

# acts

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

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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**N. 348**

**Year LXXV**

**april-june 1994**

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Édition extra commerciale  
Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco  
Via della Pisana, 1111  
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ESSE GI ESSE - Istituto Salesiano Pio XI - Roma - Tel.: 78.27.819

*Finito di stampare: Aprile 1994*



## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### **"BE ON THE WATCH, WITH YOUR ROBES HITCHED UP AND YOUR LAMPS ALIGHT!"**

- "Religious life and discipline" - Aversion to the concept of "discipline" - Spiritual significance of the "Rule of life" - The reasons behind the Eucharist - Formation to "consecrated freedom" - Authority a service of animation and government - Themes for an examination of conscience - Joseph and Mary.

Rome, Solemnity of St Joseph  
19 March 1994

My dear confreres,

I have just returned from Ethiopia where I saw with joy a part of our vast Project-Africa that is very much alive and full of hope. It is very impressive with the novices and young Ethiopian confreres who ensure the future of Don Bosco's charism in that great country. We must be grateful to God and to the generous missionaries who are working there with fidelity and enthusiasm.

The motives for hope engendered by my experience will be increased in the coming months by two events that will be strong incentives to growth: the Special Synod of the African Bishops and the



beatification of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians Sr Maddalena Caterina Morano.

— *The African Synod* will take place in Rome in the month of April. In its working document are presented the great lines of future pastoral work for the entire continent (inculturation, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, justice and peace, the dignity of the individual and the advancement of women, and the means of social communication). One of the points to be emphasized in this document is the concern for more adequate youth pastoral work, since more than 40% of the present population of Africa and Madagascar are below the age of eighteen years. We await with particular attention the guidelines that will come in this connection. Fr Luciano Odorico, our Councillor General for the Missions, has been chosen as one of the consultants at the service of the Synod.

— *Sister Maddalena Morano* will be the first FMA to be beatified after the canonization of Mother Mazzarello. The ceremony will take place at Catania on 30 April next, during the visit of the Pope to that historic Sicilian city. Sr Maddalena is an eminent model of authentic salesian life, begun by personal contact with Don Bosco and bearing in itself a particular interior apostolic conviction in both the style of union with God and in the spirit of initiative and hard work accompanied by broadness of vision. It is an event that takes us back to the sources of our charism and incites us to renew our fervour and enthusiasm; it is as though we were invited to make of the coming Synod on Consecrated Life in October a kind of launching pad for living the legacy of our Founder with greater fidelity and courage.



## 1. A topical theme

The recent Vatican document on *Fraternal Life in Community*, which is both practical and right up to date, in speaking of the process of liberation which leads religious to fraternal community, emphasizes the need also of renunciation and of fidelity to the demands of one's own religious profession: neglect in this field is harmful. "Many have noted", says the document, "that this has constituted one of the weak points of the recent period of renewal. There has been an increase of knowledge, and various aspects of communal life have been studied. Much less attention has been paid, however, to the ascetic commitment which is necessary and irreplaceable for any liberation capable of transforming a group of people into a Christian fraternity. Communion is a gift offered which also requires a response, a patient learning experience and struggle, in order to overcome the excesses of spontaneity and the fickleness of desires".<sup>1</sup>

Starting from this invitation I propose to recall attention to the vital theme of our asceticism, under the aspect of "religious discipline" and to explore its contents.

The title I have given to this circular recalls some meaningful expressions of Paul<sup>2</sup> and Luke<sup>3</sup> which sound like an opportune warning at the present day to contest with an evangelical conscience the permissive cultural climate that surrounds us. It will certainly be useful, and even urgent, to consider together the importance of asceticism for living the precious gift of apostolic consecration in an authentic manner.

<sup>1</sup> *Fraternal Life in community*, Congregation for Institutes of consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, n. 23

<sup>2</sup> cf. *1 Cor* 16, 13

<sup>3</sup> *Lk* 12, 35



## 2. "Religious life and discipline"

Article 134 of the Constitutions, in describing the particular role of the Vicar General, does not assign to him a special sector as in the case of the other Councillors, but entrusts to him the care of a global aspect of particular importance in our life. This aspect is expressed by two terms which are mutually related and hence cannot be disjoined: "consecrated life" and "religious discipline". They must not be separated because they are expressions of the same charismatic reality: when in fact the article of the Rule refers to consecrated life it does so from the standpoint of religious discipline; and when it refers to religious discipline it does so from the standpoint of consecrated life. And so, on the one hand, a typical aspect of our life as consecrated persons is made concrete – that of a way of life according to a specific Rule; and, on the other, the sense to be given to the term "discipline" becomes positively enlarged because it refers to the authentic nature of religious life itself.

Rather than being confused with the formative task specifically assigned to the Councillor for Formation, the duty entrusted to the Vicar General strengthens and integrates the overall concern that belongs to the Rector Major (whose Vicar he is) to "promote, in communion with the general council, the constant fidelity of the members to the salesian charism".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> C 126

It was precisely considerations based on Art. 134 of the Constitutions that led the Council during the last plenary session (which ended on 7 January last), to study among various other themes that of "Religious life and discipline", and to ask the Rector Major to bring the conclusions together in a circular letter.



In the plenary sessions of the General Council, in fact, it is the custom among other obligations to examine more deeply some themes which may serve to throw more light on the animation of the confreres. The Councillors first form small committees for a first analysis of the theme which will then be brought into a plenary sitting to reach common practical conclusions. The themes chosen for study are taken from those whose priority has emerged in contacts with the Provinces and in the analysis of visits.

Now, although experience is that, in general, the state of health of the Congregation in the field of "religious life and discipline" is sufficiently positive (even though there are unfortunately individuals who are off the track and situations that leave something to be desired), it seemed that this theme is particularly relevant at the present day.

The motives which prompt us to reflect together, rather than being directly found within the Congregation, are to be sought in a certain climate of cultural pollution: of permissiveness, of a loosening of ethical principles, of a weakening of charismatic pulling power, which have grown up in present-day society and which open the door to a secularism which is very dangerous, even for Institutes of consecrated life.

In this connection, one author writes: "I am referring to the relaxation evident in the fields of poverty, chastity and obedience: vows which are interpreted by many at the present day with strongly psychological and sociological criteria modified by lay cultural trends. I am referring also to the emargination which values like personal prayer, meditation, ascesis, spiritual direction, humility and service, are undergoing at the hands of a



too human desire for self-realization, for careerism, for self-management, for protagonism".<sup>5</sup>

It is a climate that surrounds us, based on relativism and horizons which are no more than anthropological, which bring out the fact that for Religious the theme of asceticism called for by their particular charism is both vital and urgent.

<sup>5</sup> VALENTINO BOSCO,  
*Per una vita consacrata  
in difficoltà: strategia di  
governo*, LDC Turin  
1992, p. 104

### 3. Aversion to the concept of "discipline"

Among the rapid changes that have taken place in recent decades there is also one that has rendered unacceptable (or even offensive) certain terms currently in use among Religious, as for example: "mortification", "observance", "discipline".

According to some people the term "mortification" would seem to imply a dualistic anthropology, now rejected, to the detriment of the body.

The term "observance" smacks of legalism, giving priority of consideration not to values but to the law. Our Commentary on the text of the Constitutions, assessing what truth there is in this reductive approach, states: "It is not the purpose of our Constitutions to lead us into a convent, there to live as observant religious; they call upon us to 'stand at Don Bosco's side' to be 'missionaries of the young'";<sup>6</sup> which is something needing an even more demanding asceticism.

<sup>6</sup> *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, Rome 1986, p. 30

And the term "discipline", which although deriving from *discere* (to learn) and conjuring up the idea of a "disciple" who should model his life on a teaching and on the corresponding practice,<sup>7</sup> has in fact seen its true meaning restricted and impoverished through the centuries, to the extent that it has come to indicate only rules and regulations,

<sup>7</sup> cf. ACG 293, 1979, circular on religious discipline



and even refer to corporal punishment, or the instrument used for ascetical flagellation (e.g. to administer or receive so many strokes of the discipline!).

It is evidently not to such restricted meanings that we refer. We are not speaking of military discipline, nor simply of pedagogical discipline, nor of that which belongs to sport. We are referring to the biblical setting of the disciple who listens to and follows Christ the Teacher, to learn from him how to behave and to conform the style of his own life to the great demands of his mystery.

Let us recall some telling declarations concerning the asceticism of the disciple: the one quoted by Luke: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple";<sup>8</sup> the one of Matthew: "Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven";<sup>9</sup> the exhortation of St Peter: "Gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully on the grace of Jesus Christ";<sup>10</sup> of St John: "By this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments";<sup>11</sup> of St Paul: "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong!"<sup>12</sup>

We could multiply quotations, but these are already sufficient to indicate the general significance we are giving to the theme.

We are referring to a concrete asceticism, a spiritual vigilance, a Rule of life, a concrete manner of being a disciple.

#### 4. Spiritual significance of the "Rule of life"

When we speak of "religious consecration" we are taking a place far above any simply legal or ju-

<sup>8</sup> Lk 14, 27

<sup>9</sup> Mt 5, 19

<sup>10</sup> 1 Pet 1, 13

<sup>11</sup> 1 Jn 2, 3

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 16, 13



ridical orbit; we are entering into the biblical concept of the Covenant, personal and communal, between ourselves and the Lord. He saturates us with the power and riches of his Spirit, and we give ourselves radically to him. But what we promise exceeds our unassisted capacity for fidelity, and so we commit ourselves to follow a manner or Rule of life, leaning on the power of the Spirit for the help to put it into practice. In this way we link the great values of the consecration also to particular normative mediations which serve as support, defence, and daily verification of the realization of our specific plan of evangelical life.

In the interesting "Introduction" to the Commentary on the Constitutions, it is stated precisely that we intend by the Rule of life "not only the description of the particular gospel inspiration but also the practical norms of religious conduct, i.e. a concrete manner of following Christ with a spiritual discipline and a particular apostolic method which provides a guide for the daily personal and community behaviour of the members".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> o.c. p. 27

To prescind from such mediations would be to render meaningless what we promise. How, for instance, could we live obedience, poverty and chastity in a radical manner, and at the same time neglect certain specific norms of our style of life?

Rather than look at the letter of such norms one looks at the vital demands of the "grace of consecration", which prompt and permeate the effort to be consistent: true "*religious* observance" proceeds from a level which is much higher and more convinced than that of a simple "*legal* observance".

Rightly then have the Vatican Council and the subsequent magisterium of the Popes insisted on the importance of this theme.



In the introduction to the decree *Perfectae caritatis* we read: "Now this Council proposes to deal with the life and discipline of those Institutes whose members make profession of chastity, poverty and obedience, and to make provision for their needs, as our times recommend".<sup>14</sup> In the text that follows, religious discipline is referred to as the faithful observance of the Rule of life.

<sup>14</sup> PC 1

Pope Paul in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio*, speaking of the dangers that must be overcome in today's environment, says to Religious: "Everyone can see how much the fraternal setting of an ordered existence with freely undertaken discipline of life helps you to attain union with God. This discipline is increasingly necessary for anyone who 'returns to the heart' in the biblical sense of the term".<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> ET 34

And further on, he says: "This is the meaning of the observances which mark the rhythm of your daily life. An alert conscience, far from looking upon them solely as obligations imposed by a rule, judges them from the benefits that they bring, inasmuch as they ensure a greater spiritual fullness. It must be affirmed that religious observances demand, far more than intellectual training of the will, a true initiation with the purpose of deeply *Christianizing* the individual in the spirit of the evangelical beatitudes".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 36

We look upon religious discipline precisely as an indispensable mediation for "Christianizing" our being.

For a better understanding of the mediations we may look at the two great poles of reference: the Eucharist and Religious Profession.



## 5 The reasons behind the Eucharist

The Eucharist is certainly the most proficient moment for the Christianization of our being. It is there that each day we become "disciples", developing in ourselves the sentiments of Christ himself. We know that the first followers of Jesus did not seem initially to be observing a special ascetic discipline: "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"<sup>17</sup> They no longer belonged to the Old Testament, when penance and fasting were substantially an appeal for the coming of the Messiah; they had no need of it because "the Bridegroom was with them". But after the paschal events, in discovering the reality of a "time in the Church" which is a period of waiting and preparation for the definitive second coming of the Lord, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast".<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Mk 2, 18

<sup>18</sup> Mk 2, 20

In this time, characterized by the eschatological dimension, ascetical discipline will not be abolished but will acquire a *new sense and modality* as a witness to living and feeling with Christ, who from the Eucharist continues to pour out the grace for being true "disciples" to face up to the challenges of the times and overcome the initiatives of sin.

As compared with the ascetical practices of Judaism and other religions, the Christian manifests his ascetic commitment with a *new spirit*, even though practices may appear outwardly the same. It is important therefore to perceive in what the novelty of this new spirit consists.

In the Eucharist, which assimilates us to Christ to constitute together his Mystical Body in history, we can easily identify the deep reasons of the new



spirit. Let us look at two of them: the “divine sonship” and the “human solidarity”.

— *THE DIVINE SONSHIP*. On the one hand, Jesus is the only-begotten Son of the Father; he lives in the highest communion with him, if we may put it that way, as man in perfect obedience, i.e. in that filial love which was the total gift of himself in the sacrifice of Calvary.

The human heart of Jesus is that of one obedient even until death, but this because of the intensity of his sonship and not for legal requirements: he is the Son who is intimately pleased to carry out his Father's will: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Mt 26, 39

— *HUMAN SOLIDARITY*. On the other hand, Jesus is the Second Adam, solidly the brother of all men, their representative and chief before God, the Redeemer who fights against the Evil One, the one who fully shares the responsibility for the sins of his brethren. The sin of man is grave indeed if the infinite mercy of God pardons it only through the cross. Through his radical solidarity, the heart of Jesus – albeit that of an innocent Lamb – considers it his personal mission and a duty inherent in his true and radical brotherhood to expiate the evil in man's history.

These two fundamental motivations represent the novelty of the mystery of the Incarnation, and hence the originality of the new Covenant, in which becoming a “disciple” to “Christianize one's own being” implies a new spirit in the whole of the ascetic and penitential field. In the Eucharist everything is ordered to becoming a “disciple” so as to foster in the heart the same sentiments of Christ in



his divine sonship ("sons in the Son"), and also in his human solidarity so that we can share responsibility with him in the Redemption.

The attitude of the true "disciple" (his "discipline"! ) is entirely set within the framework of a love which is the gift of itself in filial obedience to the Father and in the solidarity that brings redemption from sins, especially of those to whom he has been sent and of his brothers.

Religious discipline, seen in careful comparison with the eucharistic mystery is a concrete mediation for "Christianizing" our life: it leaves no room for an asceticism of other kinds, for individualism, for arbitrary independent decisions, for paltry compensations contrary to the radical nature of the evangelical counsels, to a superficial worldly style that has nothing of the spirit of the beatitudes (Jesus never dreamt of saying: "I will live discipline in my own way!").

## **6. Demands of religious Profession**

Another great point of reference for understanding the value of religious discipline is for us that of Profession: "The Constitutions are binding on every member in virtue of the obligation he has freely assumed before the Church by religious profession".<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> C 193

We have already referred to this above and we have also spoken of it in two circulars: one of 1986 in preparation for the celebrations of the first centenary of the death of Don Bosco,<sup>21</sup> and the other in 1987, when presenting the Commentary on the Constitutions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> ACG 319

<sup>22</sup> ACG 320



In connection with Profession we can consider two aspects of particular significance: that of consecration as a "Covenant agreement", and that of a specific manner of life which represents our Identity Card in the Church.

— The special consecration that takes place in religious Profession unites *in an act of mutual Covenant* the initiative of God (who ensures the assistance and power of the Holy Spirit), and the gift of himself to God on the part of the one making the Profession: it is a pact defined by a specific mission, by a particular community dimension and by the radical practice of the evangelical counsels.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> cf. C 3

On the part of God the Covenant implies a fidelity that cannot fail; on our part it implies the commitment to devote to him all our efforts,<sup>24</sup> following the plan of evangelical life of the Founder (the "patriarch" of our Covenant).

<sup>24</sup> cf. C 24

It is a matter of a pact which is completely free, in which the commitments which are taken on are not in themselves obligatory for all the faithful, but become so precisely in virtue of their Profession for those who are consecrated. This is something that demands loyalty because it is the concrete expression of a friendship intended to be indissoluble. The religious makes his Covenant grow by the daily practice of his own "consecrated freedom"; the consecration, in fact, develops and intensifies freedom through a particular evangelical discipline. We shall say more later about the relationship between freedom and discipline; here it is sufficient to emphasize that the religious Profession as a pact of mutual friendship implies on our part a true "fidelity to the commitment made" as "a response which we continually renew to the special Covenant that the Lord has made with us".<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> C 195



In this way the lack of observance of religious discipline becomes, in fact, an attack against the Profession and disloyalty to the friendship on which we have publicly embarked with the Lord.

— *The “Identity Card”* presented to those making the Profession is customarily called the “Rule of life”: it defines both the “spiritual riches” of the charism of our Founder in the Church and all “the apostolic project of our Society”,<sup>26</sup> with concrete indications concerning the manner of living together, communal norms, formation, and the sharing of responsibility in the exercise of the various roles.

<sup>26</sup> C 192

The very formula by which the Profession is made contains an explicit declaration of a practical commitment: “according to the way of the Gospel set out in the salesian Constitutions”.<sup>27</sup> These Constitutions represent “our basic code”, completed by the “General Regulations, the deliberations of the General Chapter, the general and provincial directories, and by other decisions made by competent authorities”.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> C 24

<sup>28</sup> C 191

In this way the Rule sets out a concrete religious discipline which effectively guides “the life and activities of communities and confreres”<sup>29</sup> in a living practice which is “much more than simple (legal) observance; it calls for fidelity supported by personal witness, by communion of life in the house, by a pastoral creativity to meet the challenges of the times, by an awareness of the local and universal Church, by a predilection for today’s needy youngsters, and by a tireless spirit of self-sacrifice every day of the year”.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> C 191

<sup>30</sup> *Project of Life SDB*, Rome 1986, p. 29

Why do we make of the Rule our “Identity Card in the Church”? Because it is the authoritative description, approved by the Apostolic See and pro-



fessed by the confreres, of the specific characteristics of the salesian charism of Don Bosco.

We know that the Church is the universal "sacrament" of salvation in the world, i.e. a visible sign which communicates its mystery through specific and perceivable existential means. In the People of God there are innumerable ways through which the ecclesial mission of salvation is signified, in the multiform exercise of one and the same holiness; to Religious, in particular, it belongs to testify to the fact that the world cannot be saved without the spirit of the beatitudes.

Now the charisms of religious life are many, each with its particular way of life by which it manifests to others the identity of its own vocation and mission. The practice of the indications and dispositions of the Rule of life enter globally in this way into the circle of that "sacramental" characteristic of the Church through which she presents to the world the mystery of Christ – "Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men, always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him".<sup>31</sup>

With the practice of the Rule of life we present visibly to the world a well defined aspect of the sacramental nature of the Church, as the universal "sign" of salvation.

Evidently in the Rule of life, following the indications in art.191 of our Constitutions, there are different levels of reference to religious discipline, to such an extent that in special circumstances a temporary dispensation by major superiors is possible "from individual disciplinary articles".<sup>32</sup> Here

<sup>31</sup> LG 46

<sup>32</sup> C 193



the adjective "disciplinary" is used in its restricted juridical sense to indicate some concrete norm and a regulatory disposition which does not necessarily touch on the project itself of our Identity Card.<sup>33</sup>

But these possible exceptions do not diminish the overall importance of religious discipline; indeed they confirm its validity and its deep theological and ecclesial significance. They clearly remind us, with a conviction that has been passed down in the family from one generation to the next, of the opening words of the text of the Constitutions: "For us Salesians our Rule Book is Don Bosco's living testament. 'If you have loved me in the past', he tells us, 'continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our Constitutions'" <sup>34</sup>

"To stay with Don Bosco" means to make of our Profession the source of our holiness: "The confreres who are living or have lived to the full the gospel project of the Constitutions are for us a stimulus and help on the path to holiness. The witness of such holiness, achieved within the salesian mission, reveals the unique worth of the beatitudes and is the most precious gift we can offer to the young".<sup>35</sup>

And so religious discipline is for us a characteristic part of that indispensable Christian asceticism that is proper to the "disciple" who wishes to participate in a vital fashion, like Don Bosco, in the mystery of his Master.

## 7. Formation to consecrated freedom

Our freedom of disciples is "consecrated", i.e. purified, strengthened by the Holy Spirit and raised

<sup>33</sup> It would be well to read the entire commentary on art. 193 in the *Project of Life SDB*, pp. 1019-1022

<sup>34</sup> C Foreword

<sup>35</sup> C 25



to a greater human authenticity. It may be useful to reflect briefly on the relationships between freedom and discipline, because at first sight they may appear to some people like two contrasting concepts: they might say: the more freedom the less discipline, and the more discipline the less freedom.

Many consider as "free" a person who has the power always to make autonomous decisions in line with his own tastes and desires, who can choose and change as he pleases, who can make his own arrangements without dependence on others. But this is evidently a caricature which does not respect reality, even though there may be some aspects to it which are true.

It is true that freedom is a fundamental human value; it merits special attention because it constitutes man in his deepest being. The individual perfects himself through initiatives of freedom, but with a correct conscience enlightened by objective truth and with true freedom to act, and not the slave of passions, of ideologies, injustice, conditioning, or of sickness or lack of maturity.

"Freedom", says the Holy Father in his Letter to Families, "cannot be understood as a license to do *absolutely anything*: it means a *gift of self*. Even more: it means an *interior discipline of the gift*. The idea of gift contains not only the free initiative of the subject, but also the aspect of duty. All this is made real in the 'communion of persons'. (...) Individualism presupposes a use of freedom in which the subject does what he wants, in which he himself is the one to 'establish the truth' of whatever he finds pleasing or useful. He does not tolerate the fact that someone else 'wants' or demands something from him in the name of an objective truth.



He does not want to 'give' to another on the basis of truth; he does not want to become a 'sincere gift'. Individualism thus remains egocentric and selfish".<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to families*, n. 14

In fact human freedom has numerous limits both of its own nature and because of the dramatic nature of its very existence. In some way it always appears to be "its own prisoner" and its full development requires a whole effort at liberation.

Sin, on the one hand, constitutes a real tragedy for freedom; and on the other, the desire to reach a goal and realize a mission demands that freedom be ensured specific elements that go beyond certain natural inclinations. And so there is a *freedom from* whatever acts as a brake and oppression by sin, and a *freedom for* the attainment of an objective, which together require a whole process of liberation and reinforcement to be earnestly sought after.

In this way there enters into relationship with freedom a kind of discipline which helps to bring about a concrete process of liberation "from" and of liberation "for".

The initial opposition between freedom and discipline is overcome through the mediation of conscience, which interiorizes the suitability and necessity of discipline so as to give it effect in freedom, as one's own will and not as something imposed from without. For this reason the conscience must be properly formed concerning the significance and implications of discipline; there is an urgent need to develop a concrete formation to assent, the kind linked existentially with the eucharistic mystery and the consecration in religious Profession. If we think of our discipline from the standpoint of the Eucharist and Profession, we perceive at once how reasonable it is, its necessity and its originality.



Today there is a danger of superficiality in the formation of consciences through not giving proper importance to ascesis. It is not a question of binding oneself for ascetical reasons to a mentality or practices of former times; nor do we pretend to form to a kind of servility that borders on hypocrisy. It is a matter of rendering concrete and practical the total gift of oneself in consecrated love.

Certainly discipline without freedom is unacceptable, but freedom without discipline is both arbitrary and perverse. Only conscience is able to promote a discipline sustained by freedom in such a way that it be neither rigid conformism nor a kind of pharisaic legalism. A balanced harmony must be constructed between freedom and discipline (not, therefore, freedom *or* discipline) so as to overcome forcefully the suggestion that there is irreconcilable opposition between the two.

One author writes: "Jesus stands before God as a free and obedient being. As an obedient son he fulfils the will of the Father, blindly following the law imposed on him; as a free being he adheres to the Father's will through intimate conviction, in full awareness and with a joyful heart; he re-creates it, so to speak, in himself. Obedience without freedom is slavery, freedom without obedience is caprice. Obedience follows blindly, freedom opens the eyes. Obedience acts without asking questions, freedom wants to know the significance of what one is doing".<sup>37</sup>

The "disciple" looks to Christ ("the way, the truth and the life!") as a model of perfect harmony between obedience and freedom, and concentrates the formation of his own conscience on this aspect which is at the root of all Christian ascesis; and, because he is a Salesian, he makes the daily effort to

<sup>37</sup> D. BONHOEFFER,  
*Etica*, Bompiani Milan  
1969, pp. 211-212



compose the apparent contradiction between discipline and freedom, so as to live in fidelity to the evangelical project of his religious Profession.

The personal struggle against evil, against passions and inclinations, against the invasive worldly mentality (= freedom "from") and, on the other hand, the demands of communion with confreres for the practical realization of the salesian mission (= freedom "for"), have need of a constant ascesis and an adequate discipline – a kind of daily training period – carried out with courage and a joyful heart, so as to avoid on the one hand infidelity, individualism, superficiality, permissiveness etc., and on the other to promote together the particular Covenant with God and the common mission in the Church.

In this way the formation of the conscience of a "disciple" will enrich the confreres with lights and incentives which enlighten and guide his freedom as a "consecrated" person, making his own the ascetical demands of a discipline assumed and practised through conviction and personal will in the harmony of community life.

## **8. Authority a service of animation and government**

The evangelical manner in which we have spoken of religious discipline supposes and requires mutual communion among the confreres, the fruit of renewal in both the exercise of authority and of shared responsibility in the practice of obedience. Assimilation of the postconciliar lines of renewal is not achieved by simple orders from above, but rather through an intelligent and constant work of



animation which helps to form renewed convictions. The relationship between animation and ongoing formation is the highway at the present day for education to being true "disciples". More than speaking of "superiors" and "subjects", we need to insist on the shared responsibility of confreres in mutual communion and with complementary functions: "Our common vocation requires the responsible and effective participation of all the members in the life and action of the community".<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> C 123

This does not do away with either the action of government nor the attitude of obedience, but it transforms the exercise of them in a way which is more active and shared with others.

Evidently the person of each one needs to be formed for the concrete role he will play in harmony with the roles of others, in particular as regards the superior. One notes at times a difficulty that arises because of a certain prejudice and distancing with regard to those who fulfil the service of authority. For the fulfilment of this role what is needed is not an "officer", but a pastor who is a brother, father and friend.

Unfortunately one discerns here and there in some people a certain confusion as regards the exercise of the role of authority: a certain resistance in accepting obligations, or even recoiling from the demands of responsibility, as a result of which one fails to "foster charity, coordinate the efforts of all, animating, orientating, making decisions, giving corrections".<sup>39</sup> Sometimes too there is indifference about ensuring the proper functioning of organisms of participation and shared responsibility (councils, assemblies etc.), or letting pass without comment the facility with which some confrere tends to disregard his duty to fulfil certain

<sup>39</sup> C 121



specified obligations (consultations, processes to be followed for appointments, etc.).

Certainly the lack of a proper exercise of authority has a negative influence on religious discipline. A superior who would interpret his role with a neurotic mentality, with a superficial and exaggerated vision of democracy, would reduce a religious community to a group with a disorganized manner of life and the loss of proper direction in pastoral planning and organic vitality in communion; he would have no influence on the avoidance of individualism.

Every member should be interested in the roles of others, and in particular he should have at heart the coordinating function of those who exercise the service of authority. This is a mutually indispensable help to be fostered in an atmosphere of sincere brotherhood. A common effort on the part of all to cultivate coordination of this kind has become a priority of that spiritual methodology which makes of communities a nucleus of friends and brothers harmoniously dedicated to the same mission.

Making community means more than just being together; it also means appreciating and rendering complementary each others' roles and giving a special position to the exercise of authority.

## **9. Themes for an examination of conscience**

The topic of religious discipline is not something vague and abstract. It refers to aspects that are very practical, specified by salesian tradition and by our Rule of life. It is worth our while therefore, to make from time to time a personal examen in this regard and a community scrutiny.



I will indicate here some themes for starting up an examination of conscience in what concerns our religious discipline; They are: (a) the ascetical vigilance of the individual; (b) the practice of the evangelical counsels; (c) the demands of the common life; (d) shared responsibility; (e) the educative and pastoral plan.

a. *Ascetical vigilance of the individual.* There are always two complementary aspects to our spiritual life: they are not identical, but neither are they ever separated; they are constantly found together throughout the whole of existence. They are the mystical aspect and the ascetic aspect. The first is the living participation in the joyous mystery of the love of God and of the risen Christ; the second focuses on the redemptive effort of collaboration with Christ in the struggle against sin, and is indispensable if the first aspect is to be realized in our human condition.

A concern to ensure the consistency of this second aspect, which implies the commitment of one's will, does not in any way constitute a kind of giving in to pelagianism, but a continuation in ourselves of concrete historical demands of the redemptive incarnation lived by Christ.

In consecrated life special importance has always been given to ascetical practices, especially among monks (the "monastery" was also called the "asceterium"). Certainly there are various kinds of asceticism, not only in accordance with different charisms, but also in consideration of anthropological concepts of different periods and cultures.

We Salesians have a special charism of apostolic life, and we are living it at a time in which, according to the anthropological sciences, one can speak



of a new cultural typology. The ascesis of our spirituality has therefore a specific modality to foster and intensify at the present day; and this begins with the person of each individual; from his convictions, from his reflections on the salesian spirit, from his sincere self-assessment against the Rule of life.

Don Bosco, our model,<sup>40</sup> throws out flashes of light in this regard.

cf. C 21

In the famous dream of the Personage with the ten diamonds<sup>41</sup> he refers to our “mystique” in the diamonds on the breast, centered on “*da mihi animas*”, i.e. on pastoral charity accompanied by a strong vitality of the other two theological virtues; and he dwells attentively on our ascesis in the diamonds on the back and especially on the two placed on the shoulders which support the entire mantle. These two diamonds act as hinges between the mystical and ascetical aspects, translating them together into daily life; they are “work and temperance”.

<sup>41</sup> cf. ASC 300 (1981)

This is not the moment to develop all the rich content of the dream, but we must indicate its spiritual importance: it is a theme which for us is truly fruitful. Art.18 of the Constitutions provides us with a summary on which we can base our examen in this regard. Here we see at once that we are dealing with a *spiritual* discipline, not measured simply by the observance of a determined norm; we are not dealing here, in fact, with an article that is simply disciplinary – as we said earlier – from which we can be dispensed, even though only by exception, but with a dimension of salesian holiness.

The scrutiny to be made, therefore, involves primarily a fundamental evangelical attitude, into which concrete norms can also be inserted (even



small ones), but which constitutes the concrete tenor of daily life.

b. *The practice of the evangelical counsels.* An important generating theme for special ascetical vigilance is that of the practice of the three evangelical counsels expressed by vow in religious Profession: obedience, poverty and chastity. They express the radical manner in which we want to be "disciples" of the Lord.

Here the great religious discipline is rendered practical in permanent attitudes which are clearly set out in the Rule of life: "We follow Jesus Christ and share more closely in his self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit".<sup>42</sup>

— *OBEDIENCE.* In the dream of the personage with the ten diamonds Don Bosco puts obedience at the centre of the quadrilateral on the rear of the garment; for us religious of apostolic life, with a charism totally characterized by the mission, obedience has a priority which guides the whole of consecrated life. It is worth our while to examine ourselves attentively against the articles of the Rule that deal with this vow; with it we relive, freely and responsibly, Christ's own obedience by carrying out the mission entrusted to us;<sup>43</sup> we place our abilities and talents "at the service of the common mission";<sup>44</sup> "substitute acts of penance," Don Bosco tells us, "with acts of obedience";<sup>45</sup> and with this outlook we foster a fraternal colloquy with the superior<sup>46</sup> to check up existentially on our fidelity to Profession and our manner of realizing the common mission. And the superior, in a family environment,<sup>47</sup> will be "at the centre of the community, a brother among brothers, who recognize his responsibility and authority".<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> C 60

<sup>43</sup> C 64

<sup>44</sup> C 69

<sup>45</sup> C 71

<sup>46</sup> cf. C 70

<sup>47</sup> cf. C 16

<sup>48</sup> C 55



In the present cultural context which surrounds the human will and freedom with a climate of self-realization, self-management and individual protagonism, the disciple of the obedient Christ must convince himself that he must perfect his freedom *as a consecrated person*; he must do it personally but never individualistically.

From this follows the importance of an obedience which is deeply convinced, pledging the "powers of intellect and will, and gifts of nature and grace".<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> C 67

— *POVERTY*. The poverty of the Salesian, as a disciple of Christ, has a very practical realism and also a unique mode of realization. We have reflected on this in a recent circular,<sup>50</sup> examining more deeply the evangelical project of our Rule of life. We also made suggestions for a "scrutinium paupertatis" (made specific by an appeal from the Economer General in a precise article); thanks be to God, several communities have already made some fruitful verifications in this regard.

<sup>50</sup> AGC 345 (1993)

Here too there is a whole great religious discipline, accompanied also by detailed norms, which ensure the radical nature of our following of Christ.

Ours is a poverty rich in enterprise and detachment of heart, which enshrines the use of goods in a generous form according to our particular mission at the service of the poor. "Remember well", Don Bosco tells us, "that what we have is not ours; it belongs to the poor; woe to us if we do not use it well".<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> C 79

Let us not forget what our Father has left written in his spiritual Testament: "When the desire for ease and comfort grows up amongst us, our pious Society will have run its course".<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Constitutions and Regulations*, p. 269



— *CHASTITY*. Chastity is for us “the virtue to be cultivated above all others” (Don Bosco). “Our tradition has always considered chastity a resplendent virtue, bearing a special message for the education of youth”.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> C 81

It implies a personal and communal discipline of no small degree. The practice of chastity, in fact, “touches some of the deepest drives of human nature”;<sup>54</sup> it “frees and enables us to become all things to all men. It develops in us a Christian sense of personal relationships, and helps to make the community a family”.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> C 82

<sup>55</sup> C 83

We know that the vows we profess constitute three complementary aspects of a single basic attitude: the total gift of oneself to God in view of the mission. In fact, the setting in which one can experience in a more concrete manner the reality and totality of this gift is in the sincerity and joy with which we live our celibacy for the Kingdom: “The evangelical counsels, by fostering purification of the heart and spiritual freedom, render our pastoral charity more concerned and productive”.<sup>56</sup> All the more is this the case when we recall that an attitude that goes naturally with the preventive system is that of “making ourselves loved” as signs and bearers of the love of God for those for whom we work. A careful and continued examination of conscience in this connection ensures the radical nature not only of chastity, but also of poverty and obedience.

<sup>56</sup> C 61

The discipline of the custody of the heart is a fundamental ascetical aspect which defends and fosters the Covenant of consecration; it is a religious aspect which requires an indispensable daily attention because “chastity is not a conquest made once for all time. It has its moments of peace and moments of trial”.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> C 84



Hence the need to cultivate specific attitudes and to have recourse to practical and suitable means in a hedonistic society characterized by the pseudo-freedom of sex. There is need for the greatest sincerity with oneself regarding effects, and also the courage to cut off from the outset certain perverse compensations.

The Constitutions themselves provide us with a framework for an examination of conscience:

- living in the midst of work and temperance;
- the practice of mortification and custody of the senses;
- discreet and prudent use of the means of social communication;
- attention to the natural means for fostering physical and mental health;
- intensification of the love of God in prayer;
- nourishing the love of Christ at the table of the Word and the Eucharist;
- the frequent and sincere use of the sacrament of Reconciliation;
- openness with a spiritual guide;
- constant reference back to the example of Don Bosco;
- filial and trusting recourse to Mary the Immaculate Help of Christians.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> cf. C 84

c. *The demands of the common life.* The community option is an essential element of our religious consecration. The community is not something ready made, but a task to be realized day by day. Rightly does the recent Vatican document devote a chapter to the “religious community *as the place for becoming brothers*”. Our salesian community has a unique nature and a particular style,



which we must be able to preserve and develop. And the Rule of life offers us various important elements for its specific disposition.

The GC23 indicated also the "community day" which can facilitate from time to time a careful examination of conscience on this vital point. The bonds for living and working together in fraternal communion are "brotherly love, our apostolic mission and the practice of the evangelical counsels",<sup>59</sup> i.e. the components of our consecration<sup>60</sup> which must be assumed and fostered personally, as we have already said, without individualism.

The family spirit is the hallmark of our apostolic community and "inspires every moment of its life: work and prayer, meals and recreation, meetings and other encounters. In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship we share our joys and sorrows, and we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences".<sup>61</sup>

In particular we need to review and ensure the community dimension of prayer, so fundamental and vital for the building of a community whose bonds do not proceed from either flesh or blood.

For building the community there is certainly need of a methodology which trains to kindness, forgiveness, friendship in the house, the social virtues of living together, communication and the practice of the evangelical counsels with reference to the community itself; and also one which can measure its index of brotherhood by growth in communion with the local Church, the Salesian Family, and especially with the laity who are closest to us.

d. *Shared responsibility.* The communal dimension of our religious discipline must be able to

<sup>59</sup> C 50

<sup>60</sup> cf. C 3

<sup>61</sup> C 51



bring about a daily growth in shared responsibility. The first subject of the salesian mission is the provincial and local community;<sup>62</sup> we must therefore reflect together and review the activity and efficacy of our presence in the neighbourhood.

<sup>62</sup> cf. C 44

We need to make an examination of conscience concerning the exercise of authority and on the community's apostolic project. Every confrere should feel himself a "member" with functions complementary to those of others, in true harmony with the superior, who is himself a "member who shares responsibility for the apostolic mission".<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> C 175

Shared responsibility is expressed in active and serious participation at the various levels covered by the community dimension: the life and activities of the house, participation in specific provincial commitments and initiatives, and also sincere collaboration in special activities of the Rector Major with his Council (e.g. the consultation for the choice of those responsible for government, C 123).

It will be convenient to make a level by level examination to promote and purify the discipline of shared responsibility.

e. *The educative and pastoral project.* It might seem at first sight that the consideration of a project of work finds no place in an examination of conscience on our religious discipline. But in fact it does become involved, both because in the project is largely concentrated our will for renewal and because discipline itself as a spiritual attitude refers not only to putting norms into practice but also to awakening creativity, the spirit of initiative and shared responsibility in specific areas of our mission.

As we have seen, we are called to educate and evangelize in a communal manner; the GC23 has



<sup>64</sup> GC23 n. 215 ff.

reminded us in a very practical form of the operative commitments of the community,<sup>64</sup> which must be seen as a “sign of faith”, a “school of faith”, and a “centre of communion and participation”, which certainly requires of the confreres several attitudes of spiritual discipline, made concrete in suitable programmes of ongoing formation.

<sup>65</sup> R 5

On the other hand the manner of putting into practice art. 31 of the Constitutions – to collaborate in the Church in the new Evangelization – is guided by the indications given in the second chapter of the General Regulations, arts. 4-10, which provide a demanding panorama of revision. How does one bring it about, for instance, that the community be in truth the “animating nucleus”<sup>65</sup> of the wider educative and pastoral community?

The very drawing up of the “project” requires presence and shared responsibility, which is then prolonged in a sincere and constant commitment of realization and revision. Putting the project into practice, in fact, demands the discipline of collaboration, i.e. that each one plays his own part with dedication and competence, and that he gives an account of what he has done to those who must ask for it; that he do not take on independently of the community (of the superior) commitments which prevent or hinder him in the realization of the project.

In this way, preparing to carry out an updated scrutiny on our religious discipline brings us into the living centre of postconciliar renewal where, with a deeper analysis of the particular characteristics of our charism, we find wider meanings opening before so many terms and concepts which we are accustomed to use in a reductive way: terms like “consecration”, “mission”, “commu-



nity", "vows", "brotherhood", "authority", "formation" etc.; among these there is also the concept of "discipline" raised to the spiritual level of acting as a convinced and faithful disciple, committed to living the charism of the Founder and fostering its growth.

In what then does the danger of *indiscipline* consist at the present day, for a confrere, for a community, for a Province, for the Congregation?

As well as non-observance of precise norms of the Rule of life, e.g. regarding the practice of the evangelical counsels, there is need to emphasize laziness or negligence in assuming the new conciliar orbits into which recent General Chapters have launched us. The rationalizations put forward as an excuse for delay in following the concrete lines of such renewal conceal the lack of the attitude of a "disciple", because distracted by other curiosities, or because one has become fixed in old habits, or because weakened in the world communion of one's charism.

Those who have assimilated the great lines of renewal, now approved by the revised Rule of life, bear witness to the personal and communal convictions which become translated into operative discipline.

## **10. Joseph and Mary**

Let us conclude these reflections on the value of religious discipline by recalling the example of Joseph (on whose feast I conclude this circular) and of Mary, and also the witness of the Apostles.

Without any doubt Jesus rejected and overturned the observance of the Law as interpreted by



the Pharisees, but he did not suppress it; he brought it to fulfilment: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Mt 5, 17. 19-20

It is not therefore a question of non-observance, nor of an observance with a false legalistic mentality. Jesus severely condemns the latter in the Pharisees and teachers of the Law: "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!, for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith".<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Mt 23, 23

The true significance of the observance of the Law we can admire in Joseph and Mary who betake themselves to the temple for the purification and the presentation of their firstborn.<sup>68</sup> The first reason given by the sacred writer for this gesture is the prescription of the Law. But this becomes transformed, in fact, into a providential mediation which gives us a glimpse of the unfathomable reality of the New Covenant. The observance of the Law turns out to be at the service of higher values which reveal to Joseph and Mary a panorama of grace: the mystery of the temple and the beginning of a new liturgy; the prophetic joy of Simeon and Anna, grateful to God for his fidelity to the Promise, who become the proclaimers of his realization in a new Covenant; the mysterious sacrificial per-

<sup>68</sup> cf. Lk 2, 22-24



spective of the future life of Jesus, inherent in the offering of this firstborn son (the firstborn was considered a memorial of the liberation from slavery) who will bring to fulfilment the history of salvation: a further special manifestation from on high to give a very special sense to the existence of Mary and Joseph who were chosen to care with solicitous affection for Him who will be the light of the nations and the long yearned for objective of all the tormented vicissitudes of mankind.

Meditation on this event of observance of the law can serve to throw light on the new perspectives of all Christian discipline. We have already recalled the amazement of some contemporary observers of Jesus who, on seeing that John's disciples and those of the Pharisees fasted while those of Jesus did not, asked him the reason why. And in his reply he referred to the presence of the Bridegroom;<sup>69</sup> it was the moment of passage from the old to the new Covenant, and "new wine is not put into old wineskins".<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> cf. *Mk* 2, 18 ff

<sup>70</sup> *Mt* 9, 17

In the new Covenant there is another kind of obedience to God and of ascetical practice that is much more radical and involving. Jesus himself taught it and practised it even to the shedding of his blood.

In the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple everything is expressed in a sacrificial context: the oblation of himself to God in a filial demeanour. This necessarily implies a permanent attitude of asceticism against all selfishness, which surpasses the legal norms but includes them and sanctifies them, involving also the disciplinary dispositions proper to a genuine project of discipleship. The sacrificial context of the Christian life means that each one should take up his cross to truly follow Jesus.



The Apostles understood perfectly what it meant in practice to be a disciple, and they carried their witness to the point of martyrdom.

Saint Paul penetrated deeply into the need for this ascetical attitude also because of the presence in each one of the old Adam: we want to do what is good but we do not succeed in doing it; nevertheless "there is no necessity for us to obey our unspiritual selves or to live unspiritual lives, but to live according to the Spirit"<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> cf. *Rom* 8, 12

And so the Apostle exhorts the faithful to commit themselves as do athletes taking part in a race: "You know that all the fighters at the stadium go into strict training; they do this just to win a wreath that will wither away, but we do it for a wreath that will never wither. That is how I run, intent on winning; that is how I fight, not beating the air. I treat my body hard and make it obey me for, having been an announcer myself, I should not want to be disqualified".<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> cf. *1 Cor* 9, 25-27

In the life of the Church this attitude has always been very much alive. In particular, in the centuries of experience of religious life ascetical practices, expressly confirmed by a Rule of life suited to the individual charisms, has been a constituent aspect of the following of Christ. The validity and importance of observance is not calculated in terms of degrees of sin but by comparison with the consistency of the loving disciple. The renewed Constitutions no longer finish, as they did at one time, with an article declaring (with a doubtful legal preoccupation) that "these rules do not of themselves oblige under pain of sin", but rather emphasizes the concrete Covenant of profession and its demands of fidelity. The Covenant implies on God's side the gift of the grace of consecration: it gives the strength



which renders possible the practice of the entire Rule of life. And on the part of the consecrated individual it involves the total offering of himself, not simply by the making of the vows but by the global assumption of the Founder's entire evangelical project. Rightly the text of the Rule now ends as follows: "We meditate on them (the Constitutions) with faith and pledge ourselves to put them into practice; they are for us, the Lord's disciples, a way that leads to Love".<sup>73</sup>

73 C 196

It is a way tested and endorsed by a great many holy confreres and authenticated by the specific authority of the Apostolic See.

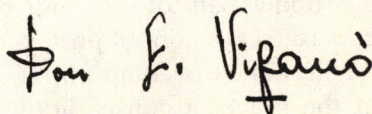
May the Holy Spirit help us to understand all the renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council regarding the religious life at the present day; it is a renewal that will certainly be examined more deeply and relaunched by the coming Ordinary Synod of October next.

May the invitation made with this circular to reflect on religious discipline lead us to greater seriousness in commitment, to more consciously shared responsibility and to more joyful communion of life.

May Mary Help of Christians, with her motherly solicitude, obtain for us an intensification of the special Covenant we have made with the Lord, and make us more consistent and generous also in the practice of our salesian asceticism.

A sincere greeting to all in the union of prayer.

Cordially in Don Bosco,

Don F. Vigano