

acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

N. 319

Year LXVI

october-december 1986

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Editrice S.D.B.
Edizione extra commerciale

Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco
Via della Pisana, 1111
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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

1988: AN INVITATION TO A SPECIAL RENEWAL OF PROFESSION

50 years of salesian life -- Religious profession and the turning point of the Council -- The laborious search for identity -- A further look at the holiness of Don Bosco -- The test of his spiritual School -- The spirit of Don Bosco in the perspective of '88 -- Kinds of reflection to promote -- Objectives of salesian sanctity -- Conclusion.

Rome, 1 September 1986

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you on the day which is the anniversary of my first religious profession. 50 years have gone by since that date! Just half of the 100 years we are preparing to celebrate in '88. I finished my novitiate two years after Don Bosco's canonization and I am keeping the Golden Jubilee of my profession a couple of years before the centenary celebrations of his death: a period of time sufficiently long and significant to prompt some reflections on salesian experience.

Profession was for me the beginning of a concrete way of following Christ, of an apostolic commitment in the Church, of predilection for the young, of a missionary inculturation overseas and of a growing awareness of the salesian identity in a plurality of cultures. It made possible a kind of unforeseen adventure impossible to programme which, when the half-century is looked at with the eyes of faith, manifest the creative presence of the Spirit, a sharing in the saving mission of the Son

and the daily provision of the infinite mercy of the Father.

**Religious profession
and the turning point of the Council**

Half way through these fifty years of my salesian life I was able to take part in the four sessions of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, the ecclesial event of the present century, the visit of the Holy Spirit to the Church, the "great prophecy" for the third millennium of Christianity.

During the four years of this so extraordinary event I felt a rejuvenation of salesian profession.

At that time the will became evident in the Church to make an energetic and decisive turn; the machinery was creaking under the braking action of factors which had settled on it like dust in the course of time. A static mentality had to be overcome, one which was rather legalistic, which smacked of self-sufficiency, resting on its laurels, imprisoned in out-of-date structures, over-centralized and giving rise to dangerous reactions. This kind of climate was widespread and there was urgent need for a breath of fresh air to renew it.

The Council gave rise to a stimulating return to the sources. It asked for a more serious fidelity to religious profession, inserted more deeply in the mystery of Christ, in the sanctity and specific mission of the Founder, in his pastoral originality; concerned about an apostolic sense of a greater relationship with the world for the service and advancement of men and women, about creative and dynamic activity, about the importance of the social dimension in our practice of the evangelical coun-

sels with new demands, about the relaunching of the laity and a more integral awareness of Don Bosco's charism as a Movement of persons and as a message of sanctity for the young and for ordinary people.

The laborious search for identity

The turning point caused by the Council involved our Congregation, like all other religious institutes, in an intensive search for a definition of our own identity against the background of the numerous changes in the emerging cultures.

To live the salesian profession for nearly twenty years in this complex process of the search for identity has meant a lengthy commitment to reflection and dialogue lived in the active participation in no fewer than four General Chapters (19, 20, 21 and 22), which involved every confrere in the drawing up of the revised text of the Constitutions and General Regulations.

And then the fact that during this period obedience laid upon me the task of living the salesian profession first in the role of Councillor General for Formation and then as Rector Major, meant that I felt a still heavier sense of responsibility. At the end of the last (22nd) General Chapter, one of the most genuine moments of salesian joy I have ever felt was certainly that of renewing my profession with the new text of the Constitutions, after solemnly entrusting the entire Congregation to the Virgin Help of Christians, our solicitous Teacher and Guide.

What has been emerging ever more clearly has been the figure of Don Bosco as our Founder and

Model: a gift for the Church and for us, raised up and fashioned by the Spirit of the Lord with endowments and prophetic means of sanctity and activity which transcend the culture of his own time and extend beyond geographical boundaries and historical eras.

The dynamic holiness of Don Bosco appeared ever more clearly as the ideal of salesian profession, raised in the Church to "apostolic consecration".

A further look at the holiness of Don Bosco

After so many years reflection it is possible to sum up in a few lines Don Bosco's ideal of sanctity as an objective to be attained through our religious profession.

Starting from the fact that sanctity is at the same time one and multiform,¹ we can detect in Don Bosco the presence of basic qualities common to all, and at the same time traits of a style which is all his own.

¹ LG 41

Sanctity is "one", and consists for everyone in the convinced practice of faith, hope and charity even at the cost of sacrifice; it is a symbiosis of mysticism and asceticism which proclaims the fullness of life in the Spirit: a love which carries the cross!

And sanctity is "multiform" in so far as each group, and even each individual, participates in the life and mission of the Church in widely differing states and ways of life, all of them expressions of the same Grace.

More than once in the past I have written to you on the theme of our sanctity: in a circular of December '81 I reflected with you on how we

² ASC 303³ ASC 310⁴ GC22, 104

could “Replan our holiness together”,² in that of September '83 I put before you “Don Bosco, Saint”,³ and in the “Good Night” on the day of my re-election just before the 50th anniversary of the canonization of our Founder I linked this six-year period with that aspect.⁴ Holiness is an inexhaustible theme which we must keep constantly in mind. Let us therefore add some further reflections.

Don Bosco himself condensed the mysticism and asceticism which marked his life style into two mottoes characteristic of the salesian spirit; and he rendered concrete his participation in the mission of the Church in the choice of a specific field of work, lived with an original style and criteria.

Let us look at these three points which provide a kind of synthesis of the spiritual experience of our Father.

— In the first place the aspect of “mysticism” (i.e. the life of faith, hope and charity) is condensed in the motto “*da mihi animas*” strengthened by radical self-donation in the practice of the evangelical counsels. It implies a manner of contemplating the Father’s loving kindness, of harkening to the saving Word, and of sharing in his transforming Love, which produces in the heart an uninterrupted union with God. It finds expression in the ecstasy of tireless apostolic activity: the interior self-donation which finds its outlet in the mission. This mysticism is nourished by the daily meeting with Christ which prevents us from losing sight of the pastoral dimension of our commitments.

— The aspect of “ascetics”, which means self-control and a spirit of sacrifice, is expressed by Don Bosco in the motto “*work and temperance*”, strengthened here too by the acts of self-denial in-

herent in the practice of the evangelical counsels. It is a programme which in the style of our Founder is easily adaptable to cultural changes and received confirmation and deeper meaning from the progress made in the anthropological sciences: the realism of self-donation through love of one's neighbour according to the charity brought by Christ into the world. To be true disciples of Christ it is indispensable to cultivate a spirit of sacrifice, of guarding the heart and of self-sacrifice, which helps us to avoid the insidious dismantling of religious discipline.

— Finally his “choice of a field of work” for an active participation in the mission of the Church, is that of a fruitful *pastoral work for the young and the poor*. It calls for continual comparison with the situation of human society, starting from the “poor and the little ones” who are always there. Predilection for the young defines the extension of this choice, which is characterized by a style and manner of approach which Don Bosco called the “preventive system”.

This is a way of living together, of dialogue, of evangelization and advancement based on three fundamental principles:

— common sense (“reason”), as an expression of a keen and well balanced intelligence, which knows the workings of the human heart and social reality;

— the religious dimension (“religion”), as a convinced vision of transcendence, a fundamental element in cultures and one indispensable in the formation of every individual;

— a warm and sincere affection (“loving kindness”), as an atmosphere of trust, dialogue and fa-

miliar cohabitation with those to whom our activity is directed.

The lasting criterion for this choice and style is the experience of Don Bosco in the Oratory at Valdocco.⁵

⁵ Cf. C 40

So many years of salesian profession provide confirmation of the validity, beauty and up-to-date nature of this kind of sanctity, which has made of Don Bosco one of the most important Founders of spiritual Families in the Church.

The test of his spiritual School

Don Bosco, who lived at a time in the last century when Saints were flourishing in Piedmont, had the merit of starting an authentic "*School of sanctity*". If the various apostolic works he began were of value in his time, the fact that he successfully promoted a particular kind of holiness would be sufficient by itself to make evident a remarkable spirituality which places him among the great ones of the Church with a fertile sanctity capable of reincarnation among other people in the course of future centuries.

To render holiness an attractive and valid message for all those he was working for, Don Bosco presented its essence in a simple and realistic fashion which he adapted to the age, life situation and cultural circumstances of those concerned. Blessed Michael Rua, St Mary Domenica Mazzarello, St Dominic Savio, to whom we may also add in a certain sense Blessed Luigi Orione and Luigi Guanella, all felt directly the influence of his kind of holiness. The programme of youth spirituality lived by St Dominic Savio is especially characteristic;

Don Bosco himself has provided a description and deeper study of it in a biography of his young pupil, which has been fully commented with great insight by Fr Albert Caviglia. The scheme of salesian sanctity appears with equal clarity from a study (from the standpoint of the kind of spirituality) of the various other biographies written by Don Bosco, and from the lives of our other saints and servants of God.

Fr Philip Rinaldi too is a direct witness to the personal influence of Don Bosco. I mention him in particular because in this coming October the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints will begin the examination to establish the heroicity of his virtues; we trust that this may prove to be the first step towards early recognition at a higher level.

The plan of Don Bosco's evangelical school is not exhausted in the saints and servants of God we have mentioned. There is another aspect, to which we have perhaps not given proper attention but which has an important and special significance as regards his typical "experience of the Spirit".⁶ I refer to the first formation communities of the Congregation in which during Don Bosco's last years and immediately after his death, his first disciples caused salesian sanctity to flourish: the novitiate at Foglizzo and the post-novitiate at Valsalice. In these houses worked Don Rua, Don Barberis, Don Bianchi and Don Piscetta (to name only a few), and it is significant that in these communities soon after the death of our dear Father were formed and worked (over a period of not many years, even if they were not actual contemporaries) a good number of our confreres who are now servants of God whose causes for beatification and canonization have been introduced: the Venerable Andrew Beltrami, the

⁶ Cf. MR 11

Venerable Prince Augusto Czarторыski, the servant of God Don Luigi Variara, Blessed Luigi Versiglia, the servant of God Vincent Cimatti. Those two salesian formation communities are indeed a fruitful extension of the authentic evangelical School begun by Don Bosco.

Another outstanding proof of this is the fact that some of the above mentioned confreres felt their first impulse towards sanctity in a meeting, sometimes a mere chance encounter but a decisive one, with the person of the holy Founder: Don Beltrami, then a student at Lanzo, read an essay to Don Bosco and received in reply a word which shaped his whole life; Bishop Versiglia had the same experience; Prince Czarторыski was conquered by Don Bosco at a meeting in Paris; Don Variara experienced a single glance of Don Bosco and remained struck by it for his whole life; Don Cimatti in his mother's arms saw Don Bosco from afar and subsequently gave life to his whole apostolate through the intuition of that meeting when he was a small child.

There can be no doubt that it was not mere chance that set these future beatified confreres or servants of God on the path followed by Don Bosco.

All this is a clear sign of how much the confreres felt the greatness and attractiveness of Don Bosco's sanctity, and of how there came to be created in our Congregation and Family a spiritual slant and impulse which is characteristic of its physiognomy. Here lies the secret of those original bold missionary endeavours; from here came the energy for the marvellous expansion of the Salesian Family in every continent; here is the explanation for its adaptability to different cultures, the fruit of

an inborn instinct of universality.

That this force of sanctity was natural to the lives of our great SDB and FMA missionaries of the early days is demonstrated too by the surprising fact that in Patagonia (the first objective of salesian missionary endeavour) the heights of youthful sanctity were achieved by the Venerable Zeffirino Namuncurà and Laura Vicuña.

Among candidates for the honours of the altars we may also recall as later witnesses to Don Bosco's School of sanctity: Blessed Callixtus Caravario, martyred in China; the many Spanish martyrs who bore witness to their faith during the dramatic events of the civil war; Bishop Luigi Olivares, a zealous pastor of the common people; Fr Rudolph Komorek, outstanding for his spirit of prayer and mortification; Fr Joseph Quadrio, a teacher of theology and an expert on the mystery of the Assumption; Bro. Simon Srugi, a fellow countryman of Jesus and a humble and prophetic expression of ecumenism — he had been a Melchite before becoming a salesian and promoted a loving dialogue with Moslems; and Bro. Artemide Zatti, the well-deserving samaritan of Patagonia, a land which at that time was just opening up to civilization and which lacked any of the modern health services: at Viedma he founded the first hospital in that city.

Among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians we may recall the Ven. Sister Teresa Valsè-Pantellini; the servants of God Sisters Maddalena Morano, Carmen Moreno, Amparo Carbonell, Eusebia Palomino, Maria Troncatti, Laura Meozzi and Maria Romero.

Of the Cooperators we can mention the Ven. Dorotea Chopitea, a great benefactress; Cardinal Joseph Guarino, friend of Don Bosco and founder

of a religious institute of women; Alexandrina da Costa, wonderful in her suffering; Joseph Toniolo, a great layman much committed in the social field.

And among the Past Pupils there are the venerable engineer Albert Marvelli, a zealous animator of oratory work and of Catholic Action; the heroic Brigadier Salvo D'Acquisto who offered his own life for the love of a fellow man; and Baron Antonio Petix, a tireless apostle among the past pupils themselves.

These and our other candidates for the altars, who together number more than a hundred,⁷ are only the tip of an iceberg manifesting the living presence of the spirit of Don Bosco in the various groups of his Family and among those to whom his apostolic presence is directed: a spirit brimming over with vitality, which is versatile and fruitful, and which bears witness to the existence of a special design of God in the gift of apostolic sanctity he granted to Don Bosco as the Founder.

⁷ Cf. Elenco 1986, Vol. 2, pp. 194-196

The spirit of Don Bosco in the perspective of '88

If the school of salesian sanctity is the principal legacy of Don Bosco the Founder, the centenary celebrations for the one hundredth anniversary of his death must be marked especially by a commitment to a great concern and fidelity as regards the relaunching of its evangelical content.

We are dealing with something which is a gift of the Holy Spirit before becoming a programme of our own. But we know that the Spirit does not take back what he has given; rather has he shown, through the event of the Council, that the gift has been renewed and is up to date as a precious and

valid prophecy for the emerging culture of the present era. If we pray with this purpose in view and really put our backs into our work, we shall see great results.

This is why we intend to make of 1988 a year of reflection and resolutions on salesian sanctity in the light of the great conciliar guidelines of Vatican II.

We can truly say that the initiatives thought up so far by way of preparation do show that that we are directing our efforts mainly in this sense.

— *At Congregational level* we have put ourselves, especially after the approval of the new text of the Constitutions and Regulations, in a kind of “state of novitiate” for an intense and lengthy work of ongoing formation. We want in 1988 to make a solemn renewal of our religious profession as a living expression of that apostolic consecration which the text of the Constitutions has taught us, in the spirit of the Council, to know better, to appreciate and to witness to with more authentic depth and prophetic application to the present day. Only by intensifying our pastoral charity in this way shall we be able to show the world the vitality of Don Bosco’s charism.

— *At the level of the Salesian Family* we feel in stronger communion with the other Groups which, like us, have renewed the basic texts of their identity in fidelity to their origins and to the Council. We want to work together to relaunch the overall project of the Founder, especially by involving a large number of courageous lay people in the Association of Cooperators and that of the Past Pupils. We intend to give animation to a vast spiritual and apostolic Movement of persons which will be

concerned with the problems of the young and of the field of education.

— *At the level of young people*, those to whom our work is primarily directed, we have already been committed for some time to a redefinition and promotion of a youth spirituality which must be the soul and objective (to be attained gradually in appropriate ways) of our various activities.

It is symptomatic that through the interest and concern of the Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Anastasio Ballastrero, the Holy Father has proclaimed the year extending from 31 January 1988 to 31 January 1989 as a special "Holy Year of the Young" in the Archdiocese of Turin. The main arguments for study and reflection which will characterize this "Year of grace for the young" will be the prophetic contents of Vatican II. Let us consider as our special task that of consigning the Council to young people as they move towards the year 2000!

The conditions for gaining this extraordinary jubilee will be laid down very soon by the Apostolic See and will be made known to all in good time. In the meantime we can start thinking already about the atmosphere to be prepared, programmes to be drawn up, pilgrimages to be organized, and the sanctity to be made known and loved.

The proclamation of a special Holy Year gives to the celebrations of '88 a wider ecclesial dimension. This is something we must keep in mind, extending our horizons beyond the Salesian Family; we must interest the Bishops and faithful of the local Churches in which we live and give our collaboration, and present the figure of Don Bosco as that of a modern saint raised up by God as a providential "Friend of youth", and especially of those who are poor and needy. The prospect is a thrilling one!

Kinds of reflection to promote

I think it opportune to suggest at this point, as a practical guideline for those who have the task of animation in the provinces, some themes for reflection. These are no more than an indication, and certainly not an exhaustive one, of certain topics for analysis which can contribute to the creation of an apt climate for the celebrations. Some of the following themes are more suitable for study by the confreres, others can be extended to the Salesian Family, others are more suited to our young people, and some can be considered by all. It is to be hoped that these topics may serve to stir up the imagination and lead to the formulation of others in the same line but more suited to local conditions, with a view to the great objective to be attained.

Here then, by way of example, is a list of themes:

- The final report of the Extraordinary Synod of 1985.

- The signs of the times and the prophecy of Vatican II.

- The novelty and vital importance of the liturgy of the New Covenant.

- The central position of the Eucharist and Penance in our pastoral work.

- The letter of John Paul II to young people, 1985.

- The present challenges to a youthful spirituality.

- The new problems in the evangelization of cultures.

- The urgent need of being able to insert the "preventive system" into different cultures.

- The Oratory, our permanent criterion in youth pastoral work.
- Christian education and civil society.
- The sense of Church witnessed by Don Bosco.
- Don Bosco's contribution to social tasks.
- Salesian profession and apostolic consecration.
- The practice of the evangelical counsels and the indispensability of asceticism.
- The up-to-date nature of Don Bosco as a model of holiness.

These topics, and others which are possible, should be developed as a response to the challenges of various situations, drawing constantly on the abundant lights provided by the Council.

Their development will help in the assimilation of the great guidelines given by the Church's magisterium and the directives of the Congregation for living our religious profession at the present day, and help us also to be witnesses to the particular message of the evangelical School of Don Bosco among the young and the poor at the present day.

Objectives of salesian sanctity

Recently in Italy a few writers have criticized Don Bosco's sanctity as being out of line with modern culture; one of them has even spoken of an "anti-hagiography" to re-establish a more authentic vision of the message of the Gospel of Christ. Some of them speak and write of sanctity while ignoring the spirit with which Don Bosco lived it, or else they confuse it with certain cultural attitudes of his

time. Others finally do not know or do not give serious attention to the spiritual School which grew up around our Father and Founder.

I think that even criticisms of this kind can be useful to us; in the first place they will help us to avoid a certain hagiographical mythology and lead us to do some deep rethinking of what constitutes the essence of holiness, which can never be reduced to simple moralism and must be carefully distinguished from the cultural coating of the time in which it is lived.

They will stimulate us too to greater precision and clarity as regards the historical pluriformity inherent in concrete ways of bearing witness to the gospel message, separating the permanent elements from the characteristics proper to Don Bosco's evangelical way. With the help of the Holy Spirit and the motherly protection of the Help of Christians, we have been able to dedicate ourselves seriously during these twenty years of research to this delicate work. A convincing proof of this is provided by the last three General Chapters and the renewed text of the Constitutions.

In a society in continual process of secularization, where sanctity seems to have been put on the fringe as a relic of past ages because it would have nothing further of value to contribute to men of a more scientific and technical culture, the coming events of the celebrations of '88 invite us to a fundamental task: to renew the salesian profession for the new times!

Such a task involves three points:

- a clear reconsideration of the evangelical essence of holiness;

- the identification of the permanent essential qualities which characterize Don Bosco's spirit;

— a methodical facing up to the challenge of a constant inculturation of the salesian charism.

This appeal to bring up to date the sanctity of Don Bosco comes to us from the Church itself, from its Pastors, from Vatican II, from the new generations of innumerable youngsters who see in our religious profession “the most precious gift we can offer” to their hopes.⁸

* * *

Dear confreres, the final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops states explicitly that: “Saintly men and women have been the primary sources of renewal at times of difficulty in the Church’s history. We badly need saints today and should pray to God for the. The institutes of consecrated life should be aware of their special mission in the Church today and we (the Bishops) should encourage them in that mission”.⁹

This is an authoritative appeal to deepen the real significance of our profession and bear witness to it in its most intimate and fruitful aspect, apostolic sanctity. The Constitutions remind us that “fidelity to the commitment made at our religious profession is a response which we continually renew to the special Covenant that the Lord has made with us. Our perseverance is founded entirely on the fidelity of God who loved us first, and is nourished by the grace of his consecration. It is sustained too by love for the young to whom we are sent, and is expressed in gratitude to the Lord for the gifts that salesian life offers us”.¹⁰

May Don Bosco intercede for us at the centenary of his death so that we may all be able to renew and bear witness to our religious profession

⁸ Cf. C. 25

⁹ Final Report II, A, 4

¹⁰ C 195

according to the plan of holiness set out in the salesian Constitutions!

I send you my fraternal greetings and good wishes for an intense spiritual preparation for '88. I pray for you all.

With gratitude and affection in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò