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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

THE LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD

Introduction. – The Year of Youth. – Values of youth. – Light of the Gospel. – Difficult challenge of the future. – Plan of life. – Pastoral love for the young. – Homeland of our mission. – Mary's intercession.

Rome, 31 May 1985

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you at a time when we are still experiencing the joy of the recent consistory in which the Holy Father raised to membership of the Sacred College of Cardinals, for a closer and more competent service to the ministry of Peter, three of our well-deserving confreres: His Eminence Rosalio Castillo Lara, titular Archbishop of Precausa and President of the Pontifical Commission for the authentic interpretation of the Code of Canon Law; His Eminence Michael Obando Bravo, Archbishop of Managua in Nicaragua (Central America); and His Eminence Alfons Stickler, titular Archbishop of Bolsena and Librarian and Archivist of the Holy Roman Church.

We can describe the event as one of outstanding importance in our brief history which, if on the one hand it gives honour to our Congregation, at the same time is a strong call to live with renewed intensity and fidelity our charism in the Church.

We congratulate our beloved confreres, and wish them ever greater wisdom and much ecclesial courage in the collaboration they have to give to the Roman Pontiff in his solicitude for the universal Church.

To each of them and also to our fourth Cardinal confrere, His Eminence Raul Silva Henríquez, former Archbishop of Santiago, Chile, we assure our solidarity, brotherly affection and a constant remembrance in our prayers.

Whilst we thank our Holy Father for this gracious choice, which indirectly involves also our own joint responsibility and strengthens the deep and keenly felt adherence to the Apostolic See spiritually bequeathed to us by Don Bosco, I invite you to read attentively once again the recent "Letter" written by John Paul II to the Youth of the world and to make its contents the subject of individual and community meditation: it is a precious document and one that makes us think.

The year of youth

The United Nations Organization has proclaimed 1985 "International Youth Year", and worldwide attention has been concentrated on the choice. The mass media are making it the object of study and carry repeated messages of commitment and hope. In the cultural field a series of publications invite us to acquire a greater understanding of the place of youth in human life and of the decisive impact of its dynamism on the evolution of society. The shocks associated with the youth phenomenon at the present day are a reflection of the prevailing social and cultural

conditions, an indication of emerging desires and the harbinger of the possibility of certain changes.

More than just a simple youth celebration, this year should be for us an invitation to look again at the specific mission the Lord has assigned to us among young people. To this we are prompted both by the above-mentioned letter of the Pope to the youth of the world, and by the associated letter to all priests of the Church for Holy Thursday 1985.

It should be noticed that these two letters are not just isolated items in the teaching of John Paul II; there are by now at least thirty specific addresses to the young made by the Pope during his apostolic journeys, to say nothing of the many others he has made to youth groups on so many different occasions.

It can be said that these two letters represent the vertex of a constant predilection and pastoral concern. They provide us with a profound and deeply original view not of mere sympathy or cultural interest, but of social and ecclesial sensitivity and responsibility. They are an appeal from one who is trying to shape the future, a prophetic message from a shepherd and leader, the intuitive foresight of a precursor of the advent of the third christian millennium.

The Church, which sees in man "the way for her daily life",¹ attributes an extraordinary importance to the period of youth in the existence of each individual, and to young people in general as regards the future of humanity, even going as far as considering the period of youth not merely as "a special possession belonging to everyone; it is a possession of humanity itself".² History's

1. Redemptor
hominis 18

2. Letter
to Youth (LY) 1

possibilities are not exhausted with the generations now in the evening of their lives, but are renewed in every generation as it takes further steps towards the fullness of reality.

Now this kind of outlook is inbred in our vocation. The SGC³ and the GC21⁴ moved us in this sense to look at the young with hope and realism, without disguising the difficulties but without losing hope in the available resources, seeing in the turmoil and anguish of youth mankind's fervent plea. "The decisive point", said the GC21, "is to encourage the deep and healthy aspirations of young people by bringing to maturity their solidarity, explicit or implicit, with the Gospel".⁵

3. cf. SGC 34-44

4. cf. GC21 21-29

5. CG21, 27

I must tell you that I have seen with pleasure that the two letters of the Holy Father have been the subject of emphasis and comment in some provincial newsletters, and have also been used for conferences and study by many confreres and youth groups.

Values proper to the stage of youth

Reading the various addresses of the Pope and especially this last letter reveals the deep reflections he has made on the period of youth: it represents a heritage of values for the individual, for society and for the Church.

Youth is a treasure in itself "for what it is" and "for what it gives": the richness of its "being" and the fruitfulness of its "sharing".

— What "is" youth?

It is springtime, a beginning, an offering of fresh possibilities, a sowing for a future in which

good is stronger than evil: the human face has no wrinkles, the heart has not yet any hidden nooks and crannies, the intelligence is joyfully engaged in search of all that is true, and the spirit takes bold steps towards the attainment of the great ideals which attract it.

With every new generation mankind can begin again with new hope: Don Bosco was convinced that even in a rotten apple the seeds were still good and promising. It is not a matter of dreaming up or creating the phantasm of an idyllic vision of the prevailing youth condition, as though dazzled by the innocent eyes and transparent smile of a baby, but of becoming aware by solid and objective reflection that youth is "that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise".⁶ We can list the different qualities to which the Pope is accustomed to refer in his addresses: joyfulness, hope, transparency, daring, creativity, idealism, enthusiasm, generosity, loyalty, vivacity, sense of justice, availability for service, rejection of half-measures, disdain for niggardly behaviour, and a disgust for every kind of hypocrisy, intolerance and arrogance.

Youth is a time for making discoveries, a time when future prospects are seen, a time for making choices, for planning, a time for making responsible and fruitful personal decisions.

All this, it is true, is a possibility that in practice is not always realized; but the possibility is nevertheless an objective one, especially in the light of the additional energy and life enjoyed by the 'new man' risen through baptism.

The Pope himself, in posing and answering the question "who are the young?" bewails the

unfortunate fact that there are some who become old before their time by a sluggish renunciation of youthful values: youth is not simply a matter of biology, it is in the heart that its true measure is to be found. As well as being in the springtime of life, being young means feeling in oneself the pressing stimulus of what is good and what is true; it means the possession of an incessant impulse of the spirit, it means the internal fostering of the searching after ideals and perseverance in attaining the goal, even through sacrifice.

Youth therefore is undoubtedly and of its very nature a period of extraordinary benefit not only to each individual but to all mankind, to whom it continually offers possibilities for growth and renewal. This is why it is indispensable for us to be solicitously concerned about it.

— What can the period of youth “give” to us?

Here, if we want to be realistic, we must have in mind young people of the present day, in the concrete society that wraps them round and brings them face to face with crucial problems of life and history: conscience and the ethical sense, love and family, culture and peace, work and political responsibility, a positive relationship with nature, scientific progress, man’s use of technology, the way to truth and the integral emancipation of man. This is where so many difficulties and obstacles arise. Here open up wide horizons for commitment, the whole vast area of education which involves both adults and youngsters in a common project of growth, revision and renewal.

The difficulties which young people meet in bringing to fruition what they are able to give,

arise especially from two sources: from the diversity and contrast in the interpretation of values by the society which puts them forward, and from the discontinuous and confused rhythm of the ideologies and concrete life-models that are offered to the young in a thousand and one different ways.

They are bombarded with messages, attitudes, promises, aspirations and objectives, and utopian ideas that ill harmonize with a lack of time and unhelpful setting for thinking, appraising, discerning and assimilating. All this provokes among youngsters a sad and disturbing fragmentation, not only as regards facts but also because of the general mentality to which it gives rise, a mentality which has no faith in an organic and coherent educational commitment. There seems to be a vague attitude about, which is loath to attribute stable significance to any choice in life in a way that would transcend simple personal taste or a temptation to hedonistic satisfaction.

In such a case the youth period, instead of being a seed that could be made to bear fruit for all, can become an object of restricted consumption, of profit to only a few people before it is gone, or a useful source of energy to be channelled and exploited in favour of some domineering Moloch.

What the youth period is capable of giving must be the object of care and attention on the part of all: young people, adults and the educating society.

The tasks of education relate to the formation of conscience, the values of existence, the events of salvation, the problems of society, the demands

of love, the needs of those in want, and the personal lifeplan of each one, considered as an authentic vocation in history.

In this way the period of youth finds its place on the road of hope and can renew the individual, love, marriage, the family, peace, development, society and the Church.

In this educational involvement with the young the Holy Father reminds us that youth implies also "inheritance" and "growth".

"Inheritance", because "the heritage of being a human person", "the heritage of culture", "the confines of a people or a nation" mean a concrete participation in history and a call to commit oneself to the assuming of an heirloom of values, so as to confirm, maintain and increase it. The youth period is innate in a history, in a process of becoming, in a definite task. Family, country and the common good all demand an education to social love.⁷

7. cf. LY 11

"Growth", because youth should be a process bringing with it "the gradual accumulation of all that is true, good and beautiful, even when this growth is linked 'from outside' to suffering, the loss of loved ones, and the whole experience of evil that constantly makes itself felt in the world in which we live".⁸

8. LY 14

For this reason too it must be able to accept fatigue and effort, overcome obstacles and opposition, foster relationships with others, develop a critical sense and acquire the ability for discernment.

A consideration of the values of youth is something that poses a deep challenge to us

salesians, because "as educators we work together with our young people to bring all their talents and aptitudes to full maturity. Always and in every case we help them to be open to truth and to develop in themselves a responsible freedom. To this end we commit ourselves to inculcating in them a convinced appreciation of true values which will lead them to a life of dialogue and service".⁹

9. Const. 32

This is why, in addition to the concern we have for each youngster personally, we dedicate ourselves at the same time to the provision of an adequate youth "setting", because the assimilation of values does not come as the result of simple teaching, but is the consequence of a lived and shared experience. I made the point in my closing address to the GC22: "It is a question of seeing whether in the light of faith we can put together a wise pedagogical system which will be able to create settings, experiences, symbols and commitment for the discovery and vital assimilation of the fundamental qualities that we want to make grow. The period of life we call 'youth' is getting longer. The cultural synthesis and context in which we have to operate presents ever new difficulties. To be a 'missionary' today in the field of education is a real challenge. The new and stimulating article of the Constitutions on the Oratory¹⁰ is an invitation to incessant originality and creativeness".¹¹

10. Const. 40

11. CG22, 70

The light of the Gospel

The Pope's dialogue with young people is a always marked by truly prophetic intuition. He

does not get lost in a facile benevolent approach, but challenges them with the clarity and integrity of the Gospel; he does it with love and sympathy for them, but with unswerving loyalty to its demands.

And in that there is a lesson for all of us: to be clear and outspoken in our pedagogy of presenting to the young the teachings of Christ. We have tried to do this with the Strenna of the Beatitudes: youngsters willingly adopt an attitude of harmony with Christ and open themselves with enthusiasm to the great ideals of the Gospel.

"Dear friends," said the Pope to the young people of Lima, Perù, "the gospel programme of the Beatitudes is a simple and attractive programme for young men and women. Certainly it proposes an ideal which is lofty and demanding. But for this very reason it amounts to a programme of life custom-made for young people. I, a pilgrim of evangelization, feel the duty to proclaim before you this evening that only in Christ can you find the answer to the deepest longings of your heart, to the fullness of all your aspirations; only in the Gospel of the beatitudes will you find the full meaning of life and the full light on the dignity and mystery of the human person!".¹²

12. Address, 2 Feb. 1985

Christ's Word, in fact, displays, a peculiar affinity with youth values because of its novelty, its authenticity, its emancipating and regenerating force; it has a mysterious capacity for stirring up enthusiasm and ensuring a constant rhythm of the performance of good works, despite weakness and occasional falls.

And then too, the Word of Jesus is intrinsically

linked with the great events of salvation: his paschal mystery.

Hence Christ, his Word and all his reality appear as the supreme novelty and the permanent youth of all history: in past ages and in centuries still to come nothing was and nothing ever will be newer and more youthful than the risen Christ; he is the alpha and omega, the first beginning and the last end, the greatest of all values, absolute and always up to date, who makes the future of humanity an explosive event. He carries with him the enthusiasm of rebirth; he is the springtime of every generation, the stimulus of all renewal, the light and daring behind all reform. The mystery of Christ, reflected in the eschatological dimension of his Church, is a perpetual message of youthfulness.

In this way the affinity of the Gospel with the period of youth becomes understandable. Hence the need to follow the Pope's example and constantly listen again with the young to the Word of Jesus.

The content of the Letter we are considering centres around Christ's meeting with a young man, as recounted in Mark's Gospel. It is chosen and included as a model for present-day dialogue with young people: "Christ speaks in this way to a young person, a boy or a girl; his conversation takes place in different parts of the world, in the midst of the different nations, races and cultures. Each of you (young people) in this conversation is potentially the one he will speak to".¹³

The meeting becomes a conversation, a dialogue about "eternal life": question and answer, confidence and invitation.

The deepest questions about existence find a response in dialogue with Christ. The attraction of the Gospel not only persists, despite the assaults of a positivist mentality dedicated to technology and even to an explicit atheistic programme, but constantly rises again with new intensity, even though in some cases this be accompanied by subjective overtones.

Rightly did our SGC remind us of this in trenchant words: "For the salesian, the existence of young people living without Christ, and a Christ unable to find a welcome among young people, is not just a cause for regret but is also a challenge and an incentive to renew himself and to discover new ways and take any risks in order to proclaim efficaciously the salvation of God and to help young people 'to be themselves and to give authentically their human and christian experience, helping them to find in their friendship with the Redeemer the power to reach full maturity'." ¹⁴

14. SGC 306

The person and words of Jesus never leave young people indifferent; they attract them, challenge them, fascinate them, disturb them. Jesus fixes his gaze on them and loves them; maybe they will go away, but they will never be able to forget his face.

"Young people, precisely because they accept only those persons who lead coherent lives of integrity, more willingly give themselves to a catechesis which presents Christ as Love at the disposition of all, and as achieving the liberation of man by the total gift of himself in sacrifice. They question in depth the meaning of life and of suffering and, spurred on by their own experience

which is not always positive, of friendship, of love and of work, they seek God 'trying to sense his presence and lay hold of him'.¹⁵ For them Christ can become the only response to an irresistible attraction.¹⁶

15. Acts 17, 26-27

16. SGC 304

The difficult challenge of the future

John Paul II forthrightly declares that "the Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way sees herself in the young".¹⁷

17. LY 15

By this the Pope means that the Church's mission as "the universal sacrament of salvation" on the way of reconciliation, of ecumenism, of development and of peace, is confided particularly to the young; he has said, for example, that "peace and youth go forward together"!

The themes of dialogue, penance, solidarity, apostolic commitment and social justice are centres of interest in the formation of the young. Sometimes the accusation is made that our process of education prepares people capable of setting themselves up personally in life, but it does not lead them to commit themselves to a work of transformation, especially when they find themselves in structures and systems which debase human dignity and trample on human rights. An adequate preparation for political responsibility, for participation in social life and for an active ecclesial commitment, is an indispensable aspect in the education of the young to professionalism, to the development of a civil conscience and to the christian faith choice.

But the situation in the world is very complex and difficult; inequalities abound and there are threats from all quarters: "We are all aware", says the Pope, "that the horizon of the lives of billions of people who make up the human family at the close of the second millennium after Christ, seems to portend the possibility of calamities and catastrophes on a truly apocalyptic scale".¹⁸

18. LY 15

But is it possible to change such a world? Will young people succeed in doing so? Will they know how to do so?

The Pope does not shilly-shally in the face of such distressing questions, but urges all to have constancy and trust. "Christ answers as he answered the young people of the first generation of the Church through the words of the Apostle: 'I am writing to you, young people, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, young people, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you'".¹⁹

19. 1 Jn 2, 13 ff.

It is a matter of trusting in the strength of the resurrection of the Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Life is a struggle: not a "struggle of one against another in the name of some ideology or practice separated from the very roots of the Gospel", but a struggle against evil itself, against every injustice and exploitation, against every falsehood and deceit, against every sin.

The Word of God therefore must dwell in the young. Then they will be "strong"; then they will "succeed in getting at the hidden workings of evil and its sources, and thus they will gradually succeed in changing the world, transforming it,

20. LY 15

making it more human, more fraternal — and at the same time more of God”.²⁰

The plan of life

21. LY 8, 9

The theme of vocation is central to this letter of the Pope, just as it is central to the conversation between Christ and the young man in the Gospel: the evangelist presents the encounter as so many steps leading to that “Follow me”. The argument is the fabric which connects up all the adumbrations: vocation to life, to christian witness, to a specific ecclesial commitment.²¹

In the designs of God youth is the time for the making of a life plan, for considering vocation; it has a decisively personal aspect. The range of vocations is a wide one, but privileged among them are those to the priesthood and to the consecrated life.

The first motive in this connection is not the shortage of workers in the vineyard, but the maturing in faith of every young person and the happiness attained by planning one’s own life in such a way as to insert it in the loving plan of God the creator and redeemer so as to fit oneself to realize his designs: “I desire therefore to entrust to all of you, the young people to whom this Letter is addressed, this marvellous task which is linked with the discovery before God of each one’s life vocation. This is an exciting task. It is a fascinating interior undertaking. In this undertaking your humanity develops and grows, while your young personality acquires ever greater inner maturity. You become rooted in that which each of you is,

in order to become that which you must become: for yourself, for other people, for God".²²

22. LY 9

It will be a fine thing if educators can see the vocational problem from the aspect of the growth of the subject, even though they still have in mind the compelling needs arising from the extent of the harvest and the pressing need for workers to gather it in.

The urgency of better pastoral work for vocations could give rise here to many comments. Suitable initiatives have not been wanting in the Congregation with regard to discernment, pedagogy and practical expertise in this field. They take their place among others at a more authoritative level, such as the second World Congress which was realized with the collaboration of various religious organizations and congregations, under the aegis of the Apostolic See and with the concurrence of the Episcopal Conferences.

Rather than repeat the very valid contributions made in these assemblies, and in the annual message for Vocations Day, I prefer to emphasize some observations that I have picked up from numerous fraternal meetings in which I have taken part in various regions.

The first can almost be taken for granted: the conviction that *it is life that generates life*. "Just as a terrain gives evidence of the richness of its vital humours by the freshness and luxuriousness of the harvest it bears, so a society gives proof of its vigour and its maturity through the flourishing of vocations".²³

23. John Paul II, homily 10 May 1985

There is no doubt that a youngster is led in his process of discernment more by what he has

learned from experience than by what he is told. Article 16 of the Constitutions prompts us to follow the same fruitful line, when describing our family spirit: "This is a witness that enkindles in the young the desire to get to know and to follow the salesian vocation".²⁴

24. Const. 16'

The kindling of vocations is more a matter of "generation" than of recruitment. Our witness is "the most precious gift we can offer to the young".²⁵ Solid christian surroundings form the best soil in which to sow the seed.

25. Const. 25

"Pastoral work for the young and for vocations are complementary", declared the second International Congress on Vocations (1982) in its concluding document. Specific pastoral work for vocations finds in the corresponding work for youth its vital living space. The work for youth becomes complete and efficacious when it includes the vocational dimension".²⁶

26. Final document
"Internat. Voca-
tions Congress", 42

"Pastoral vocational work, in fact, is not just one branch of youth pastoral work in general, but rather its unifying perspective, because all pastoral work is vocational of its very nature. Either youth pastoral work, as it grows, automatically generates specific vocational proposals, or pastoral vocational work finds that it needs work for youth as a suitable context within which it can take place".²⁷

27. CEI (Italian Bishops
Conf.) Vocations in
the Church, 23

But a further indispensable observation must be made at once: *a healthy pastoral pedagogy* requires the intelligence and courage to make concrete suggestions! This not only to groups, but to individuals, to this or that particular person, in the intimacy of a conversation about spiritual discernment.

“Do not be afraid to give a call”, the Pope has told us. “There should be no fear about suggesting to a young (or not so young) person that the Lord is calling him”.²⁸

28. Message for World day of prayer for Vocations, 1979

And in his letter for Holy Thursday 1985 to priests, the Pope is still more explicit: “Love enables us to propose what is good. Jesus ‘looked’ at his young questioner in the Gospel ‘with love’ and said to him: ‘Follow me’. This good that we can propose to young people is always expressed in the exhortation: Follow Christ! We have no other good to propose; no one has a better good to propose.”

What this means is that the young person must rediscover himself in a most profound and authentic way; he must try to find that vocation, which Christ shows to man, of finding himself as a man: “for it is precisely Christ who fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his highest calling”.²⁹

29. Letter to Priests (1985), 7

“If there is love for young people in our hearts, we shall know how to help them to find the answer to what constitutes the life vocation of each one.”³⁰

30. *ibid.* 7

As educators we need to convince ourselves that *this personal mediation is necessary*. It helps the young person to make explicit the voice he seems to hear within himself, and gives him courage to follow it. For quite a number this is the indispensable touch that leads them to make a decision, and is a concrete sign for them that the Lord has spoken to them personally.

Lastly I would like to emphasize the necessity for “follow-up”, at both personal and group level,

by means of suitable welcoming and growth communities, of vocations which are beginning to emerge in young people's awareness.

This, I think, is one of the practical conclusions which we are compelled to draw at the present day after the very different kinds of experiments we have tried. It is true that a common kind of setting has to become strongly personalized if it is to be successful in the development and discernment of any vocation; but a 'setting' as such is indispensable if the germs of a vocation are to grow.

"Individual follow-up, adapted to each single individual in a wise work of discernment and spiritual direction, and group follow-up in a gradual and shared community journey of faith, are complementary and decisive for a mature vocational choice."³¹

31. CEI op. cit. 48

Pastoral love for the young

The letter of the Pope for Holy Thursday 1985 to priests provides a valuable complement to his letter to young people. In it he describes the figure of the priest dedicated to the young and analyses the characteristics of his specific pastoral charity.

It is interesting and stimulating for us to note that the nature of such charity is precisely that which is at the centre of our salesian spirit.³² It is a charity which permeates and guides all our personal and community energies so as to be in the Church, as our Constitutions say, "signs and bearers of the love of God for the young".

32. cf. Const. 10, 14, 15 ff.

In pastoral activity young people must occupy

a privileged place, which requires particular attitudes in the 'pastor'.

The Pope speaks in the first place of "*accessibility*", or in other words availability, openness, kindness, ease of contact, closeness and interest.

It is a question of being able to engage in friendly dialogue with sincere confidence on the problems involved in a plan of life, especially those of a fundamental nature which touch on the themes of salvation and 'eternal life'. It is essential to be able to arouse interest in these vital topics and then be able to listen to the youngsters and be able to reply to their questions and objections.

To this end the shepherd or guide needs a double "*sense of responsibility*": he needs to feel his responsibility to provide a clear and objective presentation of the truths of salvation, and equally he must be competent in discussion, eminently credible and endowed with moral authority.

To his sense of responsibility must be added also a transparent awareness of his *role of mediation*; of the need he has to do his utmost to penetrate into hearts, but without ever obscuring the priority of the role of Christ, the great Friend and Challenger par excellence.

But the principal quality, which is the root and soul of all the others, is *love*: "a sharing of that gaze with which Jesus looked at his young questioner in the Gospel, and a sharing in the love with which he loved him".³³ It is a love which becomes translated into goodness and loving kindness, into the ability to remain with them even through trials and sufferings, into firm and

33. Letter to Priests, 6

evangelical challenge of whatever may imperil the treasure of their youth, so as to foster the development of its qualities of heart and character.

“We must also earnestly pray”, exhorts the Pope, “that this priestly and disinterested love may really match the expectations of all young people, both male and female, boys and girls. For we are aware of the rich diversity constituted by masculinity and femininity for the development of a concrete and unique human person. In relation to each individual young person we must learn from Christ that same love with which he himself ‘loved’.”³⁴

34. *ibid.* 6

Finally the holy Father recalls also that education and pastoral work for the young are the object of much systematic study and many publications; by this he means to suggest that genuine pastoral love will lead educators to study and update themselves in a serious manner so as to acquire that pedagogical competence which love runs the risk of sinking to the superficiality of sentimentalism or a first flash of sympathy devoid of any christian incisiveness.

The homeland of our mission

But the overall thought that remains with us Salesians after reading the two letters of John Paul II is the substantial and unbreakable link which unites salesian apostolic consecration with the young.

Don Albera made the striking remark that the gift of predilection for the young is the soul of our

mission: "It is not enough to feel a certain natural attraction for them; they must be the object of our real predilection. This predilection is in the first instance a gift of God, it is the salesian vocation itself, but it is up to us to use our intelligence and heart to develop and perfect it".³⁵

And so for us *the Year of Youth continues throughout the whole of our lives*: "The Lord made clear to Don Bosco", we are told by our Constitutions, "that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young".³⁶

Young people, especially those who are poor and from densely populated low-income areas, were Don Bosco's legacy and for them he had a charismatic passion; they were the hallmark of his vocational identity; he will always be first and foremost the Father and Teacher of the young.

It was precisely among youngsters that he worked out his style of holiness and his pastoral and pedagogical heritage: "With the boys of the first Oratory" he lived an experience of the Holy Spirit which he called the "Preventive System".³⁷

The Pope has called us "missionaries of the young";³⁸ youth provides the natural habitat for our mission; and predilection for needy youngsters has won for the Salesian Family the sympathy and goodwill of the masses, and a rich abundance of vocations which have made our Congregation a truly international Institute with roots in every continent.

From deeply felt sayings of Don Bosco and from many others of his successors one could compose a 'canticle' expressing the mutual harmony and attraction between salesians and

35. "Don Bosco our model": circular letters D. Albera, p. 372

36. Const. 26

37. Const. 20

38. Letter to GC22

youngsters; they belong to each other with a reciprocal affinity.

Some of these expressions have been taken up and perpetuated in the new text of the Constitutions: youth is "the part of human society so exposed and yet so rich in promise";³⁹ "for you (young people) I study, for you I work, for you I am ready even to give my life".⁴⁰

39. Const. 1

40. Const. 14

"Here in your midst I feel completely at home; for me, living means being here with you."⁴¹

41. Const. 39

"That you are young is enough to make me love you very much."⁴²

42. Const. 14

"In those things which are for the benefit of young people in danger I push ahead even to the point of recklessness",⁴³ using "all the means that christian charity suggests".⁴⁴

43. Const. 19

44. Const. 29

Don Bosco "took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young";⁴⁵ and even the chastity desired by the Founder had to be such as to allow confreres to love the young in an open and uncomplicated way so that "they know they are loved".⁴⁶

45. Const. 21

46. Const. 81

If the Holy Spirit formed in Don Bosco the heart of a "father" and "teacher"⁴⁷ in view of the mission he had been given, so today the same Spirit infuses in every salesian the grace to experience the fatherhood of God working for the salvation of the young.⁴⁸

47. Const. 1

48. Const. 12

Our mission is intrinsically linked with the world of youth and finds in it its realization and the source of its joy and inventiveness, because there it finds its natural habitat or homeland.

To every new salesian generation it belongs to

rediscover, re-explore and intensely love this homeland. It may be asked how it can be done in a meaningful and efficacious way at the present day, when the condition of youth is so fragmented and varied, easily changing in the course of an accelerated social evolution in which educational institutions are becoming ever more complex and flexible. The Pope's letter must be for us both an appeal and an invitation to ensure some aspects of commitment.

— The first can be that of “*not deserting the youth sector*”,⁴⁹ but of remaining permanently rooted in this our perennial homeland. To stay is an indispensable condition, to be with the young, sharing their hopes and problems. It may be that in some situations the advancing age of the confreres pushes us unconsciously towards a kind of indirect activity, thinking that through others, under our guidance, we can carry out the same mission. It is certainly true that we must be able to involve the greatest possible number of collaborators; but our work will be fruitful from a salesian point of view only if the confreres themselves do not lose their vital contact with the youngsters. A sad reminder is addressed to us by the GC22; it “asks all salesians to ‘return’ to young people, to their world, their needs, their poverty, by giving them true priority expressed in a renewed educational, spiritual and affective presence among them”.⁵⁰

49. cf. GC21, 13

50. GC22 6

— A second important aspect is that of trying assiduously to acquire a real understanding of what is implied in the requests and problems of youth. To our presence and our living among them we must add the need to be tuned in to the

youthful mind. What youngsters are concerned about at the present day is no longer the conflict, contestation and rejection of the past but rather the silent subjective choice of a road to be followed. It is supremely necessary to be able to listen to them and to lead them to express themselves so as to seek together and programme their own existence in the light of the great mystery of Christ, the way, the truth and the life.

— Finally I think it is urgent that we able to give to all our works that youthful air which gives rise to vocations and is a sign of the authenticity of our mission,⁵¹ even when a work extends beyond the youth sector. The new Regulations remind us of this, for instance, when dealing with parishes: “A parish entrusted to the Congregation should be distinguished by its low-income population and its interest in the young. It should consider the oratory and youth centre an integral part of its pastoral project.”⁵²

Hence “presence”, “tuning in”, and “operative preference” are necessary conditions for the effectiveness of the specific gift of predilection in our pastoral charity. They ensure that our living and working among young people places us in the true homeland of our salesian mission.

I think it would be a useful and even urgent thing if every province, house and confrere made a careful review of how we stand as regards these three conditions. It will also serve to give a more concrete and committed dimension to one of the important Practical Directives of the last General Chapter, that of giving a greater pastoral qualification to our activity.⁵³

51. cf. Const. 6

52. Reg. 26

53. cf. GC22 5-7

Mary's intercession

The Pope concludes these two valuable letters with a fervent reference to our Blessed Lady: "Mary of Cana of Galilee, who intercedes for the young people, for the newly married couple";⁵⁴ and the Virgin Mother of whom was born among us "the youthfulness of God."⁵⁵

54. LY 16

55. Letter to Priests, 8

She is there with her motherly presence at the origins of our mission,⁵⁶ and we "entrust ourselves to her that we may become witnesses to the young of her Son's boundless love."⁵⁷

56. cf. Const. 1, 8, 20

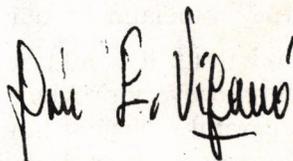
57. Const. 8

I invite you to trust always in her powerful intercession and to ask her to obtain for every confrere and for all our communities an increase in the gift of predilection for the young and the ability to plan a concrete pattern of youthful spirituality which will reproduce for young people of the present day that miracle of christian existence which Don Bosco, "under the guidance of Mary his teacher",⁵⁸ was able to bring about in the Oratory at Valdocco.

58. Const. 20

May Mary help us to be always and everywhere "missionaries of the young".

Affectionately,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Pius XII". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.