

# acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### CONVOCAION OF THE 23rd GENERAL CHAPTER

Introduction. - Convocation in accordance with the Constitutions. - Particular character of the GC23. - The theme proposed: its choice and significance. - The tasks involved in education to the faith indicated by the Constitutions. - The challenges of our new times. - The "pastoral" commitment of the salesian community. - The work of the forthcoming provincial chapters. - Conclusion.

*Rome, Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord*  
*6 August 1988*

*My dear confreres,*

Among the many gifts we have received during this centenary year of grace we must include also the convocation of the coming General Chapter: it will be the 23rd.

Don Bosco attached particular importance to general chapters. He himself presided at the first four of them in 1887, 1880, 1883 and 1886; at that time they took place every three years, a practice that continued until 1904. In convoking the first General Chapter he reminded the confreres that "we are undertaking something of the greatest importance for our Congregation... our meetings have no other purpose than God's greater glory and the salvation of souls... We intend to place the Chapter under the special protection of Mary most holy".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.CERIA, *Annali*, vol.1, p. 313

The present Constitutions tell us that “the general chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation’s unity in diversity”;<sup>2</sup> by its means we meet as brothers on a worldwide scale to grow in fidelity to the Gospel, to Don Bosco and to present-day needs.<sup>3</sup> It is a community event of identity, unity, revision, planning, and of salesian dynamic presence among the pilgrim People of God, which in the midst of “temptations and tribulations” continually renews itself so as to be the light and salt of the earth.<sup>3</sup> Through it the whole Congregation makes itself docile to the Spirit of the Lord, seeking “to discern God’s will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> C 146<sup>3</sup> cf. C 146<sup>4</sup> cf. LG 9

It is therefore one of the most significant events in our community life. We must be fully aware of this; we must feel ourselves involved in a responsible commitment at worldwide level, and play an active part in its preparation based on the concrete situation in our own particular province. Because it is an event in harmony with the workings of the Holy Spirit, it should give rise in the first place to an atmosphere of intense prayer accompanied by pastoral zeal, study, verification, dialogue and the formulation of efficacious proposals for meeting the serious challenges we are facing at the present day.

### **Convocation in accordance with the constitutions**

The Constitutions state that “the general chapter is convoked by the Rector Major”,<sup>5</sup> and so it is my intention by this letter to officially convoke the GC23.

<sup>5</sup> C 146



In the recent plenary session of the General Council too I have appointed the Secretary General, *Fr Francesco Maraccani*, as Moderator of the Chapter.

I have also chosen the following as the Chapter's theme:

**"Educating young people to the faith:  
a task and challenge for today's salesian community"**

Finally I have appointed the "*technical commission*" which has worked with the Moderator to draw up a "*plan of preparation*" for the Chapter and to promote the "interest and active participation of the members".<sup>6</sup> The results of the commission's work are to be found elsewhere in this issue of the Acts.

In due course the "*precapitular commission*" will also be appointed; under the responsibility of the Moderator and in agreement with the Rector Major, it will draw up the reports or schemata to be sent in good time to those taking part in the general chapter".<sup>7</sup>

"The convocation", say the Regulations, "will be made at least one year before it opens".<sup>8</sup> The various possibilities were carefully studied in the General Council, and as a result the Chapter will take place in Rome at the Generalate, Via della Piana 1111, from 4 March 1990 for a period — I hope — of not more than two months. It will begin with a retreat for the chapter members to enable them to open themselves to "the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord".<sup>10</sup>

The "*principal purpose of the chapter*"<sup>11</sup> is not only to make an adequate study of the theme proposed, but also to exercise according to law the "supreme authority" which is one of its character-

<sup>6</sup> C 150

<sup>7</sup> R 112

<sup>8</sup> R 113

<sup>9</sup> R 111

<sup>10</sup> C 146

<sup>11</sup> R 111

istics. In fact it belongs to the General Chapter "to elect the Rector Major and the members of the general council".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> C 147

This is a grave responsibility affecting the life of the Congregation and its future; it is a question in fact of designating those who for a period of six years will be responsible for the ministry of unity, animation and guidance of the Congregation in the Church and in the world. One need only read over again the articles of the Constitutions which refer to the various roles to be played at world level among us in the service of authority to understand the need there is for immediate prayer, and to begin to discern and dispose our minds to overcome motivations or feelings inappropriate in the face of so vital a choice.

### **The particular character of the GC23**

The GC23 should restore the celebration of the general chapters at world level to their "ordinary" rhythm, as regards both duration and work content.

The GC22 and the approval by the Apostolic See of the revised text of the Constitutions, and the completing of our Rule of life by the last provincial chapters, marked the end of a laborious and fruitful postconciliar period dedicated to the vast work of clarifying the salesian identity in the Church and its consequent legislative expression at both general and provincial level.

The Chapter now in preparation can be called "ordinary" by comparison with the previous general chapters that followed Vatican II. The intention is in fact to concentrate the attention of the

confreres on a specific argument of a practical nature, considered to be of particular urgency for the Congregation but to a certain extent sectorial in nature, in the sense that it does not refer to the whole of salesian life.

To rethink our identity in an adequate manner and to avoid the insidious danger of being merely superficial, the last three general chapters have enriched us with documents of great doctrinal depth which have enlightened and guided us in responding to the new challenges of the present day. In the light of this wealth of guidelines officially available to us, we are now asked to verify that we have assimilated them and put them into practice.

The scope of the GC23 is therefore limited to a more immediately practical objective: to verify the efficacy of salesian education with regard to the life of faith of the youth with whom we work, so as to revise with greater incisiveness the educational and pastoral projects of each province and of the individual houses. (What we are looking for from the coming Chapter is a concise collection of "*practical guidelines*").

### **The theme proposed: its choice and significance**

— *The choice of the theme* was a natural outcome of the experience of recent years, of the difficulties met with by both young people and the salesian community, but also of our thoughts on the occasion of the solemn promise of fidelity to Don Bosco which we renewed on 14 May last.

The education of youth to the faith has become a complex mission, not only in particular provinces or cultural areas but to some extent throughout all

the various Regions. It is quite true that the problem is not one of our own Congregation alone: it is one which deeply touches the whole Church. Nor do its ramifications stem exclusively from specific characteristics of the present-day youth condition; they are rather the consequence of a cultural situation associated with a "turning point" in history: "Ours is a new age of history", said the Council, "with critical and swift upheavals spreading gradually to all corners of the earth".<sup>13</sup> It is a moment of a new ecclesial beginning, a time of great responsibility and of fascinating historical commitment. It reminds us of the famous "leap forward" of which John XXIII spoke in prophetic fashion in his address at the opening of Vatican II: It will be our duty, he said "to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us, pursuing thus the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries".<sup>14</sup>

13 S 4

14 11 October 1962

In the General Council the choice of this theme was reached after lengthy discernment. It began last January with the suggestion of various themes made by the Councillors themselves. Then the Regional Councillors made an informal sounding of the provincials and confreres in their eight regions, bringing back the results to the General Council in June. The various proposals were sorted, and after hearing the opinions of all and noting the priority accorded to the subject of christian education, the Rector Major made on 6 July the definitive choice.

The Council had already studied and discussed at length over the previous year some of the points involved, which had been seen as urgent problems to be taken up and analyzed to help the provinces.

Once the theme had been chosen there were further discussions for the purpose of expressing

it as clearly as possible, defining its content and studying the best way of presenting it to the confreres. In this way it was possible to provide the technical commission with material sufficiently precise to enable it to proceed with its specific work of service to the provinces.

— *The significance of the theme* is clear from its very statement. Education of the faith<sup>15</sup> and to the faith<sup>16</sup> is the specific line of approach to the analysis and deeper study of the whole question. To use any other approach would be to lack relevance. We shall have to be on our guard therefore against being led astray by side issues.

To develop the theme we must analyze from a pastoral point of view and make a salesian verification of the reality in which we are working. We shall therefore have to make practical reference to the young people we are educating in each of our local presences, so as to reflect on the problems about the faith which crop up in their own lives.

In this regard there is a *task* we have to carry out, and a *challenge* to which we must respond.

The “task” is clearly indicated in the Constitutions; the “challenge” will be defined by what is found by the individual local communities and in each province, according to the diversity of the works, social situations, culture and trends.

We must be able to distinguish between what we may call recurrent difficulties and the challenges that arise from cultural innovations, which call for a real rethinking of methods and of the content of education to the faith.

The theme does not exclude an educational commitment among non-christian youth. This indeed is expressly included, but from the specific aspect of a journey to the faith. In his letter “Iuve-

<sup>15</sup> C 6<sup>16</sup> C 34

num Patris” the Holy Father has reminded us that “the aspect of religious transcendence, the cornerstone of Don Bosco’s pedagogical method, is not only applicable to every culture but can also be profitably adapted even to non-christian religions”.<sup>17</sup>

17 IP 11

No type of person with whom we work therefore is excluded, but what is emphasized and has to be verified is the specific *pastoral* and *missionary* aspect of all our work with respect to the faith of young people: *always and everywhere we are “shepherds and missionaries of the young”!* We educate with our heart centred on Christ, gradually leading youth in his direction. If it were otherwise, the centre of our spirit would no longer be pastoral charity; nor would “da mihi animas” be the motto defining us.

### **The tasks involved in education to the faith indicated by the Constitutions**

Our Constitutions explicitly declare that “‘this Society had its beginning in a simple catechism lesson’. For us too evangelizing and catechizing are *the fundamental characteristics* of our mission. Like Don Bosco we are all called to be educators to the faith *at every opportunity*. Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery”.<sup>18</sup> There you have the great task which defines us!

18 C 34

And the General Regulations, speaking of the educative and pastoral project, tell us that “a *central nucleus* of the plan should be an *explicit programme of education to the faith*, which will accompany the general development of the youngsters, and coordinate the different forms of catech-

<sup>19</sup> R 7

esis, celebrations and apostolic undertakings".<sup>19</sup>

These two articles give clear emphasis to the theme of the GC23.

The work to be done in pursuit of the great content and objectives of these "fundamental characteristics of our mission", and the educational process to be followed, we find described in the Constitutions themselves, especially in articles 31 to 37. The technical commission has clearly set out its various aspects. Here I would like to focus your attention, dear confreres, on some key points which should help us to understand the *unique style* of the salesian educational commitment.

I invite you to keep in mind the following points: the fostering of organic unity, the promoting of critical understanding, the development of love, and the discovery of the joy of living.

— *The fostering of organic unity* is an aspect which concerns both method and content. We have summed it up in the slogan "evangelizing by educating".<sup>20</sup> The Pope reminded us of this in his letter: the particular method of Don Bosco for the evangelization of youth "forms an *integral part of the process of human formation*, ... so that the faith must become the unifying and enlightening element of their personality".<sup>21</sup>

This is not an easy thing to do: it demands a deepening of the vision of Christ as the "perfect Man", the formation of a heart on fire with pastoral love, and the careful acquiring of an up-to-date educational competence concerning human values in the process of growth. This fostering of organic unity obliges us to resolve the tragic cleavage between the Gospel and culture at the grass roots of personal life.

<sup>20</sup> cf. *Circular letter*, AGC 290, July-Dec. 1978

<sup>21</sup> IP 15

The secret lies in never forgetting the *enlightening and unifying* function of the faith, and in making it accepted as a leaven for the maturing of the whole person.

The Council too emphasizes this unifying and organic function of the faith: "Let christians follow the example of Christ who worked as a craftsman; let them be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God".<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> GS 43

—*The promoting of critical understanding* in relation to personal freedom. There is an urgent need for education to an authentic sense of sin, i.e. personal sin which depends primarily on one's own will.

At the present day the awareness of such sin is dangerously declining. Critical understanding is usually fostered with reference to structures, society, particular economic or political systems, without any attention being given to the radical importance and responsibility of the individual and the education of his freedom.

Promoting critical understanding in relation to faith means accompanying the young person on his path of "conversion", educating him to the values of personal dignity, of overcoming selfish tendencies, of reconciliation, of the great christian significance of repentance, of learning to forgive as he himself feels forgiveness. Don Bosco attached great importance to this aspect, which he considered one of the columns of his educational system.

Giving new life to the sacrament of Reconcilia-



tion is an indispensable objective in education to the faith!

— *The development of love* must bring the young person to understand and share in the greatest act of self-donation in history: the redeeming sacrifice of Christ.<sup>23</sup> The christian faith is directly linked with the Eucharist. From the very outset many of Christ's disciples did not grasp this; his words seemed like wild exaggeration, But "Jesus said to the twelve, 'Will you also go away?' Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'"<sup>24</sup>

It is not a question here of harking back to the observance of norms (even though the Church's precepts are important), but rather of educating the mind and heart of the young in such a way that they clearly perceive the supremely central nature of the Eucharist in the life of the individual and in the climate of an educational environment. This is the other column of Don Bosco's pedagogical method, so vividly present in his educational practice.

It must not become weakened by inconsistent attempts at rationalization. The much vaunted needs that have to be respected in the so-called pre-evangelization process are in fact the result of a secularist kind of lowering of the objectives to be reached in education to faith, with harmful consequences for the educators themselves. Certainly, as the Constitutions say, "imitating God's patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom"; but they also go on to say: "We then accompany them so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith".<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> cf. *Circular letter*, AGC 324, Jan.-March 1988

<sup>24</sup> Jn 6, 67-68

<sup>25</sup> C 38

If our education does not aim at developing love, we shall never form strong personalities. And education to true love passes necessarily through the Eucharist.

Finally, *the discovery of the joy of living* implies the ability to appreciate the sense of life as a "vocation".

Every young person represents a human project to be discovered and realized in the light of a personal awareness of being an "image of God". If the dignity of the individual is measured by his freedom and the perfection of freedom is the lived exercise of love, the vocation of every young person will consist in his ability to plan his life and conduct on the basis of love. The principal enemy of existence as a vocation is a selfish mentality.

The Constitutions tell us that "we educate the young to develop their own human and baptismal vocation by a daily life progressively lived and unified by the Gospel".<sup>26</sup> There is no need to dwell here on a presentation of the multiplicity of human and christian vocations, but I think it necessary to emphasize the urgent need there is at the present day to be able to single out and bring to maturity numerous vocations to male and female consecrated life, to the ministerial priesthood, and to a generously committed laity; and hence to insist on the pedagogical importance of this vocational aspect of education to the faith.

Let us never forget, either as individual confreres or as communities at the service of the young, that "this work of collaboration with God's design (is) the crown of all our educational and pastoral activity".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> C 37

<sup>27</sup> C 37

## The challenges of our new times

I said earlier that the challenges involved in education to the faith will have to be singled out and evaluated in the individual communities and provinces, because of the variety of works, circumstances and cultures. But there are some big challenges deriving from the signs of the times which have already reached worldwide dimensions and which call for a new kind of evangelization, albeit with the preservation of the truth of faith. As Pope John XXIII said in the address already quoted: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration, with patience if necessary".<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 11 October 1962

This need for "new evangelization", which in turn implies "new education", is something that touches us closely and challenges our very ability to render relevant our charisma in the Church at the present day. We salesians are, or should be, experts in educational methodology among the People of God!

Unfortunately we have witnessed in the Church, since the Council, deviations in the name of ultraconservative or ultraprogressive thinking which undermine the authenticity of the faith, either by resistance to Vatican II as in the sad case of Lefebvre, or through ideological pressures of a temporal or secular kind as in the interpretations of a dangerously ambiguous kind made by certain thinkers.

This fact should put us on our guard and prompt us to seek a new method of evangelization in the greatest fidelity to the revelation of Christ.

I think that the great universal challenges of innovation appear especially at two complementary levels: that of the *personal dimension* and that of the *social dimension*.

— The *personal dimension* has been greatly enriched in recent years by a variety of factors: the deeper analysis of the personality of the individual; a greater understanding of the values of freedom; progress in the human biological sciences and the significance and importance of sexuality; the advancement of women; the emphasis given to life and its defence; the lengthened period of adolescence and the inserting of the young person into society (the period is in fact about ten years longer than it was in Don Bosco's time).

This is why on the one hand the deeper analysis of the "process of personalization" has thrown up problems previously unpublished and not always taken sufficiently into account in traditional methods of education to the faith, and on the other hand progress in the human sciences has given rise to numerous questions and problems, especially as regards the christian view of moral conduct, thus provoking in practice a confusion in the attitude to life of the believer. One need only recall that among the faith-related sciences the one which has experienced the greatest crisis is moral theology.

And yet education to the faith tends of its nature to be equated to conduct of life, with the appraisal and development of all human values, a clear sense of sin, and a style of existence that becomes "witness".

And so a vast and complex field is opened up, rich in innovations and new ideas and in urgent need of evangelization.

— The *social dimension* presents an even wider horizon of innovations. Terms like “sharing”, “solidarity”, “communion”, “democracy” joined with the great “policy of the common good”, “peace”, “justice”, “social communication”, “ecological balance”, etc. all suggest themes with multiple aspects which need much deep rethinking with a strongly renewed mentality.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recently confirmed that “christians working to bring about that ‘civilization of love’ ... are today faced with an unprecedented challenge. This task calls for renewed reflection on what constitutes *the relationship between the supreme commandment of love and the social order* considered in all its complexity”.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Libertatis conscientia*  
81

Hence in education to the faith at the present day we must be able to enter into this real constellation of new social values, reserving a specific and continually updated space for the Church’s social teaching.

Well known in this field from a negative point of view are certain deviations through manipulation and exploitation, and on the positive side the keen discernment and singular style based on the transcendent but committed attitude of Don Bosco. Article 33 of the Constitutions indicates clearly what this implies and demands of us: we share “in a manner appropriate to religious”, and in a salesian manner, in the preferential option for the poor and in commitments to social and collective advancement in the overall fundamental area of culture, but “without getting involved in ideologies or party politics” in our work of education.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> C 33

The new challenges of the present day certainly oblige us to clarify, update and renew our concrete activity of education to the faith.

## The “pastoral” commitment of the salesian community

“To live and work together”, say the Constitutions, “is for us salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> C 49

The task of education to the faith is assumed and exercised in the first place by the provincial and local community, and shared by each of its members according to the different roles assigned to each one.<sup>32</sup> The GC23 intends to provoke a serious reflection on this communal responsibility. It is precisely in this that will be found the secret of the renewal we hope to find in the next Chapter, not so much in the reshaping of works (though that too has its own particular importance, *but in the re-thinking and renewal of our mission*, or in other words of the pastoral quality of our activity. This is the kind of “new presence” which we must primarily aim at in every work.

<sup>32</sup> cf. C 44, 45

This is the sense in which the salesian community is called upon to draw up and apply a renewed pastoral and educational plan!<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> cf. R 4

The theme deliberately puts the accent on the community, in so far as it is the latter which bears the prime responsibility for the education of young people to the faith. It is important that we be wary of being distracted from this argument by the red herring of the complexity of problems concerning the community itself. The one and only angle of approach for our considerations must always be education to the faith as a commitment which is thought out, programmed, verified and revised by a salesian community linked to a particular local area, with its own specific social, cultural and ecclesial aspects, and responsible for a work which

has its own educational and pastoral objectives.

Evidently in the evaluation of this fundamental task of the community, importance will be given to the *pastoral* role of the provincial, the rector, the animators and the individual confreres.

*It will be an examination of the pastoral dimension of our work*, and will centre on an assessment of the community's pastoral discernment.<sup>34</sup>

We shall be asked what contribution we all make in the work of education, in animation, in the use of the means of social communication, in the stimulation of initiatives, in overcoming difficulties, in the challenges which call for a response here and now.

After the return to the sources through the work and events of the centenary, we want to put all our efforts into relaunching the attitude of "da mihi animas", to which we shall bear witness with the pastoral and pedagogical originality of Don Bosco.

The fact of being situated in a specific locality with a particular kind of presence will steer the verification of the salesian community towards its relationship with the local Church and the surrounding human neighbourhood. In fact "the salesian community works in communion with the particular Church. It is open to the world's values and attentive to the cultural milieu in which it carries out its apostolic work".<sup>35</sup> For this reason one must keep in mind both the ecclesial plan of pastoral work in the neighbourhood concerned, and its social and cultural condition both now and how it is likely to develop in the future.

And then in all our works the salesian community is called to be the driving force in a wider "*educative community*": "The application of the plan", say the Regulations, "requires that in all our

<sup>34</sup> C 44

<sup>35</sup> C 57

works and settings we establish the educative and pastoral community, whose animating nucleus is the religious community".<sup>36</sup> And this leads us to some wider considerations, which are both very relevant and demanding; the clear reference is to the lay people who work with us and to the young people themselves; we have to reflect on their pedagogical, spiritual and apostolic formation, and on our ability to animate them.

<sup>36</sup> R 5

And then if we recall that, in the noble vision of Don Bosco, education to the faith is realized not only within the educative community but even beyond it through its influence in the parish, the local district or zone, the diocese and even the country, it makes us think too of the importance of animating those Cooperators and Past-Pupils who are working for the faith in the neighbourhood where the salesian community is situated.

This attention given to the lay members of the faithful is of great importance in the present-day Church and is for us a constitutional call to renewal, with specific reference to the Salesian Cooperators and the Don Bosco Past Pupils.<sup>37</sup> But this aspect too must be considered in the light of the Chapter theme, It is not in fact a matter of entering into the question of the Salesian Family, but of verifying and stimulating its educational and pastoral initiatives in the neighbourhood concerned, its renewal and vitality being taken for granted.

<sup>37</sup> cf. C 5; R 36, 38, 39

It is important to consider the influence of the whole charisma of Don Bosco on the parish, district, town or region, in accordance with the dynamic ecclesial and social vision of our Founder.

This awareness of shared responsibility and ecclesial harmony redefines and gives greater breadth to the physiognomy of our salesian activity in the



places where we work: and so take courage, dear provincials and rectors!

### **The work of the forthcoming provincial chapter**

According to the Constitutions the provincial chapter is the “representative assembly of all the confreres and local communities”.<sup>38</sup> Its nature and powers differ from those of the general chapter: it neither possesses nor exercises “supreme authority” in the province,<sup>39</sup> it is not a source of authority in the Congregation, and its sphere of competence is well limited by the Constitutions.<sup>40</sup>

Ordinarily it is called together by the provincial every three years.<sup>41</sup> Hence in the normal course of events every provincial will convoke two of them in the course of his six-year period of office: one “*in preparation for the general chapter*” and another intermediate one.

In the period immediately following Vatican II there was a tendency towards a more frequent convocation of provincial chapters (there were proposals to hold them every two years, and even every year). But then we came to see the reasons behind the three-yearly rhythm. The noteworthy commitment of the last twenty years, reflected in the provincial chapters which were called upon to undertake a quite intensive work in rewriting our Rule of life (even through the convoking of “special” provincial chapters), could have led to the risk of a certain saturation or indigestion. We must be able to react to such dangers.

In considering the very nature of the provincial chapter, and keeping in mind the work of revision of our Rule of life now completed, we need to be

<sup>38</sup> C 170

<sup>39</sup> N.B. cf. C 147

<sup>40</sup> cf. C 171

<sup>41</sup> C 172

very clear about the chapter's eminently community significance, the importance of its three-yearly rhythm, and the responsibility which in consequence devolves on every confrere and every community.

The fact that the coming GC23 reverts to what we may call the category of "ordinary" general chapters must have its repercussions on the manner of celebrating provincial chapters.

It seems convenient in fact to make a certain *practical distinction* between the provincial chapter convoked *to prepare a general chapter*, and the *intermediate* kind, called together precisely to reflect on the good functioning of the province.

*In the first one* attention is centred on the general chapter and the main work to be done is carried out with the preparation of the general chapter in view, even though the province's more urgent problems are not excluded.

*In the second* the work consists in examining how the province is going, and in making a deeper and more adequate analysis of its work.

This practical distinction may serve to overcome the dangerous sense of disaffection I have mentioned, ensure the serious celebration of the provincial chapters, and facilitate their work.

In any case one thing is very clear: the coming provincial chapters must concern themselves principally with the study of the theme of the education of young people to the faith. I therefore exhort all the confreres and every local community to consider the preparation and realization of the next provincial chapter as a particular event of shared responsibility at world level. The theme of the present-day education of the young to the faith must indeed become the subject of reflection, discussion,

research, verification and planning for every local community and every confrere. We are touching here the very soul of the salesian mission; we are taking the measure of our fidelity to the Founder and of our pastoral creativity; we are assessing the degree of ecclesial communion which defines us; we are verifying the truth of the love which makes us live for the young; we avoid the dangers arising from ideological thinking and the levelling down due to certain pseudoscientific claims. And so I invite you, dear confreres, to give great importance to the preparation of this chapter by prayer, in study and reflection, in verification, in discerning the challenges, and in planning for the future.

I want to insist especially on the ability *to perceive the positive signs of the cultural innovations* in which we are living, and the values of human growth proclaimed and witnessed to by today's youth. The signs of the times have at their root the impulse of the Holy Spirit. They do not drag us down but rather help us to rise up! If the weight of sin has become greater, so too has the genuine sense of the Gospel and its fruitful leavening effect for the growth of humanity. We can see this in the Church's life and in the renewal of the Congregation.

The *creation* by the Father, from which flows all good, is in constant growth; the *redemption* by the Son, which is the victory of faith, increases its beneficial effect of personal and social liberation; the *sanctification* by the Spirit, which is transforming power, works incessantly in hearts and communities. It is short-sighted pessimism to fail to see the love of God which surrounds men in the signs of the times, in Vatican II, in the renewal of the Church, in the reactivation of charismata (which

means for us in particular the charism of Don Bosco), in pastoral creativity, and in enthusiasm for the preparation of the launching of the third millennium of christian faith.

Certainly evil too is growing, and in sophisticated ways. But the Lord has called us to fight against it and has given us the energy and example to do so, assuring us that with the light of the resurrection "whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> 1 Jn 5, 4-5

### **In conclusion**

I would like to remind you, dear confreres, of the distinction between *mission* and *pastoral work*, put forward by the Special General Chapter.

The *mission* is identical and unchangeable in every culture and situation; *pastoral work* "is a practical realization of the mission under the guidance of the *pastors*. This presupposes a sensitivity to the signs of the times and a sense of adaptation to the situation at a particular time and place. A necessary consequence of this is the pluralism of pastoral work, or in other words of practical concrete choices by the Church (universal and local) in the threefold service of the community: prophetic, liturgical and directional. In this way are explained the different pastoral apostolates depending on age, sex, social and cultural context, the degree of faith, and the joint pastoral action in the area".<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> SGC 30

The renewal of our mission is intimately connected with the pluriformity of our pastoral activ-

ity, a pluriformity which is already an established fact among us; it is the starting point for the work of the coming chapters.

But the theme chosen does not refer to pluriformity of this kind; it takes it for granted and accepts it as a living reality on which we must concentrate our attention, but for the purpose of discerning another aspect — that of the *pastoral quality* of the particular commitments of each salesian community. In our pluriformity *what is of specific concern to us is this pastoral quality*.

For the moment therefore we are not addressing other aspects, even though they be important: not the question of those to whom we are sent, not the reshaping of our works, not the inculturation of our mission, not a review of the religious community, not the relaunching of the Salesian Family. not any other of the many interesting items, *but specifically and in depth the quality of our pastoral work in the education of youth to the faith*.

Fidelity to Don Bosco's mission demands that we reawaken in our minds and in every community ardent and genuine pastoral ability, under the influence of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The verification we must carry out, or the analysis of the reality of our work, must be considered from a pastoral standpoint without any ideological presuppositions which could surreptitiously exploit the conclusions to be reached. We are not therefore making an analysis of a reality on the basis of criteria alien to our mission, but *a pastoral vision of the reality*, which can be achieved only through a process of evaluation which is evangelical and ecclesial. It is a question of making a judgement about one of life's riches, that of the faith, which goes beyond the limits of science and social and po-

litical systems. Faith can be scrutinized and examined in its deep reality (in its beginnings and growth) only by believers themselves who have made of it the vertex which sheds light on their own judgements.

For this reason it will be well to go back in prayer and imitation to the Virgin Mary, defined in the Gospel as "*She who believed*", and who expressed in the Magnificat her evangelical way of appraising history.

We already entrusted ourselves solemnly to her at the beginning of the GC22. We are convinced that she "Is present among us and continues her 'mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians'. (Today, and for the GC23,) we entrust ourselves once again to her, the humble servant in whom the Lord has done great things, that we may become witnesses to the young of her Son's boundless love".<sup>44</sup>

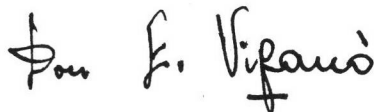
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May Don Bosco obtain for us from our Blessed Lady a living sense of Christ, the apostolic zeal to pass on to others the benefits of his great mystery, and the creative intelligence and pedagogical ability to educate young people to faith in Christ as a response to the pressing challenges of our times.

Let us set to work with enthusiasm!

The theme is a strategically vital one.

With cordial greetings and all best wishes in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Don F. Viganò". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Don" and "Viganò" being capitalized and prominent.