of us offered himself "completely", i.e. without reserve or compromise, trusting despite his weakness in the grace of God, in the intercession of Mary, of the Protectors of the Congregation, and in the daily life he shares with his confreres who "help him to be faithful".<sup>103</sup> Considering then the consecrating action of God at profession, the Constitutions rightly assure us that "our perseverance is founded entirely on the fidelity of God who loved us first, and is nourished by the grace of his consecration".<sup>104</sup> It is worth emphasizing also that "it is sustained too by love for the young to whom we are sent".<sup>105</sup>

Between 'fidelity' and 'perseverance' there is a cross-reference: they are mutually supplementary elements which together make up the full significance and meaning in life of our "response which we continually renew to the spiritual covenant that the Lord has entered into with us".<sup>106</sup>

'Fidelity' emphasizes rather the truthfulness with which we conform to Christ by following with our full correspondence the gospel path we have professed.

'Perseverance' on the other hand highlights the tenacity and constancy with which we firmly persist in the covenant pledge we have freely taken upon ourselves.

The two terms taken together are an invitation to every confrere to a due and constant consistency in respect of the obligations assumed at profession.<sup>107</sup> They remind us as well that such correspondence is firmly anchored in the faithful and unchangeable love of God who with the gift of consecration has made it possible for the salesian to begin "a new life lived out in a service of permanent dedication to the young".<sup>108</sup>

And there in a nutshell you have the true key to our future: absorb the Constitutions and practise them with fidelity and perseverance, because they are for us "a way that leads to Love".

102. Constitutions, Foreword

103. cf. C 24

104. C 195; cf. 25

105. C 195

106. C 195

107. cf. C 193

108. C 23

## 7. The urgent need for a concrete and methodical plan

Now that the postconciliar period of research and clarification is over, there is now beginning in the life of religious Institutes a stage which should be characterized by a striving for realization and practical application. With the renewed Constitutions and Regulations the Congregation is on the threshold of a period of more clear-cut practice.

"From now on our vital and meaningful energies will be directed to a more concrete and genuine practical life and a greater and more trenchantly creative pastoral activity."<sup>109</sup>

109. GC22 59

We are asked to be practical and to testify to the values, guidelines and norms of our Rule of life.

- The first practical step to be taken is to get to know well, at both personal and community level, the new text of the Constitutions and Regulations.<sup>110</sup> And here it is important to emphasize once again the fine work done by the GC22 on the Regulations; it revised their structure completely and made of them a practical channel for the application of the Constitutions to life.

110. cf. *ibid* 1, 2, 3

This is a commitment to be promoted immediately in every province. Without knowledge, without appreciation, esteem and love of what is contained in the text, one cannot reach an adequate realization of the spiritual experience described. The kind of study to favour is one that will be spontaneously translated into meditation and prayer.<sup>111</sup>

111. cf. C 196

In fact it is not a question of merely intellectual knowledge, but of an involvement of one's whole interior being which can enlighten and guide the energetic drive of one who has made his profession. The purpose of the study is the relaunching in each of us individually and in all our communities of the spiritual patrimony of Don Bosco.

In addition, since in accordance with the criteria which distinguish between the various parts of the text of the Rule of life, the normative items have been placed as far as possible in the Regulations, it follows that the requisite knowledge of the Constitutions will not be complete and genuine without an adequate study of the Regulations as well. The difference in

nature of the two texts does not imply any disparity of importance, but rather the need for mutual integration. How could one assign any methodical force to the Constitutions if one misunderstood or disregarded the Regulations and the other prescriptions of our particular law?

- A second obligation we have is that of singling out some priorities which must be given pride of place because of the more urgent needs and particular situations of some Regions and provinces. These priorities will concern our spirit, our mission and the pastoral quality of our activity, our religious identity, formation, and a healthy and indispensable discipline of life. Light can be thrown on the choice to be made by applying the inspirational principles already indicated.

Each province therefore should feel an obligation to concentrate its attention on particular themes which will lead to its growth and change of mentality. There is an urgent need for willing adaptation to the great work realized by the Congregation in the past twenty years. Preparation for the approaching centenary of the death of Don Bosco in 1988 should be an incentive to us to profit as much as possible by these intervening years: to live our Rule with integrity is to continue to love Don Bosco.<sup>112</sup>

In this way we shall celebrate the anniversary of the 'death' of our dear Father by showing that he is 'alive' among young people of the present day: may there continue to live in us his union with God, his apostolic enthusiasm, his Preventive System, his preferential options, his tireless energy and spirit of initiative, his flexibility and down to earth approach.

### **Conclusion. The Marian date of the promulgation**

And now, a month later, I can finally bring this letter to a close.

The Apostolic See approved the new text of the Constitutions on 25 November 1984, Solemnity of Christ the King. It had previously requested some modifications to the text prepared by the General Chapter, as is explained elsewhere in this addition of

112. cf. Constitutions, Foreword

the Acts by Fr Juan Vecchi, the diligent and self-sacrificing moderator of the GC22.

In fulfilment of what the Constitutions prescribe, I have thought it well to chose as the date for the promulgation of the renewed text of our 'Rule of life' the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 1984.

This feast of Our Lady, so full of meaning for every salesian heart, is a date that was very dear to Don Bosco; it was the date that he said marked the official birth of our charism in the Church. It may be indicative to recall some events associated with this date: in the first place the meeting with Bartholomew Garelli (1841) and the Hail Mary that began that prophetic catechism lesson;<sup>113</sup> the opening of the Oratory of St Aloysius at Portanuova;<sup>114</sup> the announcement in 1859 of the meeting which would launch the Congregation;<sup>115</sup> the consigning in 1878 of the first printed Rule to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians;<sup>116</sup> the first appointment of one of our confreres as a Bishop;<sup>117</sup> and in 1885 the important announcement of the designation of Don Rua as Vicar of the Founder.<sup>118</sup> On that same 8 December 1885 our Father declared that "we owe everything to Mary", and that "all our greatest enterprises and events began and reached fulfilment on the Feast of the Immacolata". And at the end of his traditional conference in the choir of the Basilica he added that the Congregation was "destined for very great things and would spread throughout the world, if the salesians were always faithful to the Rule given them by Mary most holy".<sup>119</sup>

And so the date of the promulgation of the revised Rule is an indication that this is one of "our greatest events" and is meant to emphasize the motherly intervention and uninterrupted protection of Mary<sup>120</sup> to whom we solemnly entrusted ourselves precisely at the beginning of the work of the GC22.

Let us open our hearts in hope as we repeat once again to the Virgin Help of Christians: "To you we entrust the precious treasure of our Constitutions, the pledge of our fidelity and unity in the Congregation, the sanctification of its members, the work of each one of them offered in a spirit of living worship, the pledge too

113. MB II, 70 ff

114. *ibid* III, 281ff115. *ibid* VI, 333116. *ibid* XIII, 210

117. Mgr Cagliari - cf. MB XVII, 285ff

118. MB XVII, 510

119. *ibid* XVII, 510-511

120. cf. C 1, 8, 20, 34, 92, 196

121. Formula of act of entrustment

of vocational fruitfulness, of serious commitment in the work of formation, of boldness and generosity in our missionary endeavour, of our animation of the salesian Family, but most of all our tireless work of predilection for the young.”<sup>121</sup>

Before concluding, dear confreres, I would like to invite each of you to study the photograph that you will find at the beginning of the new booklet of the Constitutions and Regulations. Let us imagine ourselves in the place of Don Cagliero, about to set out to carry the salesian charism to the world, and let us receive from Don Bosco himself our Rule of life. The best expression of our love for him will be to translate it always and everywhere into a life of fidelity and perseverance.

We can imagine him saying also to us: “You will cross the seas, you will reach unknown lands, you will deal with people of different languages and customs, maybe you will be exposed to great dangers. I would like to go with you myself, to comfort and strengthen you, to protect you. But what I cannot do myself this little book will do. Keep it as you would a precious treasure.”<sup>122</sup>

122. Don Rua, circular of 1 December 1909, *Lettere Circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, Dir. Gen. Opere D. Bosco, 1965, p. 498

Let us express our love to Don Bosco by the study, esteem and practice of the ‘Rule of life’ to which we joyfully committed ourselves on the day of our profession, a pledge that we shall renew with special fervour on the day we receive the new text. Let us draw strength for fidelity and perseverance from the heart of Christ, the Good Shepherd, the source of new life and the model of self-dedication to his brethren in his filial obedience to the Father.

Let us all try to be joyful and convinced “newly-professed”!

With my affectionate greetings,

