

acts

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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco**

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

THE PROPHETIC STIMULUS OF THE EUROPEAN SYNOD

– Introduction. – The European Bishops Synod. – Collapse of ideologies? – Exhortation to apostolic breadth of vision. – New paths to follow. – The unchangeable driving force. – The role of Religious and the leading part played by the young. – Salesian involvement. – Conclusion.

Rome, Ash Wednesday
4 March 1992

My dear confreres

Lent is a time when we prepare ourselves more seriously for the contemplation of the Easter mystery, in which is concentrated all our faith and from which all the aspects of our mission take their rise. I hope that for every community it may provide, through the efforts of the Rector and every single confrere, an atmosphere for internal reflection and give light and strength to the community's plan for the education of young people to the faith. I hope too that in such an atmosphere special importance will be given to my last circular on our special effort with regard to Vocations.

In the latest statistics of the Congregation, which refer to the year 1991, there is an item that gives cause for alarm: the number of novices fell by

80 with respect to the previous year. Some reasons can be given to explain the drop: two or three provinces, in fact, had suspended their novitiate in view of a reorganization of the stages in their formation process. But the fall remains a warning to us to intensify our common efforts in the youth apostolate as envisaged by the GC23. We have an urgent need for more numerous and qualified vocations because so many young people need Don Bosco's charism and so many local Churches are asking insistently for our help. Pressing requests are reaching us from all five continents.

After the recent great changes in Eastern Europe we have already courageously accepted new front-line commitments. The Apostolic Administrator of Eastern Europe, Mgr Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, for example, already has a good number of confreres assigned to his area; and the Venice Province is about to open a vocational training school in Moscow at the invitation of the civil authorities.

The Apostolic Administrator of Siberia, Mgr Joseph Werth who resides at Novosibirsk, is pressing us to help him and has already assigned to us the town of Aldan (much further east). The Province of Bratislava in Slovakia is responding generously to his invitation.

We are going to Albania too; the Apostolic See has asked us to open various works: a vocational school at Tirana and a catechetical centre at Scutari. Some Italian provinces and that of Slovenia have already accepted the responsibility for these.

And I do not give any further examples, because if we go on to the other continents the requests run into hundreds, without any exaggeration.

But in addition to these new requests, there is also an urgent need to renew the works we have al-

ready; for an authentic and effective evangelizing thrust an injection of youthful and competent energy is needed. We follow the example of Don Bosco who always pressed forward but without chancing his arm: his philanthropic projects were always accompanied by trust in divine Providence and nourished by a strong spirituality and a zealous concern for the promoting of vocations, convinced as he always was of the enlivening presence of the Holy Spirit.

But what makes the need for vocations so terribly urgent is the immensity of the harvest waiting to be gathered in. Pastors pray and exhort; they do not simply limit themselves to the pastoral structures of yesterday, they do not confine their activity only to the sheepfold but look with zealous eyes to today's world with its numerous and insistent challenges; they look at them from the standpoint of pastors, not to foster discouragement but to face up to them boldly and courageously.

Ever since Vatican II, in Synods and Bishops Conferences, in the journeys of the Holy Father and in the indications of the teaching Church, the Pope and the bishops have been speaking to us with a boldness that is prophetic. They sense the breath of the Spirit which is prompting the People of God to a new beginning as the third millennium of the faith draws near.

It is with this anxiety stemming from apostolic zeal that I want to offer you some reflections on the recent European Bishops Synod; for all of us they can throw light on the way to carry out the new evangelization, even though we may be working in other continents.

Soon the Fourth General Assembly of the Latin-American Bishops will take place in Santo Domingo; soon too there will be the African Synod.

These and other similar ecclesial events are an incitement to us to go forward with courage and wisdom along new paths.

The European Bishops Synod

The Synod was announced unexpectedly by the Pope at Velehrad in Moravia on 22 April 1990, and took place at the Vatican from 28 November to 14 December 1991. Taking part were Bishops representing all the countries of Europe, including Turkey. Present too as "fraternal delegates" were representatives of other Christian Churches and denominations, and a certain number of invited people. The presence among the latter of the Rector Major with other religious superiors is certainly for the whole Salesian Family a gift which becomes also an appeal.

The event was intended and planned as a "special Synod" of brief duration: it was to consist of a week for the exchange of information between east and west concerning experiences of faith in the last fifty years, and a second week for drawing up stimulating guidelines and action criteria designed to lead believers to a practical involvement in a new kind of evangelization appropriate to the social and cultural situation of the present day. It was not a Synod of the world's bishops, as was the special Synod of 1985, twenty years after the ending of Vatican II, nor was its purpose to tackle specific themes. It aimed at intensifying communion between Eastern and Western Europe and proclaiming the common intention to renew the manner of fulfilling the duty of evangelization in a future that looked like being particularly challenging. It was more a prophetic event than a blueprint for action.

The Synod's "Final Declaration" specifically stated that it was a "*first step*" towards the dawn of the third millennium.¹

At the foundation of the Synod's guidelines there is a careful consideration of the significance of the extraordinary events that took place in Europe in 1989. They must be considered by believers as a "*kairós*", i.e. a moment in the history of human development particularly enriched by the presence of the Holy Spirit. This gives rise to pastoral reflections for the assessment of the situations resulting from the new realities and the identification of the urgent needs as regards evangelization: as though the Lord himself were suggesting to the Pastors of the Church the path that should be followed by the People of God.

And at the very outset we have a point that is of value everywhere: the "enlightened reading" of historical events of the present day and context. It is not a question of interpreting them from a simple sociological or political point of view, but rather of

¹ Some facts about the Synod:

Participants.

138 members: 29 bishops from the east, 38 from the west; 11 fraternal delegates (representatives of 5 orthodox churches were absent: Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece); 8 religious superiors; various "auditores" and "adiutores" and other invited persons, including the President, Vice-president and Secretary of the European Conference of Religious, and some others.

Moderators.

3 President delegates (Cardinals Lustiger, Klemp, Martinez Somalo)

1 Reporter: Card. Ruini, with 2 special secretaries: Mgr Vilk and Mgr Lehemann;

1 Secretary General: Mgr Schotte.

Main documents.

Indications of the Synodal Secretary, 12.4.91

Letter of Pope from Fatima, 13.5.91

Letter on relations with the Orthodox, 31.5.91

Pope's address to Preparatory Commission, 5.6.91

The "Summary", 10.11.91

Two reports of Card. Ruini "before and after the interventions in the assembly".

The Pope's addresses

The Final Declaration

Course.

15 general Congregations 125 verbal interventions 6 sessions of language groups (12 groups) 5 auditions of those specially invited

a careful and communal reflection of faith on the pastoral perspectives offered us by the future of the humanity in which we are inserted. Without any doubt we can also make use for this purpose of the objective contributions of the human sciences, but we do not stop at their level. By faith we rise above them, in our concern to discover in the vicissitudes and challenges of these particular adults and young people of the present day the promptings God is offering us for seeking in the Gospel an adequate reply for solving their many problems.

Lack of attention to historical development, to what is taking place, to the new situations and the emerging culture, would be a truly harmful attitude that would clip our wings as regards our ability to take part effectively in the new evangelization.

It would be both abstract and evading the issue to think of God as being unconcerned with history. Vatican II has taught us, in fact, to allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, not only by interior reasoning and conclusions (based even on the most erudite theology) but also – and very practically – by considering his presence in history in the daily events which continually challenge us to find the response to them in the Gospel.

In the light of this first observation concerning the experience of the Synod, I thought with satisfaction of our own GC23 which led us to begin the journey of faith by making a serious pastoral assessment of the youth reality and its contexts. When compared with that of the Synod, our own assessment was limited to the small sector of the daily apostolic work we have to carry out among youth; but that too must be inserted in the great historical turnabout studied pastorally by the Bishops.

Collapse of ideologies?

The Synod has spoken of the fall of communism as a system for the structuring of society. The demolition of the Berlin wall, the new political situation in the former Soviet Union and the countries under its influence, the breakup of Yugoslavia, the fall of the regime in Albania, are all events of great importance, unexpected and even unthinkable, that have now become real and irreversible realities. They are surely the expression of the serious nature of the epoch-making changes through which we are living, and the collapse of a mendacious ideology.

But this does not mean that ideologies are finished. There are others in both western Europe and the world in general; but the collapse of real socialism leaves so many consequences in the fields of culture, economics, politics and religion, that they continue to be challenges to the faith and call for the intervention of a new evangelization, especially among young people.

The reaction brought about in the Pastors of the Church has not been one of celebration at the collapse of former regimes – even though they certainly thanked God for a kind of “miracle” in history (we may recall the expression of unspeakable amazement used by Mr Havel, the President of Czechoslovakia) – but rather that of the need to consider more clearly and concretely what the Church must do to carry out her specific mission in the face of so many previously unknown problems. The Bishops did not set out to provide responses by suggestions of a political, economic or cultural kind (which do not belong to their ministry, even though they are facing obligations which involve everyone), but with a religious and pastoral con-

cern to enlighten the minds and raise the hopes of Christ's disciples and men of good will.

From the considered interpretation by the Pastors of the effects of the downfall of communism there has come an observation which is very significant for evangelization. The term "anthropological catastrophe" has been used to sum up the very serious negative consequences of what has happened. The harm done to freedom, which has been alienated from its true nature, has become very clear: the freedom of the individual, of his conscience and creativity, the ideals to be pursued and the meaning of life, have all been eroded. But it must be added at once that the remedy for so serious a calamity is not to be sought simply in the kind of freedom proclaimed by consumerism. Unfortunately in Europe, even on this side of the Berlin wall, there were and still are ideological deviations which damage man's freedom, and hence harm both individual and society. It was the Synod's hope that the new evangelization would bring it about that Christians would become in society true *witnesses to Christ who has set us free*, or in other words proclaimers of the "liberating" Gospel.

The collapse of the dominating ideology of eastern Europe has highlighted the ideological deficiencies of the west.

Scholars have noted that in recent decades eastern Europe has witnessed a progressive dissociation between Christian belief and observance, with religious practices becoming "weak" and rather subjective, following personal criteria; while in central and eastern Europe, despite the wonderful examples of fidelity to Christ and the Church by many believers, a significant number of citizens have forgotten the faith and many indeed have set themselves against it. In the newly liberated coun-

tries there is an urgent need for cultural and ecclesial updating; they lack resources and are fragile from a social and political point of view. In them there is a mirage of consumerism, and dangerous nationalist movements are springing up.

The result is that at the end of the second millennium one can no longer speak of "Christian" Europe, but rather of "pluralist" Europe with areas of atheism, agnosticism, indifferentism, a strong presence of other religions and serious internal divisions within Christianity itself. And of course there are also some healthy Christian roots to be given new life.

The Synod proclaimed without any ambiguity that in this context the Church is called upon to dedicate herself urgently to the new evangelization, which includes the task of providing a proper education to human freedom. Anthropological errors stem not only from atheistic totalitarian systems; they are also the result of a bad ideological use of certain scientific data. It is important that the Gospel now occupy the space usurped by these ideological intrusions.

One of the tasks of the new evangelization is the wise amalgamation of three great sources of truth in the service of freedom: the anthropology of the current reality, the application of the Gospel to the present context, and the Church's social doctrine. Without the mutual compenetration of these three aspects there can be no efficacious education to the faith. The Synod has placed particular insistence on this theme, showing that freedom is not in itself an absolute and individualistic value but is directed to "truth" and to "communion". The perfection of the human person, in fact, is love: that love of charity which has its source in the life of the Three who are One, and its supreme model in the mystery of

Christ. In lay western culture, on the other hand, we are witnessing a deeply confusing "debacle of love" (and hence also of "freedom") because of selfishness, strife, eroticism, injustice and lack of solidarity.

There is no loving freedom if self-donation in sacrifice and solidarity is lacking. Experience teaches us that human efforts by themselves can never succeed in creating an earthly paradise, either for individuals, families, society or the world at large. And we must note here at once that there will be no "new evangelization" for Europe or any other continent unless human progress in anthropology and sociology is permeated by the Gospel.

This is why the Synod appeals for the inculturation of the Gospel. Today's evangelizers are called to develop a serious cultural preparation in which the present human sciences will have a primary place. The "new evangelization" is in fact the "evangelization of the *new world*".

Exhortation to apostolic breadth of vision

Any ecclesial event is necessarily localized in character, but usually carries with it consequences on a universal scale because it touches the life of faith that belongs to all, even though it must necessarily begin from a local experience.

This is true in a special way of the recent Synod, and its members were fully aware of it. They were concerned, in fact, to avoid in their suggestions anything that could give rise in any way to the least danger of "Euro-centricity". They spoke explicitly of a future European unity open to a universal solidarity: "Europe", says the Declaration, "has given

the rest of the world much in culture and technology which now constitutes the heritage of world civilization. But the history of Europe has known many dark moments, among which it is right to mention imperialism and the oppression of many peoples together with the exploitation of their resources. In fact a certain 'Euro-centricity', whose consequences can be noted at the present day, is to be rejected."²

² Declaration 11

Hence it is indispensable that the new evangelization should include a strong sense of historical conversion, in view of a more solid society which will be able to look beyond its own boundaries and interests.

The cry of Christ suffering comes to us very strongly today from many parts of the world: "we must respond to this call with concrete options which will aim at an end to the arms trade, an opening of our markets, a more even arrangement of international debt, and everything which in those regions would foster cultural and economic growth as well as democratic forms of life. Among other things Europe itself has drawn great riches from the treasury of other races and cultures... All sorts of needs and the great sufferings of the world remind us of God's eschatological promises, which can never be fully realized in this world. Through real solidarity and love we can, in the midst of a divided and torn humanity, set things in motion and sow seeds for the future fulfilment of eternal perfection."³

³ *ibid.*

In this sense the Synod thought it well to highlight the missionary generosity of Europe through the centuries, asking that it be continued and intensified at the present day. The various interventions by representatives from North and South America, from Africa, Asia and Australasia, present in the as-

sembly, gratefully confirmed this missionary thrust springing from the genuine apostolic concern of so many European believers.

Moreover, the lesson of the Synod refers also to two other vital aspects of the new evangelization which are of concern everywhere.

The first is that of an apostolic boldness of faith which does not take fright nor draw back in the face of an enormous task that at first sight seems impossible: that of evangelizing the building of a united Europe; a hundred peoples locked in strife who must be brought to live together and love each other in a single common homeland. When we think of the innumerable religious, political, economic, cultural, racial and historical problems inherent in such a plan, we may begin to think that the fascinating goal is in fact an unattainable utopia. And yet the directives of the Synod urge Christians to become leaders in the project. Time will be needed, a thousand and one difficulties will have to be overcome, the complexity of the operation will demand help from science and technology; it will call for dialogue, perseverance and reconciliation. The Church is well aware that such a project belongs primarily to the temporal order, but she is not for this reason unconcerned about it. Rather is she convinced that this is a particularly important way for her new evangelization work. She wants to be faithful to Vatican II which declared: "The work of Christ's redemption concerns essentially the salvation of men; it takes in also, however, the renewal of the whole temporal order."⁴ And "far from depriving the temporal order of its autonomy, of its specific ends, of its own laws and resources, or its importance for human well-being, this design, on the contrary, increases its energy and excellence, raising it at the same time to the level of man's in-

⁴ AA 5

⁵ *ibid.* 7

tegral vocation here below.”⁵

And so apostolic boldness in evangelization has no fear about tackling enormous tasks concerned with concrete life in the temporal order, because it feels itself enlightened and supported in its specific religious and pastoral mission by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And here I think it important to emphasize that the heart of the evangelizer must cultivate in itself the ardour of theological hope as its daily nourishment. The knowledge that he is called to collaborate at a moment in history characterized by a more intense presence of the Holy Spirit should lead him to rise above himself and his limitations, in the knowledge that the Spirit is his driving force in a Church which “saves” the man of the present day, and which is sent to be the leaven as a “sacrament” in the epoch-making changes that are taking place, even though the manner in which it is all happening is puzzling. The evangelizer’s apostolic breadth of vision is nourished always at the spring of hope. We could say that the “miracle” of which President Havel spoke can be multiplied in the new pastoral work by the Christian hope of the evangelizers.

The second vital aspect of the new evangelization which is of concern everywhere is the awareness that the changes we are witnessing in today’s world are signs, as the Council said, of an “emerging culture” which is becoming ever more *universal*. A careful reading of the introduction to the document “*Gaudium et spes*”⁶ assures us that in every continent man is “living today through a new period of his history”, marked by “a real social and cultural transformation.”⁷ It is not a question of Europe alone, but of a new era in history which is beginning for everyone. The cultures of different

⁶ GS 4-10

⁷ *ibid.* 4

peoples must necessarily take account of such deep transformations. "A more universal form of culture is gradually taking shape, and through it the unity of mankind is being fostered and expressed in the measure that the particular characteristics of each culture are preserved."⁸

⁸ *ibid.* 54

The new evangelization cannot prescind from this fact; it must help to overcome the recurrent danger of deviations stemming from various national, continental, racial and ideological prejudices which imprison the dynamism of cultures, open of its nature to the future of all men, in areas fenced off from universality and the future. Dangerous examples of such short-sightedness can be found everywhere to some extent, brought about for the most part more by uncontrolled feelings and partial projects than by an understanding of faith.

The fact is that at the present day the simultaneous maturing of the various signs of the times is taking place in Europe with ever greater acceleration, with the result that the faith and the Gospel are meeting with a collection of urgent challenges; if these are given an adequate response by the Church they will provide a stimulus for all and also, to some extent, a source of inspiration for pressing ahead. The new evangelization will be characterized by an ability for inculturation and an authentic missionary mentality concerned about the many new varieties of the pagan *Areopagus* and by the bringing together of people of different race, culture and religion. But the building of such a pluralist society is an enterprise that needs God for its attainment.

The evangelization of a new Europe will not be the restoration of something of yesterday, but a new beginning of faith in the living together of people in a manner previously unknown: it will be a

new kind of presence of the Holy Spirit in the emerging culture so as to produce a hitherto unfamiliar civilization of love.

This apostolic breadth of vision requires an open mentality, fostered by a world vision and universal solidarity – qualities which find genuine growth in the living mystery of Christ's Church. The education of young people to the faith therefore means being able to form in them these same values of a world vision and of solidarity with all peoples.

New paths to follow

In a circular letter I wrote some three years ago⁹ I spoke especially of the change of mentality that the new evangelization presupposes in us. The European Synod has now put to us some large-scale problems that are emerging and which must be tackled by new methods. They refer specifically to Europe, but they give light in fact to everyone. They are challenges which spring from the new cultural situation and which highlight some of the greatest difficulties for those working in the pastoral sector.

In Europe at the present day there are many who know nothing at all of the Gospel message; others, equally numerous, remain indifferent to it or unbelievers even though they know it; more than a few are still looking positively for a transcendent experience but think they can find it in other religions; others too there are who explicitly reject Christianity, being strongly imbued with a scientific anthropocentrism which leads them to a growing conviction that they have now reached a "post-christian" era; hence they consider the heritage of

⁹ AGC 331

the Gospel in its essential points and especially in its moral teaching to be pre-scientific and out of date, and so to be eliminated.¹⁰

From this situation massive challenges arise for the Gospel if it be read out of context. In reality the Word of God, even though it was fully pronounced twenty centuries ago, addresses practical problems of all generations. The attitudes mentioned above represent, in fact, only the tip of the immense iceberg of the epoch-making changes.

In their examination of the context the Synodal Fathers have pointed mainly to the following major problems:

- the *materialistic standpoint* from which the attempt is made to interpret anthropology;
- the *political secularism* to be placed at the foundation of the new democratic and pluralistic city;
- the *vast pagan contingent*, with so many of them unbaptized, who are concerned only about their own immediate needs;
- the *religious relativism* that is evident in the face of the widely varying ideas of transcendence among different religions.

By this time Europe is indeed a continent that is pluricultural, plurinational, pluriracial and plurireligious; can it possibly become the homeland of a solid civilization? The Synod has responded with hope. Today's Europe resembles an immense crucible or, if you like, a huge kiln for the forging of a new kind of citizenship. Evangelization will have to come up with new schemes for enlightening and responding to new challenges that never arose in the past, and in particular to the four major problems referred to above.

Let us look at some of the ways proposed to us as evangelizers of the young for tackling the above themes.

¹⁰ A research carried out in 1981 in 9 western countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Spain) resulted: Those believing in some way in God - 75%; in the soul - 58%; in sin - 57%; in life after death - 43%; in the devil - 25%; in reincarnation - 21%. cf. J.STOETZEL: *I valori del tempo presente. Un'inchiesta europea*, SEI, Turin 1984, ch.4

— The *materialistic standpoint*, widespread at the present day, is not just a blunder of ignorant people; it is closely linked with scientific and technical progress. It presents the model of a critical and self-assured citizen, formally respectful of others but without any convictions linked with transcendent principles. To the question: what kind of individual is needed for the new culture?, he replies on a “rational” philosophical and scientific level which excludes from anthropology any real recourse to God. The mentality is one of “learned ignorance”, which seeks among other things to formulate an entirely new system of ethics, to be translated when possible even into social norms.

Man would be a purely earthly being, for whom the proclamation of the Gospel would have no sense; neither would sin, redemption or immortality. Put in these rapid and over-simplified terms, some might think it an attitude easy to correct, but the reality is far different. The educator to the faith is called upon to provide a competent response, and for this he needs to attend to at least two demanding and complementary aspects: in the first place he needs an adequate anthropological preparation, so as to be on a par with today’s scientific progress; and secondly he needs the ability to show that faith is never really at odds with reason and that the latter is essentially and historically open to the transcendent: a competence therefore, and it is new from a cultural point of view, about what man is in his critical maturing.

I think it important for us Salesians to emphasize this aspect. It implies a serious reassessment, for instance, of the school, in line with the deep renewal called for by Vatican II. The way of the school certainly belongs to the new evangelization: it is the third symbol in our oratorian criterion for

renewal.¹¹

¹¹ cf. C 40

How silly therefore to talk about withdrawing from schools so as to do pastoral work at the present day! The school has a most urgent part to play in evangelization. The Holy Father recently declared in the First National Congress of the Italian Church on the Catholic School,¹² that it is the place of culture for the purposes of education and that it bears within itself great resources for the new evangelization. The dialogue between faith and culture is fundamental: "The Church expects much from Catholic schools for her mission in the world in which the cultural challenge is primary, most daring and most productive."¹³

¹² 20-23 Nov.1991

During the Synod emphasis was rightly laid on the importance that must be given in the new evangelization to Catholic schools and universities, in which cultural and scientific development grows in harmony with the faith. The Synodal Declaration expressly declares that "in nations recently freed from communism there is an urgent need to establish Catholic universities and schools."¹⁴

¹³ Oss. Romano (Eng. edtn)
2.12.91

Here therefore we have a new way, that of re-thinking the school in line with the demands of the Gospel in the prevailing context.

¹⁴ Declaration 5

Political secularism has a strong incidence on the democratic dimension of the pluralistic society; and this is something with many implications for the life of faith, especially of the lay faithful and the young. As is noted in the encyclical "Centesimus annus", there is a tendency at the present day to consider agnosticism as the fundamental philosophy and attitude for a democratic mentality; the believer, convinced of a very definite vision of faith concerning man, would be considered unreliable

from a democratic point of view, since he would not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends.¹⁵

¹⁵ cf. CA 46

In the face of such a judgement the new evangelization will have to give particular importance to the teaching of the social doctrine of the Church, which specifically enlightens democratic social life with the integral truth regarding the individual and society.

In its light the vast horizon opens up of the true nature of the lay state, intensely proclaimed by Vatican II and implying in evangelizing activity a large-scale relaunching of the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the world. "Laicism" is always prey to domination by some ideology which distorts its ability to interpret the temporal order correctly. There is an urgent need to present in a lucid and updated manner a faith that can perceive in the whole of created reality the autonomies intended and inserted by the Creator in the very nature of created things.

Here therefore is a new way that we too can pursue in evangelization with constancy and dedication: that of the "lay-project" and of the social dimension of charity to which the GC23 specifically invites us.¹⁶

¹⁶ cf. GC23 246; 203 ff.

The vast pagan contingent, especially of young people, who know nothing of Christ and his Church, is a challenge to the Christian community. The customary pastoral mediations of parish life do not reach them; they need specific interventions, thought up with missionary creativity and suitable pedagogy. On this new frontier we Salesians must be able to devise original ways of approaching the young and of rethinking the way we can present

the hierarchy of revealed values; this is something that calls for a gradual pedagogical process and a great deal of pastoral inventiveness.

What the Pope said to us about "prevention" should be considered in this connection with particular attention: "the art of positive education by putting forward what is good through appropriate experiences which call for the involvement of the pupil and are attractive because of their splendour and lofty nature; the art of producing growth in the young persons 'from within' by appealing to their inner freedom to oppose external conditioning and formalism; the art of winning the heart of young people so as to inculcate in them a joyful and satisfied attraction to what is good, correcting deviations and preparing them for the future by means of a solid character formation."¹⁷

¹⁷ IP 8

In connection with "missionary" work among the young, this evidently shows us a new way of re-launching the oratory criterion of Don Bosco. The new evangelization requires us to be generous in "refounding the Oratory", which is precisely what the GC23 asked us to do.¹⁸

¹⁸ cf. GC23 345-350

Religious relativism begins from the positive fact of a certain openness to the transcendent and the search for a religious experience, but it can often open the way to religious experiences that are not Christian. It must be kept in mind too that in Europe there are well-deserving Christian churches that are non-Catholic and there is an ever increasing number of immigrants belonging to great religions born in other continents; at the present day also we are witnessing the spreading of various sects.

This is a hard and somewhat complex fact that compels us to incorporate strongly in the new

evangelization the demands of an *ecumenical mentality* and the *ability for religious dialogue*. The situation is a delicate one and must be approached by a variety of commitments appropriate to the religious groups concerned, and to be pursued with clear convictions about our own Catholic identity.

In settling on new ways for evangelization we have a particular interest in two aspects that the evangelizer must acquire and develop: to be a sign and bearer of the faith with a clear ecumenical mentality, and to cultivate an ability for dialogue so as to expound the mystery of Christ together with its objective and central nature through a gradual pedagogical process. This new way touches more directly on the formation of the evangelizers or their change of mentality.

Of these two aspects, the first (that of the ecumenical mentality) requires us to make a careful revision of our study programmes and the formation of our confreres in matters concerning other Christian churches, the great religions, and also as regards a knowledge of the more prominent sects present in the area. This will be a help to a more realistic cultivation of the identity of the evangelizer's own Catholic faith by appealing to historical data, not so much to defend a thesis as to know the religious thought of men with whom we live.

The second aspect (that of dialogue) takes us back to the preventive system with its fostering of easy approach and exchange of views, of respect and understanding for others even if one cannot always share their opinions. Here it is important to keep alive in us all the spiritual and methodological heritage contained in our symbolic name of "Salesians": it embraces affability, service, dialogue and patient exchange of views. It makes us think, as Don Bosco wanted, of our Patron St Francis de

Sales and his extraordinary pastoral charity, especially in the difficult mission of the Chablais.

We need urgently to acquire an ecumenical mentality that is capable of dialogue.

I think that the consideration of these four major problems, though presented here in a very compressed form, can lead us to develop new ways: to intensify the pastoral quality of the school, to dedicate ourselves to the planning and realization of the lay project and the social dimension of freedom, to relaunch the Oratory with initiatives in group activity, and to form in ourselves a mentality for dialogue in respect of the various religious experiences.

In this way the new evangelization will gain strength as a dynamic force in the complicated changing era which challenges us. Faith gives us energy for the future and fosters our fidelity to the mission we have received from God: it is not something passive nor a harking back to the past, but a new beginning. It is something for which we have to pay a price – but it is indispensable.

The unchangeable driving force

The Synod's Final Declaration contains a specific indication for ensuring the authenticity of evangelization in a context that is so new and variegated. "It is not enough", says the text, "to spread 'Gospel values' like justice and peace. Evangelization is truly Christian only if is preached the person of Christ, who is their source and foundation, as well as being the centre of the whole Gospel message."¹⁹

¹⁹ Declaration 3

It is a question of perceiving and bringing others

to discover in Christ the great modern challenge of a new choice of God; not the God of our imagination, but the God who is objectively true in himself and in history; not a religious elaboration from below but a divine revelation from above of a historical kind; not the imperfect prophecy of a man, but the human incarnation of God; not a repetition of hackneyed habit, but an enthusiastic daily rediscovery.

A God who loves us, a God who creates us, a God who speaks to us, a God who is solid with us in our sufferings and victory. Not therefore an unknown God who is far away, but a God who is close to us as a Father, a God who makes himself one of us, a God who comes to us individually and forgives our sins, a God who rebuilds us from within and enables us to overcome death itself, a God who does not take away our suffering but brings it to fruition in a happiness that will never end. The Gospel of Christ consists in proclaiming to every individual: God loves you, God is with you, God saves you!

Here I would like to recall what we said when reflecting for the first time on the new evangelization. We saw that we had to consider seriously many cultural innovations accompanying cultural development; not to do so would mean paralysis. But "today as yesterday and as it will be again tomorrow, the supreme novelty of Christianity remains alive, enthralling and decisive: it is the death and resurrection of Christ, a novelty which is at once historical and theological. It is not enough to recognize the exceptional nature of this event in an abstract way; it must be presented as the most important 'news' for the present day, something which amazes and renews, which has a response for the most distressing questions, which opens the

life of every individual and all human history to the transcendent; it is a matter of the mysterious eschatological dimension (i.e. of the final end, already in some sense present) which has its incidence on human cultures, enlightens them, judges and purifies them, discerns them and can foster the values emerging from them. The new evangelization bases everything on this supreme event: the novelty par excellence! There has never been, nor will there ever be in the future, a novelty greater than this one; it is the yardstick for the measurement of all others; it never grows old; it is the perennially greatest wonder of God's insertion in history; it is the new creation anticipated in our old world. We have to be able to make this supreme novelty visible and communicate it to others."²⁰

²⁰ AGC 331, p.11-12

This, therefore, is the Gospel; and there is no other! It cannot change because not even God himself could devise an event greater than this; it is for ever the supreme expression of his love for man. If we speak of a new evangelization, said the Synod, "it is precisely because the Holy Spirit is always bringing forth the newness of the Word of God and continually stirs men and women spiritually. Moreover, this evangelization is new because it is not immutably linked to any particular civilization, since the Gospel of Jesus Christ can shine forth in all cultures."²¹

²¹ Declaration 3

The role of Religious and the leading part played by the young.

The mission to evangelize is a task for all the People of God. From the new kind of relationship between the Church and the world a requirement

emerges which is very important as regards the task of the lay faithful in this connection. They are in the front line for meeting innovations in the temporal order and in the emerging culture. But together with them, and as their energizing principle, there is the consecrated life, which is a strong reminder to all that the world cannot be transformed and offered to the Father without the spirit of the beatitudes.²² For this reason Religious have a strategic part to play in the new evangelization. History shows us that to them was due in large part the first evangelization of all five continents. Paul VI, in the Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii nuntiandi", speaks of the "immense contribution" they made in the past and continue to make at the present day: "Thanks to their consecration they are eminently willing and free to leave everything and to go and proclaim the Gospel even to the end of the earth. They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration. They are generous: often they are found at the outposts of the mission, and they take the greatest of risks for their health and their very lives. Truly the Church owes them much."^{23, 24}

The great problems of the present day have need of an urgent renewal by Religious so that the testimony given by their identity and apostolate may be of greater quality: "Religious men and women and their communities will be able to offer to all of Europe the witness of a life rooted in the Gospel if the call to what is essential in consecrated life becomes more deeply rooted in them."²⁵ That "if" gives us much food for thought. The main objectives to be realized are: the primacy of spirituality; the awareness of the ecclesial nature of the charisms of the religious life; and the need for an overall pastoral project drawing its inspiration from

²² cf. LG 31

²³ EN 69

²⁴ Men and women Religious in Europe total 460,000 at the present day, half the number for the whole world.

²⁵ Declaration 5

the document "Mutuae relationes", which is still relevant at the present day.

There you have the point! Those Religious who were the first evangelizers of continents were full of the ardour of faith, apostles of the Church and collaborators of the bishops. In our own brief history, we Salesians can recall names like Cagliero, Fagnano, Milanesio, Lasagna, Costamagna, Balzola, Evasio Rabagliati, Cimatti, Versiglia and Caravario, etc. Their example is a call to us to renew the quality of our witness and activity. The words of John Paul II have already become classical: "new enthusiasm, new methods, new expressions."

In an interview on the topic "What new evangelization?", the theologian Max Thurian was asked whether there was some model of an evangelizer who had a special fascination for him at the present day. Without any hesitation he replied that he considered as a sublime model the saintly Curé of Ars, who became among his people a convincing exponent of who God is and of his infinite mercy. In the evangelizer there must be a contact with Christ and an ability to communicate his mystery to others that permeates his entire personal existence: it is more a matter of testimony than of reasoning.

Now if we Salesians were to ask ourselves to whom we should look for a model for our own inspiration, I do not think there would be any doubt about the reply – we must look to Don Bosco. Not indeed for a deeper understanding of the cultural innovations of the present day, but rather to reflect with him on those three elements indicated by the Pope for the efficacy of the new evangelization. Don Bosco, the evangelizer of the young, is our model and inspiration in each of the three elements: zeal, method and expression.

— As regards *zeal*: Don Bosco teaches us the intense pastoral implication of “Da mihi animas”; the primacy of the salesian spirit must characterize our renewed zeal. This is a commitment we have taken on in the period following the Council, and to neglect it would render us incapable of educating to the faith.

— In *method*, i.e. in the art of education, he is the model in his pastoral practice, though at the same time we must give careful attention to the challenges inherent in the “new education”.²⁶ The Holy Father addressed to us the letter “*Iuvenum Patris*” precisely to reassess this treasure of educative criteriology for the present day.

— In *ways of expression*, he inspires us by his tireless apostolic creativity. Think, for instance, of his initiatives (all of them new and original among the people of his day) in the fields of the use of spare time, schools for the common people, entry to the world of work, social communication, and confidence in group activity among youth. New situations are continually arising at the present day which call for creativity from evangelizers, moved by the same spiritual ardour and the same criteria regarding method.

The GC23 has asked us to “re-found the Oratory”, through a renewal in active fidelity to these principles which shine so brilliantly in our Founder. Drawing our inspiration from him, we want in all truth to be leaders in the new evangelization.

The recent Synod goes on to make a special appeal to “young men and women to be leaders as evangelizers of the new generations.”²⁷ We must commit ourselves to the spreading and animation of this appeal, convinced that (in the words of “*Christifideles laici*”) “youth must not simply be

²⁶ cf. AGC 337

²⁷ Declaration 5

considered as an object of pastoral concern for the Church: in fact, young people are and ought to be encouraged to be active on behalf of the Church as leading characters in evangelization and participants in the renewal of society.”²⁸

²⁸ CL 46

The deliberations of the GC23 need to be carefully studied in every community so as to draw up plans for putting them effectively into practice.

Salesian involvement

I think it is one of the Rector Major's duties to invite confreres to be in vibrant practical harmony with the Church's thinking, in her experiences of the Holy Spirit and in her bold apostolic projects. The European Synod of Bishops is an ecclesial event that should stir us deeply, the confreres of Europe in the first place but later all those in the other continents too, but in different ways. Something similar will happen soon for the confreres of Latin America and then for those of Africa, after their respective Bishops Synods, the results of which will touch the whole Congregation. Each of these events is a moment of grace for the universal Church, and hence for all our Congregation.

Meanwhile our European provinces (and they number no less than 40!) are committed to a meeting at the Generalate next June of all the Provincials with the Rector Major and General Council, to consider what steps can be taken, in association with the other constituent groups of the Salesian Family, to meet the Synod's indications. In August next at Colle Don Bosco there will also be the "Confronto-92" with young people from our foundations all over Europe to launch them in the same

direction. In Rome we have already had meetings with some Provincials of Eastern Europe, accompanied by the members of their councils, to see what can be done in connection with the many problems that have arisen; there have also been meetings with the delegates for youth pastoral work from the same areas, who have the urgent task of creating a whole new approach to young people.

Summing up, you can see that in harmony with the Synod there is a widespread desire to promote communion and participation, and this is a stimulus above all to our pastoral work for the young. The fact that they have started out on this road has given vital growth in these provinces to the sense of Church and will prompt continual creative and promising apostolic suggestions. But all provinces indeed should draw inspiration from what the celebration of this Synod means for the universal Church.

Among its stimulating aspects we may emphasize the following:

- awareness of the historical importance of the period in which we are living and its informed interpretation for the renewal of pastoral activity;
- education to a faith that will provide living energy for the individual, the family and the society that has to be renewed;
- apostolic breadth of vision and hope rooted in the power of the Holy Spirit for great apostolic commitments in the future;
- the true nature of the new evangelization and the urgent need for it, with its centering on the mystery of Christ in the perspective of the many paths to be followed;

- the evangelical interpretation of an anthropological turning-point curbed by ideological deviations of various kinds which requires enlightenment of the revealed truth for the benefit of human freedom;
- inculturation of the Gospel as a missionary dimension of education to the faith: a new humanism to be purified and developed, in which a proper promotion of women will clearly appear;
- the overcoming of all nationalism and "continentalism" for a concrete formation to universal solidarity;
- dedication to the formation of the laity which has a leading place in the mission of the Church for the world;
- the exchange of gifts between different ecclesial experiences, with the emergence of a living testimony of the mystery of the cross and the vitally indispensable nature of Peter's ministry;
- the desirability that in the hearts of the evangelizers there may be no separation between spirituality, liturgy and theology, as testimony to a vital faith-synthesis;
- formation of conscience in the delicate field of moral conduct, etc.

All these aspects, and others as well, are to be found in the climate of the interventions, dialogue and documents of the European Synod of Bishops.

And so we do well to give proper value to this visit of the Holy Spirit at a historic moment that brings people of different cultures ever closer together towards a universal convergence in which the christian faith is the light of truth and the energy for cohesion.

Conclusion

In the Synod there was frequent reference also to our Blessed Lady. More than once there was a moving recognition of her motherly protection during the dark years of terrible dictatorship. It was insistently stated that the great events of '89 were due to her special intervention; her role as Mother of the Church throughout history is permanently and mysteriously efficacious; she is indeed the Help of Christians.

In connection with the new evangelization the Synod always thought of her as being united with us in an attitude of prayer in the heart of the Church as at Pentecost, to invoke the Holy Spirit with unswerving trust; in this connection the statement of Paul VI was recalled: "May she shine forth as the Star of that constantly renewed evangelization which the Church must promote."²⁹

²⁹ EN 82

And since all true apostles of the faith have need of continual self-evangelization "through assiduous prayer and meditation on the Word of God and the daily effort to put it into practice"³⁰, the Synodal Fathers turned to her as the lofty model who "teaches us to be open to the Word of God and embrace it with our whole heart: 'she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Lk 2; 51). In this way, next to her Son, she accompanied the preaching of the Gospel from the beginning."³¹

³⁰ Declaration 5

³¹ Declaration: conclusion.

The members invoked Mary under the title of *Hodegetria*, because she shows everyone the way to reach Christ and to proceed unhesitatingly towards the true faith.

It is with this trust, the fruit of a living hope, that we too have recourse to her, convinced that all our commitment to the education of young people

to the faith finds in her the Teacher and Guide.

Don Bosco has taught us to love her and invoke her as our helper precisely because of her permanent and always active motherhood of the Church on its pilgrimage through the centuries.

We may well think that the recent Synod was a meaningful gift of the Mother of the Church to set it more securely on the way towards the goal of the third millennium.

Let us be grateful to her and feel ourselves invited by her to take up courageously the arduous and complex task of being evangelizers of young people at the present day.

My cordial greetings to all of you in the joy of the paschal mystery.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

Don F. Viganò