

# 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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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### CONVOCATION OF THE 24TH GENERAL CHAPTER

Introduction - 1. Official convocation - 2. The choice of the theme - 3. A rapid glance at salesian tradition - 4. The statement of the theme of the Chapter - 5. The meaning we give to the term "lay" - 6. "Secularity", the "secular dimension" of the Congregation, the "secular character" of the lay faithful - 7. Lay people with Don Bosco's spirit - 8. A salesian community animating lay persons - 9. Incentives of the coming Synod for new relationships with lay people - 10. An invitation to the provinces - Conclusion

Rome, Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady  
15 August 1994

My dear confreres,

This closing part of the year 1994 and the whole of 1995 is for us a time rich in grace.

Very soon the Lord will give us the opportunity to follow the work of the Synod of Bishops on "the consecrated life and its mission in the Church and in the world".

I have already drawn your attention to this event of the Church; it has been entrusted to the consideration of communities and to the prayers of the individual confreres. I ask you to be generous in this connection; all the good that flows from it will redound to our own advantage and to the growth of gospel authenticity.

During the time the celebration of the Synod is in progress the communities should offer a special prayer of adoration to invoke the light and strength of the Holy Spirit.



We shall have occasion to come back in due course to the content and conclusions of the Synod, because they will be of direct interest to our life.

This circular brings you the official announcement of the convocation of the coming 14th General Chapter which will involve the provincial communities in work during 1995 in the preparation of contributions to be sent to the Moderator who is organizing the work of the general assembly.

We have grown accustomed to hearing it said that the General Chapter is an "event of the greatest importance", to repeat the words of Don Bosco in 1877.<sup>1</sup>

The Constitutions certainly attach great significance to the General Chapter: *"The general chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation's unity in diversity. It is the fraternal meeting in which Salesians carry out a community study and reflection to keep themselves faithful to the Gospel and to their Founder's charism, and sensitive to the needs of time and place."*

*Through the general chapter the entire Society, opening itself to the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, seeks to discern God's will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service".<sup>2</sup>*

Even without going fully into what a Chapter is, we must recognize that its convocation is of special significance and represents a call to fulfil obligations of great importance.

cf E CERIA, Annali vol I, p 313

<sup>2</sup> G 146



## 1. OFFICIAL CONVOCATION

By the present letter I intend to convoke officially the 24th General Chapter in accordance with what is laid down in art. 150 of the Constitutions. I fulfil also what is required by arts. 111 and 112 of the General Regulations:

★ I communicate that I have appointed as Moderator of the GC24 Fr Antonio Martinelli, Councilor General for the Salesian Family and for social communication;

★ after hearing the opinion of the General Council, which reflected also the preferences of the various regions of the Congregation, we have chosen the following as the Chapter's theme:

“SALESIANS AND LAY PEOPLE:  
COMMUNION AND SHARING  
IN THE SPIRIT AND MISSION OF DON BOSCO”;

★ after analyzing a possible process of preparation we have decided on 18 February 1996 as the opening date at the Generalate in Rome, Via della Pisana 1111. The Chapter will begin with a retreat, and it is expected that it will continue for some two months, finishing not later than 20 April;

★ in due course the technical commission was appointed and, with the Moderator, has decided on the preparation process and arranged for the drawing up of the guidelines to be sent to the provinces for their sensitization and active participation in the coming Chapter. You will find the results of their work in another part of the present issue of the Acts.

The Regulations also require that the Rector Major send out a letter indicating the “principal



purpose of the Chapter". That is the purpose of the present circular.

It should be kept in mind however that another important and vital aspect of the Chapter is the election of the Rector Major and the members of his Council. I draw your attention to this task not merely to fulfil a formality but to ask for the participation and shared responsibility of all confreres,<sup>3</sup> through abundant prayer that the Lord will give to the Congregation the superiors needed at the present historic moment of the Church, the world and young people. On their service of animation and government, on the docility to the impulse of the Holy Spirit, on their ability to be bound to the foundational charism of our father Don Bosco, will depend in a special way the numerical and qualitative increase of our Society.

<sup>3</sup> cf G 123

## 2. THE CHOICE OF THE THEME

The GC23 had already given to the Congregation a precise and demanding task in connection with lay people. It had expressed the following words directed to the Rector Major and General Council: "The Rector Major, through the Departments concerned, will offer elements and lines of thought for a 'lay project' in the Congregation".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> GG23 238

The same Chapter also declared unequivocally: "A change of mentality is needed ... in the first place in the Salesians themselves".<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> GG23 232

With the convocation of the GC24 it is clear that the time has come to verify the result of these statements and to relaunch in efficacious fashion the steps taken by the communities in connection with the hoped for lay-project.



The substance, in fact, of what we are hoping to realize at the present day through the GC24 has its origin in the distant past, and has its roots in the experience of Don Bosco himself.

We cannot forget, however, that the Church has lived through new and deeply renewing events proclaiming that the hour of the laity has struck.

Such items, for instance, have been:

- *Lumen Gentium* with its chapter II on the People of God and its chapter IV dedicated entirely to the lay faithful;
- *Gaudium et Spes*, which analyzes the presence of the Church in the world and, after examining and reformulating Christian anthropology, goes on to consider in the second part of the document the more urgent problems linked with the various areas in which the lay Christian is called to realize his or her vocation. One need think only of the problems of the family, of culture, of the economy, of politics, of peace and in wider terms of the problems of the world in general;
- the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* considers with balanced attention the different perspectives in which the lay apostolate is realized in the Church, in harmony with its global mission, emphasizing the commitment to evangelization, to the Christian animation of the temporal order, and finally its charitable mission;
- coming nearer to the present day, the Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world, *Christifideles laici*, to “stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> GL 2



In the light of these substantial innovations we may ask ourselves: Don Bosco's intuitions about the laity, his commitment to getting them fully and responsibly involved in his mission, his seeking to the end of his life for convinced and generous collaborators, his conviction that unity gives strength to those working for good – how have all these been renewed by us who are his heirs?

Hence the choice of the theme for the GC24, which will offer all confreres and communities opportune guidelines for renewing the relationship between Salesians and lay people along the lines of the most genuine tradition.

### 3. A RAPID GLANCE AT SALESIAN TRADITION

Don Bosco understood intuitively the essential importance of his mission to the young and the poor being shared by a vast movement of persons (priests, religious and lay people), In fact the activities of the Oratory in its first years he carried out with the assistance of numerous collaborators, beginning with the help of his own mother, Margaret Occhiena.<sup>7</sup>

He chose them from among those who showed an aptitude and availability for the education of needy youth, and he used them principally for the animation of free time, in recreation, in assistance, and in the teaching of catechism.

He took care of their initial training and planned for them a programme of continuing formation, for which purpose he had frequent meetings with them.<sup>8</sup> He involved them in the life of the Oratory and entrusted to them specific tasks.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Decree of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, of 9 May 1985, in RAL p. 5 and 10

<sup>8</sup> cf. MB 4, 300



From the rich personal experience of Don Bosco there developed a salesian suggestion to lay people who want to respond to an invitation to "help Don Bosco".

The lay person who commits himself to the service of the salesian mission shares Don Bosco's apostolic anxiety, interpreting his spirit and love for the young. He becomes ever more involved in a true sharing of responsibility to the point of living to the full the protagonism deriving from Don Bosco's charisma.

Such work, sensitivity and availability have been evident from the beginning in varied forms of collaboration and sharing.

When we dealt with the topic of the Salesian Cooperators, we made a close examination of salesian tradition in this connection. I invite you to read again with attention in AGC 318 (*the Association of Salesian Cooperators*) the reflections we then made on the central aspect which concerns us.

For our Founder the determining element of the presence of the lay person is not only the capacity for work and active intervention, but primarily the possibility of fully sharing the spirit which animates education and the apostolate in the thought of Don Bosco.

#### **4. THE STATEMENT OF THE THEME OF THE CHAPTER**

The expression used to indicate the task of the coming General Chapter includes some important perspectives:



★ *"Salesians and Lay-people"* in communion of intent: not therefore a relationship as between teacher and pupil, but an interpersonal and institutional relationship which is to be deepened, fostered and followed up with a view to mutual enrichment.

The Salesians have something very valuable to offer the laity, while the latter can give the Salesians original elements in their being and activity.

These mutually enriching relationships need to be rooted not so much in requirements associated with a possible decrease in the number of Salesians, but rather in the notion of complementary roles in a common mission rethought in the light of the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

★ *"Communion and Sharing"*; an expression of the new Constitutions well expresses the sense and implication of the formulation of the theme: it is a matter of involving *"in a family atmosphere parents and educators, so that it can become a living experience of the Church and an indication of God's plan for us"*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> 47

The term communion emphasizes the close relationship of persons in the light of the objective of living together, of mutual friendship, of activity and intercommunication; the term sharing implies a reinforcement of communion, giving further emphasis to the aspect of active participation of both parties.

★ *Spirit and mission of Don Bosco*"; this is an expression which refers to his charism as a Christian educator. It must be repeated that it is precisely the genuine spirit of Don Bosco that must enlighten the mutual relationships, as also his concrete mission.



In this perspective it becomes possible, as we shall see, to recall the *different levels* in communion and sharing on the part of many lay people who work at our side or draw their inspiration from our educative project.

This expression also recalls the salesian community to a task which has true priority: that of the formation of the laity; i.e. the Salesians must give priority to the tasks of spiritual and pedagogical animation, and give greater attention to the formation of collaborators and those who share responsibility with us, before undertaking other activities.

Here too is relevant the indication of the GC23, n. 232: "A change of mentality is needed ... in the first place in the Salesians themselves", to foster the professional approach, educational ability, and witness as regards education to the faith.<sup>10</sup>

The spirit and mission of Don Bosco, shared together by Salesians and lay people, will need a common formative process, which will have to be such not only in content but sometimes also in time. The latter will facilitate the assimilation of the gifts of each group and of the vocational differences.

## 5. THE MEANING WE GIVE TO THE TERM "LAY"

In our numerous and widely varying foundations there is, in fact, considerable space for many persons all of whom we call "lay", but who differ widely from each other. Some of them are practising Catholics and true members of Christ's faithful; others are Christians but not Catholics, others belong to non-christian religions; still others are unbe-

<sup>10</sup>cf GG23 237



lievers who go so far as to call themselves atheists: a whole variety of persons according to the cultural characteristics of the local territory.

And then what are we to say also of the term "lay" as commonly used outside ecclesial circles, with a cultural and political sense of an agnostic kind?

We cannot allow the work of the General Chapter to become submerged in a background so elastic as to paralyze the attainment of concrete objectives.

We shall not interpret correctly the living meaning we want to give to the term unless we start from the concept of Vatican II (developed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*) which ensures that we have the first and full ecclesial significance.

Such an aspect must also shed light on the various levels of which we are aware among the lay people (in the broad sense) who surround us; it will constitute the yardstick, as it were, and the goal of our relationships of communion and sharing with them. We must never forget that what we have in mind are always lay people who are committed in some way and sympathizers with the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, which is objectively a charism of the Holy Spirit in the Church for the world. We need to recall therefore, albeit briefly, what is a true "lay Christian".

The dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* presents the lay person in the following terms: "*The term 'laity' is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful who by baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God,*



*and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world".<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> LG 31

On the other hand, the Council itself presents the insertion of the laity into temporal and earthly realities, not only as a sociological fact, but rather and specifically as something theological and ecclesial, as the characteristic manner in which the Christian vocation is lived: "*they live in the world, i.e. they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that, being led by the Spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity, they must manifest Christ to others*".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> LG 31

They live out their commitment on a double frontier: within the Church and within the world.

The harmonization of the double attachment, in the unity of personal life, compels all in the Church to work for the growth of this vocation, in line with the three great urgent needs recalled in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*:

- the indispensability of both an ecclesial and social formation, since they must commit themselves on both fronts;
- the importance of an appropriate and actual spirituality, as a response to the new demands of today's culture;



- the continued need of support in their difficult process of presence and animation, so as to be manifestly “the sacrament of God’s love” to contemporary men and women.

## **6. “SECULARITY”, THE “SECULAR DIMENSION” OF THE CONGREGATION, THE “SECULAR CHARACTER” OF THE LAY FAITHFUL**

But for us, in fact, the term “lay person”, even in the light of these precisions of the Council, has a wider effect; it compels us to think matters out in a more gradual but stimulating way.

Let us recall how Vatican II has relaunched in a new form the concept of “world” (*Italian ‘secolo’*), and has rethought the relationship of the Church with it: no longer the “Church *and* the world”, but “the Church *in* the world”.

From this there emerges a vision of “*secularity*” as an existential and sociological condition of everyone: it is a simple fact; and in it there is a great deal of good and a great deal of evil. The present process of secularization would need to know better and develop its multiple values which are often neglected by a reductive mentality, even though it be religious. Unfortunately, however, this process leads all too easily to a secularism which is harmful and immanent.

In any case a renewed theology of creation helps us to a knowledge of many secular values by leading us to a discovery of the positive sense of the world, created by God, taking account also of its dynamic elements of evolution and development (the signs of the times) which are found objectively situated at the foundation of the growing challen-



ges which nowadays demand nothing less than a new evangelization. To be convinced of this, all you have to do is consider the "new frontiers" of which the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* speaks.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> GL ch 3

Unfortunately secularism distorts the many values of secularity, with the result that man, instead of being the way of the Church, becomes transformed into a usurper who manipulates and misuses these values, thus bringing about a noxious anthropocentrism.

Secularity without the Creator, without Christ who sums it up in a new form, is in fact a soulless reality. It remains always a treasure chest, rich in values, but in unskilled hands its very riches serve to cause its degeneration.

Christ, the Church, vocations, are all born in the secularity of the world, but bring to it the soul of the Creator and Saviour. In this way Jesus and all the People of God are bearers of an indispensable "*secular dimension*", which adds to the reality of the world a very special vocation of salvation. It is important from this standpoint to distinguish between "secularity" in itself and the "secular dimension of the Church"; the first is a fact, an existential and sociological condition: it is the being of the world involving its future, the commitments of science and technology, commerce, life in society, etc., but in a way that can be partial, reductive, non-transcendental and leading astray.

The "secular dimension of the Church", on the other hand, implies a particular assumption of secularity in its values and implies an operative mandate of salvation on the part of the Creator and Saviour: it is a vocation with a wide responsibility for the liberation of the world.



This secular dimension, shared by all the People of God, is realized in different and complementary ways by its members.

Rightly was Paul VI able to declare that the whole Church "has an authentic secular dimension, inherent in her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members".<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> AAS 54 (1972) 208

In this sense the 4th Latin-American Bishops Conference proclaimed as being inseparably united, under the synthesizing perspective of "Christ yesterday, today and the same for ever", the proclamation of the Gospel with human advancement and Christian culture.

Now, when we consider the tasks proper to the specific vocation of Don Bosco, we find massively present in it the incisiveness of a very particular and concrete "secular dimension". It is a charism that has been raised up in the Church *for the world*: the choice of education in the cultural field, the operative sense of the renewal of human society, the awareness of what is lacking in civil life, the demands of the family, the challenges of needy youth, attention to the formation of a right conscience among people, the efficacy of social communication, etc. The very figure of the Salesian Brother is an original element in our clear secular dimension.

Don Bosco's charism is an ecclesial reality which would have neither sense nor physiognomy without its concrete and very demanding secular dimension; it would have no meaning without the world, just as it is, in which it feels itself called to practical collaboration to repair the Christian texture of the fabric of human society. And this secu-



lar dimension brings our Congregation very close to certain specific commitments of the laity, and to their competence and professional approach.

In the laity, in fact, the “*secular character*” must be considered as their proper characteristic. “Certainly,” says the Pope, “all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but in different ways. In particular the *sharing of the lay faithful* has its own manner of realization and function which, according to the Council, is ‘*properly and particularly*’ theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression: ‘*secular character*’.”<sup>15</sup>

For these lay people “secularity” passes from an existential and sociological condition to a vocational theological commitment. In other words secularity is consciously assumed as a qualifying element of their own Christian existence, which no longer remains simply a common fact (being in the world), but becomes a freely made choice for the practical living out of baptism. The “world” becomes the setting and means of their own Christian vocation, “called to contribute to the sanctification of the world, *as from within like leaven*”. Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an “anthropological and sociological reality but, in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well”; it is the “place” of their vocation and mission. “The lay person is a member of the Church in the heart of the world and a member of the world in the heart of the Church”, declared the Latin-American Bishops at Puebla.

All this prompts us to keep in mind an observation particularly useful for approaching well the theme of the coming Chapter.

It is worth our while to emphasize the close as-

<sup>15</sup> GL 15. N.B. In this paragraph it is important to understand the distinction between «secular dimension» and «secular character»



sociation and happy spiritual harmonization between the "secular dimension" of our Congregation and the "secular character" of very many lay people who share our choice of the social and cultural sector of education.

It is not only a fortunate linkage, but is objectively a practical and vocational involvement to be fostered, so that the "spirit of the beatitudes" to which Religious must give shining witness<sup>16</sup> may become the evangelical climate also of the life and activities of the laity.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> LG 31

<sup>17</sup> 5f LG 38: AA 4: GS 72

The Founder Don Bosco did not enclose his characteristic salesian spirit in two religious congregations, but wanted these to be the source and animating centres and distributors of such evangelical richness.

The growth of the salesian charism is not genuine without further communion and sharing with many lay people.

In the first General Chapter of the Congregation (1877) Don Bosco, speaking of the Cooperators, said they are: "An association of the greatest importance for us, one which is the soul of our Congregation and will provide us with a link for doing good with the consent and help of the good faithful who live in the world, practising the spirit of the Salesians. These Cooperators must grow in number as far as possible".<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in AGG 318 (1985), p. 4



## 7. LAY PEOPLE WITH DON BOSCO'S SPIRIT

Lay people with something of Don Bosco's spirit are found at various levels, and we must be able to give adequate animation to all of them.

The *Cooperators* are the first of the laity who share the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, even outside our works: Don Bosco's "mission" and "salesian works" are not the same thing. I invite you to read the Regulations of Apostolic Life drawn up originally by our Father and Founder for the *Cooperators*, and recently revised in line with the requirements of the Council and approved by the Apostolic See

With the *Cooperators* there are also the *Past Pupils* (who if Christians are invited to become *Cooperators* too); because of the education they have received they have a more direct knowledge of the spirit and mission of Don Bosco; among them is to be found a wider range of persons of good will, even outside the Church.

Included too must be the very many *Collaborators* who in different degrees of sharing and involvement contribute actively, and in some cases also in a decisive manner, to the fulfilment of the salesian mission; it would be desirable that those who are committed in a Christian manner should become true *Cooperators*.

It must be kept in mind that the term "collaborator" includes different categories of people: the parents of the youngsters for whom we work, teachers, animators of groups and free time, employees, and volunteers of various kinds. All these play a part in the activities of our works according to the possibilities either by active participation in



the work itself or by their adherence to the salesian spirit and mission.

Finally we must add those who are loosely called *Friends of Don Bosco*, and who include numerous persons who are sympathizers (believers, non-Christians, admirers and benefactors): they have in common a liking for Don Bosco, his spirit and mission, and they are willing to collaborate in doing good, even just as benefactors, in the vast expanse of our mission to the young and the poor.

And if to all of these we add the laity entrusted to us in our various works, like parishes, because they refer in a certain sense to all the inhabitants of a specific area, we find among them in addition to a wide variety of non-Christians, non-believers and non-practising Catholics, also groups of Catholics with other spiritualities which enrich the local Church with their own particular charisms; this implies for us a delicate and versatile ability to animate their identity without detriment to the groups of our own charism.

I think that, like Don Bosco, we also must be able to look at all these lay people without excluding from our active attention anyone who wants in some way to share with us our educative and evangelizing perspectives.

This is a very valid heirloom which must always be preserved in the Congregation and which at the present day must also be tested in conciliar openness to ecumenism, to dialogue with non-Christian religions, and even with non-believers.

It must be remembered, however, that the more we extend the understanding of the term "lay person" as one who draws inspiration from the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, the greater becomes the obligation of the salesian community to help



and follow up in their formation these people who are close to us. The more numerous our lay people in this wide sense, the greater is the need for a well formed nucleus of "lay faithful" (especially Cooperators) and the more spiritual and apostolic must be the animating salesian community.

To understand this *requirement of a strong animating nucleus* we need to refer back to the reflections we have already made concerning secularity, the secular dimension and the secular character.

It is a matter of bringing a salvific influence to bear on secularity, or in other words on the world and society. The commitment for salvation has its roots in the "secular dimension of the Church", in her mission of evangelization of the world through her numerous special charisms, and in particular for us the charism of Don Bosco. The secular dimension of the Church is the bearer of the vocation of salvation; without it secularity does not foster and does not enter upon the process of transcendence. Within secularity there are certainly many values, people of good will, the possibility of involving in a practical way many persons in the work of salvation, even though they may not perceive clearly the transcendental dimensions. There is true space for the involvement of the laity in the wide sense, but it is very necessary that in the animating nucleus the clarity and strength of the Christian faith be securely present.

As I said earlier, the secular dimension of our Congregation is concentrated in the cultural option of education, of the human advancement of needy youth, of a particular sensitivity in respect of the poorer classes. It does not extend over the whole vast expanse of secularity but is defined by the choice of this concrete and vital sector. It will not



be difficult in such a sector to involve in a practical way people of good will who are professionally competent, directing them gradually towards a spirituality which respects and in no way suffocates their secularity but rather enriches it and enables them to discover broader horizons.

There is therefore a vast and fertile ground also among the "laity in the wide sense", but it supposes an animating nucleus with an intense salesian spirituality.

If we look in particular at communion and sharing with the "lay faithful" we observe a very strong harmony between the secular dimension of the Congregation and the secular character of these brothers and sisters in baptism. It is promising and even vital to be able to share the commitments in the cultural and educative sector with people who cultivate its values "from within", who live out their baptismal vocation precisely by fostering the positive realities of this sector, which they make their own so as to be genuine members of the Christian faithful.

If to this we add that the Holy Spirit has raised up Don Bosco specifically for needy youth in the "world", and has equipped him with a kind of evangelical spirituality and a working method brimming over with apostolic love precisely with a view to such a mission, we are bound to admit that failure to share these riches with large numbers of the lay faithful committed in the secular area of Don Bosco's mission would be a kind of mutilation of the charism which would impoverish the educative outlook for very many youngsters. But here too the involvement of these lay faithful demands a salesian community with an intense charismatic vitality.



To conclude these reflections, which I thought necessary, we can respond to the question: who are the lay people with the spirit of Don Bosco? With him we are open to all sorts of possibilities at different levels, but like him we must be filled with the Holy Spirit so as to multiply the number of the faithful who live out their baptism in the area of education and culture. The Chapter theme of the laity is a challenge to us to be more authentically Salesians.

## **8. A SALESIAN COMMUNITY ANIMATING LAY PERSONS**

To tackle the theme of the laity means, as we have already observed more than once, to speak of the salesian community to itself, of the reformulation of its services and commitments, of its manner of being and working. Let us try to explain the new elements more clearly.

In the first place, testimony of fidelity to God's gift received and expressed on the part of a religious community more attentive to the requirements and shared responsibility of the laity cannot fail to involve, from the standpoint of identity, the primacy of spirituality. It becomes indispensable to intensify the famous "new enthusiasm" of which the Holy Father speaks.

And then, *collaboration* between the different forces requires that it be given a new orientation: the necessary and indispensable presence of the laity cannot be considered as something merely ornamental. The project is born of the whole complex. The realization of the educative mission must



be planned with due consideration for the unique nature of the various forces involved.

Finally, the *animation of the community* demands a verification of the possibilities and manner of working as an animating nucleus, concerned in a special way about the *formation of the laity*.

This is not the place to review all the various practical settings in which lay people are inserted at various levels, nor to indicate what the salesian community should do in each case. These are aspects for each community to look at, analyze and insert in a project suited to the particular situations.

What concerns us more immediately is rather the horizon to which we have to move and for which we have to organize our forces. It involves the following obligations:

#### 1. *Qualify the formation of the laity*

The most significant qualification is given by the help we are able to offer for unity of life.

The first great virtue to foster is the vital synthesis of *unity*: the grace of unity which is at the centre of Don Bosco's spirit. This maintains the harmonic binding force between two poles: those of faith and secularity, which are also the two poles of charity: God and man, mystery and history.

The grace of unity must be fostered by means of a spiritual pedagogy. Unity is not something static; it is in tension, with a continual need for proportion, revision, conversion, updating and harmonization.

There are two risks to be avoided:

— too much weight given to the secular pole:



not only would this fail to ferment the world with the values of the Gospel, but little by little it would lead the lay person (and the Salesian as well!) to a horizontal and purely temporal mentality at odds with the Church's specific mission;

— too much weight given to the spiritual pole: it would bring about an intimism or alien vertical attitude opposed to the characteristic significance of the salesian vocation and mission.

*"In discovering and living their proper vocation and mission, the lay faithful must be formed according to the union which exists from their being members of the Church and citizens of human society.*

*There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand the so-called 'spiritual' life with its values and demands; and on the other the so-called 'secular' life, i.e. life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture. The branch, engrafted onto the vine which is Christ, bears its fruit in every sphere of existence and activity. In fact, every area of the lay faithful's lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God, who desires that these very areas be the 'places in time' where the love of Christ is revealed and realized for both the glory of the Father and service of others".*<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> GL 59

## 2. Extend the involvement

What is wanted is not just a greater working presence of lay people in our works; that could be easily realized and would serve at times to meet only some immediate needs. What is required is rather an overall attitude, rooted in an availability



for personal and communal change so as to bear clear witness to baptismal brotherhood and a shared missionary outlook.

Involvement implies also the ability to have trust in the lay person who takes on the direct and primary responsibility for certain services, while the Salesian supports and sustains him.

### 3. *Foster shared responsibility*

Experience shows that in some cases this aspect is the most difficult of the elements involved.

Some confreres find personal difficulty in visualizing the sharing of responsibility. They willingly accept collaboration, but not shared responsibility. It seems to them that the latter takes from them something which is absolutely theirs without any question. Certainly one must avoid whatever might detract from our particular identity and vocational responsibility, but be able at the same time to make use of the complementarity of gifts and the possible harmonization of contributions.

There are also objective problems that can be met with in the organization of work carried out by a differentiated group.

A calm and progressive dialogue about the content and motivations of the work, the frequent verification by a group of work done together with the express desire to help each other, the necessary proportion between the requirements of pastoral educative activity and those of family, social and political life (especially of lay people), the clarification of roles and functions entrusted to the Salesians and to the lay group, are the most effective means for bringing about a real sharing of responsibility.



Some organisms of shared responsibility, such as the educative community, consulting groups and committees, groups for specialized work, should be strengthened in order to ensure a setting in which all can make their contribution to the common cause.

#### 4. *Revitalize internal and external communication*

We must be well aware of the strict linkage that exists between collaboration and shared responsibility on the one hand and the intensity and quality of communication on the other.

There is an aspect which, I think, could be given greater attention if we are really open in mind and heart to the professional ability of lay people and their desire to make available their expertise: the communication we succeed in creating with the surroundings in which we are inserted. It is not sufficient to concentrate only on the efficacy of our influence on those to whom our work is immediately directed; we must also have in mind the incidence we have on culture and our ability to spread the message linked with Don Bosco's charism.

Our Father and Founder paid much attention to the image of his mission that others would form. Attention to secular matters, and to the demands associated with them, open the community to this dialogue with the setting, the neighbourhood, and the local culture.

Don Bosco deliberately sought this comparison, in the conviction that he had something interesting and important to both give and receive.

There are many other aspects concerning the presence of lay people, their collaboration, their



ability to assume responsibility, that would merit a word of introduction or comment. I have in mind two themes which are not considered in the present circular:

— the *lay ministries*, in which we have a particular interest because in our initiatives we have in fact so many ministries, which are only awaiting organization and recognition;

— the new cultural aspects associated with the *identity and dignity of women* at both ecclesial level and civil or secular level. For us Salesians the theme is of practical concern in the educational and pastoral field, e.g. in connection with coeducation and education to love.

In any case there is no lack of material for serious and deep reflection in this regard.

## **9. INCENTIVES OF THE COMING SYNOD FOR NEW RELATIONSHIPS WITH LAY PEOPLE**

Without any doubt the coming Synod on Consecrated Life will deal also with the theme of the relationships between consecrated and lay persons. In the "Working paper" the point is referred to in two paragraphs: in n. 80, under the heading "in communion with the laity", and in n. 98, which is an incitement to "new forms of apostolic presence".

In the light of the ecclesiology of communion, n. 80 exhorts to a more constructive collaboration in which there must be an explicit re-evaluation of the secular reality *as a theological area*. The Council has highlighted the dignity and mission of the baptized person; at the present day there is a grow-



ing number of groups of lay people “who express the desire to share in the spirituality and mission of the institutes of consecrated life in a complementarity of vocations. These institutes”, adds the text, “are actively involved in searching for programmes of formation and structural forms to accommodate this participation and collaboration”.

The document goes on to remind members of Institutes of Consecrated Life that, as is stated in *Lumen Gentium*, they exist to bear witness “to all the faithful, but especially to the laity, that the secular world cannot be offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes”.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> cf. LG 31

This is equivalent to recommending to consecrated persons the urgent need for their spiritual renewal (a “new enthusiasm”), in such a form that their charismatic identity proclaims clearly to everyone each day a strong evangelical spirit. Communion and sharing with the laity demands of each of us and of our local communities a contagious salesian spirituality; without this it will be a matter only of collaboration and organization in the works, which will not necessarily bring about in the Church and in the world a growth in Don Bosco’s charism.

Referring to the demands of creativity made by the New Evangelization, n. 98 exhorts to “a particular form of apostolic participation at this moment in the Church’s history”. Such participation “is expressed in the sharing of the individual modes of seeing and acting together with the laity, especially in fields of particular competence, such as the school, etc.”.

Here it will be well to look back and recall that when speaking of the salesian apostolate the terms “mission” and “works” are not identical in mean-



ing, and that lay people who are well prepared can act, within the secular area chosen by Don Bosco, even beyond the limits of the works of the Salesian Family.

The Regulations of Apostolic Life of the Cooperators declare that "the lay Cooperators fulfil their commitment and live the salesian spirit in the normal situations of their life and work, according to their lay state, and spread their values in their environment".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> RAL 4, §2

Our own Constitutions assert: "We also give our attention to the lay people responsible for the evangelization of their local area, and to the family where different generations come together and build the future of mankind";<sup>22</sup> an operative presence in the world, in the family, in work, in local and social institutions, especially for the benefit of the young, to offer the ferment of the Gospel on a generous scale.

<sup>22</sup> C 29

Don Bosco was eager to involve numerous members of the lay faithful in his spirit and operative plans, even beyond his own works: "The work of the Cooperators will extend to every country, it will spread throughout Christianity. The hand of God will sustain it! The Cooperators will be the ones who foster the Catholic spirit. It may seem that my idea is utopian, but I am sticking to it nonetheless!".<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> MB 18, 161

He wanted the Cooperators Association to be active and enterprising, with its purpose to shake a lot of Christians out of their torpor and spread the energy of charity.<sup>24</sup> Rightly do the General Regulations lay down: "Every community should feel it its duty to increase and support the Association of Salesian Cooperators for the good of the Church. It should help in the formation of its members, prom-

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*



<sup>25</sup> R 38

ote and spread knowledge of this particular vocation, especially among our more committed young people and among our lay collaborators".<sup>25</sup>

The working paper of the Synod gives praise to the kind of Associations that "share the spirituality and collaborate in the mission" of an Institute; it is "a reality in process of growth and still seeking adequate forms, but which can allow consecrated communities to better articulate their life in the Church and their specific apostolate. These new ways", adds the document, "can play an important role in sustaining persons dedicated to spiritual research, who want to commit themselves in the Church in a specific field. They are forms which provide the possibility of creating places for sharing, places of faith, and for support in a common mission, lived in different forms but realized in the same spirit".

## 10. AN INVITATION TO THE PROVINCES

The time we have available before the celebration of the General Chapter will be useful to the individual provinces as a period of grace for the verification of fidelity to Don Bosco, and in the search for a more adequate manner of participation of the laity in the salesian spirit and mission.

Art. 168 of the Regulations prescribes: "*With the consent of his council the provincial has the power (...) of inviting to the provincial chapter Salesians and non-Salesians as experts or observers, without the right to vote*".

Without doubt, this indication has always been kept in mind in provincial chapters, but in preparation for the GC24 it acquires a new significance if



the norm referred to can be rendered operative and efficacious.

*The presence of some lay people*, and this not just at the opening and closing celebrations but also during the effective work of the Chapter, can be of opportune help in feeling, seeing and guiding the sensitivity of the lay faithful who live their own vocation and their reference to Don Bosco in a significant manner. Direct contact between Salesians and laity in reflection and the selection of guidelines will be of help both to us Salesians and also to the lay people.

The presence of such lay people cannot be improvised. They must be chosen in advance and prepared. By sharing with them the preoccupation of a General Chapter of renewal, we shall discover possible suggestions and proposals which will prove truly enriching, and we shall gain a better understanding also of the secular dimension of the Congregation.

And then, since the lay-project has been considered and put forward in the last General Chapters, it is fitting that in the coming provincial chapter any initiatives already launched in this field should be reviewed and strengthened.

In particular it will be well to insist on the educative and pastoral community, putting realistically into practice what the Constitutions lay down: in the educative community "lay people associated with our work make a contribution all their own because of their experience and pattern of life. We welcome and encourage their collaboration and offer them the opportunity to get a deeper knowledge of the salesian spirit and the practice of the preventive system".<sup>26</sup>

Finally I would like to recall with particular in-



sistence *the involvement and formation of parents*. We are in the Year of the Family and the Holy Father has placed great emphasis on the urgency of this theme; in the last circular we reflected together on our apostolic responsibilities in this connection; and so in the provinces let there be an intensification of initiatives for the benefit of parents and an insistence that each local community truly commits itself in this sense.

## CONCLUSION

Our preparation for the coming General Chapter, dear confreres, will oblige us to intensify two vital aspects of our consecrated life: *spirituality and formation*. They are aspects which are primarily of importance for us but which refer also to those to whom our work is addressed.

Speaking of the young, much insistence has been placed on youth spirituality and on their formation through appropriate journeys of faith.<sup>27</sup>

Now, as we concern ourselves with lay people we must once again be able to study deeply both our salesian spirituality and formation to operative activity following the rich contents of the preventive system.

To succeed like Don Bosco in such a task we must perfect ourselves in these two aspects. We have at our disposal abundant and valuable instruments for doing this well, even beginning gradually and in small numbers provided the work be genuine and penetrating.

Let us look with trust to Mary, who is particularly competent in lay values: the faithful wife, the virgin mother, the generous disciple of Christ her

<sup>27</sup> cf GG 23



Son. In her, family values shine out: conjugal love and the education of her child.

She lived joyously in the world, listening to the saving Word of the Creator and meditating on his merciful interventions. She is "the one who believed", manifesting a deep vision of faith with respect to the vicissitudes of history. Assumed into heaven as the second Eve, she has stimulated the secular dimension of the Church because, following her as a model, the Church has always been the leaven of salvation. From heaven she has shown her continuing motherhood of all the members of the People of God, and this in particular by collaborating with the Holy Spirit in raising up charisms of consecrated life.

And it is precisely Mary, the Helper of Valdocco, who with motherly concern and predilection guided Don Bosco in beginning his charism for the young and the poor: a spirit and a mission to be shared with ever more numerous consecrated and lay persons to provide a common witness in an authentically ecclesial communion.

May the Marian dimension of our charism be for us an incitement to prepare well for the GC24. In this way we shall be faithful to the gift raised up by the Holy Spirit through the maternal intervention of Mary in view of the renewal of society and the salvation of the world.

My greetings to you all, with God's blessing on your work. May Don Bosco intercede on our behalf!

With affection and hope.

Don F. Viganò