

acts

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

The Synod on Consecrated Life

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Rome, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
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My dear confreres,

Fraternal greetings to you from myself and from the members of the General Council, especially from Fr Martin McPake who has unfortunately been in poor health for some time; he is recommending himself in a particular way to the intercession of Don Rua; let us accompany him in our own prayers.

As you know already, the services rendered by the General Council in these months include a number of Team Visits; on the one hand these reveal the enormous amount of good that has been promoted in the Congregation since the last General Chapter (the GC23), and on the other they disclose certain lacunas or unfinished matters which oblige us in our planning to keep in mind the indispensable urgency of the evangelization of the young. Fortunately the theme of the GC24 in no

way deflects us from the obligations of such a mission but rather stimulates us to involve numerous other complementary forces in the same sense.

We are already at the beginning of the new year of 1995, a year which will be characterized for us by the duties of preparation for the GC24; it will set the Congregation on the way to the grandiose and prophetic bimillenary commemoration of the incarnation of the Word and will carry Don Bosco's charisma into the third millennium of the faith.

The recent Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* enables us to understand the greatness of the vision of faith of John Paul II and the extraordinary commitment of the Church in the preparation of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000.

The Apostolic Letter speaks of two phases of preparation. The first, which we could call "preparatory", lasts until 1996. The celebration of our GC24 is therefore included in this phase, and it is well to keep this point in mind as we plan for the future. The preparation of the Chapter ('95) and its realization ('96) will make us feel our position as leaders in the effort to incorporate among the fruits of the Great Jubilee Don Bosco's charisma, authentically renewed and rendered contemporary in its ability to respond to the challenges of the times.

"The future of the world and the Church", writes the Pope, "belongs to the younger generation, to those who, born in this century, will reach maturity in the next, the first century of the new millennium. *Christ expects great things from young people!*"¹ Our Founder's apostolic plan is directed entirely to the young and is intrinsically permeated by the virtue of hope. The General Chapters of the period following Vatican II have prompted us to be in an ever more practical sense "missionaries of the young".

¹ TMA 58

Let us ask our Blessed Lady, who is at the centre of the great event of the year 2000, to accompany us in the work of the coming Provincial Chapters and in the other initiatives in preparation for what will be the last General Chapter of the present century.

A Church and family event of particular significance for our efforts at renewal took place at Catania on 5 November last: the beatification by the Holy Father Pope John Paul II of Sister Maddalena Catarina Morano, one of our consecrated sisters who contributes as a member of our Family to making the genuine salesian spirit of Don Bosco shine out in the Church. If we turn to her to read her spiritual testimony, portrayed in a laborious existence of apostolic charity, it will help us to make practical and efficacious resolutions to improve our own salesian qualities.

In this great commitment of charismatic identification we are impelled in a particular manner by the recent Synod of Bishops (October '94), and for this reason I invite you, in this circular, to consider some of its stimulating aspects.

It is a Synod which certainly finds a place – if we look forward to the Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father which we expect to follow it in the near future – in the pre-preparatory phase of the Great Jubilee. Let us make good use of its content and guidelines to intensify and improve our own process of renewal.

The Synodal Assembly with most members

The recent Ordinary Synod, the ninth, broke the record for the number of participants: more than

250 "Synodal Fathers" (all Bishops with some priests who are religious Superiors, 74 "auditors" (including 53 women) invited by the Holy Father, 20 "experts" (collaborators of the Secretary General) and ten or so observers from non-Catholic Churches: nearly 350 members in all.

As is well known, the theme was "Consecrated life", which is wider than "Religious life"; the contributions made in the preparatory phase by all the Churches were contained in a valuable "Working Document" which frequently received much praise and provided a guide for the interventions in the assembly and the fruitful exploratory dialogue in the 14 language groups and the commission for the drawing up of the Synod's Message. 55 Institutes of men were represented and 53 of women.

Salesians among the "Synodal Fathers" included two Cardinals (Castillo and Javierre), eight Bishops (Charles Bo, Hector Lopez, Juan Mata, Basilio Mwe, Zacarias Ortiz, Oscar Rodriguez, Tito Solari, Ignazio Velasco), and also the Rector Major; among the auditors was the Provincial of Venezuela, Fr Jose Divasson; and among the experts were Fr Vittorio Gambino and Sister Enrica Rosanna FMA. Apart from the daily work, we were able to gather together for a family supper in our Vatican community, always so hospitable, and for a happy evening of songs and lively conversation that filled us with a feeling of joy and hope that still remains in our hearts: it was a kind of charismatic pause during the Synod itself!

In addition to the contributions made by each one in the language groups, all our confreres made interventions in the general assembly with particular reference to their countries of origin, and all reflecting the spirit of Don Bosco. The only one

unable to intervene was Mgr Charles Bo, whose arrival had been greatly delayed by difficulties in obtaining permission to make the journey.

The Holy Father was faithfully present each day at the assemblies, displaying interest and good humour.

A particularly striking and at the same time unobtrusive presence was that of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, always attentive and always in prayer; she read in the assembly a moving intervention which made everyone think of the knack of women in witnessing to the value of religious consecration for the Church and equally for the world.

John Paul II, leaning on a stick, was a centre of communion and also of happiness with his good humour; his affability and sense of dialogue led him to make contact with everyone, inviting to lunch or supper each day small groups of eight or ten persons, and bringing all together on the final day for a big lunch in common.

It must be said that the very celebration of the Synod, with its life in common, the cordial environment, the meetings, dialogue and discussions, the atmosphere of convergence in faith despite the variety of places of origin, constitutes an invaluable experience of communion in the Church and a positive manifestation of the wise pastoral preoccupations of the Pope and the Bishops. It is certainly a grace of God to have been able to take an active part in an event of communion which can be considered unique in the world.

The ecclesial aspect in the formulation of the theme

In the Congregation we have already made together some useful reflections² on the importance of this Synod and on the nature of its conclusions. On reading once again the circular of '92 I am struck by its closeness to what the Synod actually did.

² cf ACG 342, (1992)

As we said then, this Episcopal Assembly is not on a par with a General Chapter for each individual Institute; the Bishops did not start out from the standpoint of the specific nature of charisms but rather from the overall and vital significance that all of them together have in the Church. We wrote: "In a certain way we are invited to carry out a process which is the reverse of that of the recent General Chapters: there our concern was to start from the promptings of the Council and so define the charisma left us by the Founder, i.e. we moved from the common patrimony of the Council to the specific nature of our own characteristics; here, on the other hand, we shall have to start from the experience of our charismatic identity so as to bring light and deeper understanding to common values of an ecclesial nature, i.e. we have to pass from the specific nature of our own characteristics to the vital common patrimony".³

³ ACG 342 p. 10

For this reason it was not to be expected that the Synod, which is primarily an episcopal collegial event of a *specifically pastoral character for the whole Church*, would formulate a technical definition of consecrated life, a clear statement of its constitutive elements being sufficient, nor provide a solution to specific problems proper to the various Institutes, nor yet censure possible errors and deviations of groups of consecrated persons in the period

following the Council, but rather affirm in depth its ecclesial dimension, its linkage with holiness, its role of protagonism in the New Evangelization, its great value as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and the world with a view to the future: it would rather examine the great common values, but at the same time avoid the danger of a dull and pedestrian generalization.

“We could say”, we wrote, “that we expect as a global fruit not so much a solution to specific problems of this or that group, but rather a strong relaunching of consecrated life in its essential and vital aspects. Consecrated life, in fact, through the fruitful action of the Holy Spirit in the Founders and Foundresses through the centuries, is called to manifest the richness of the mystery of Christ which makes to shine out in the Church (his Body in history) the multiform grace of Christ its Head”.⁴

⁴ ACG 342 p. 40

It is interesting to read over again that circular today; it would give the impression of having been written *after* the celebration of the Synod; I can tell you in confidence that during the Synod's work, we Salesians felt ourselves in happy harmony with the direction taken by the assembly, and positively stimulated to continue along the path we had undertaken, with renewed energy and deep gratitude to the Holy Spirit who has guided us in our work of post-conciliar renewal.

The Synod has given us cause to rejoice and has made us feel that we are on the right path, even though it invites us at the same time to intensify our efforts at renewal so as to attain the various objectives that still remain open.

We are asked to hear in the Synod the voice of the Episcopacy, concerned to provide sound guidance for the People of God. After the synodal re-

flections on the Laity in the Church,⁵ and on the priestly ministry⁶, the Bishops with the Pope have now examined more deeply the nature and role of consecrated life. Their considerations highlight the ecclesial nature of charisms and the responsibility of service which they themselves have towards consecrated life, considered as a precious gift of the Holy Spirit to all the People of God.

The standpoint from which the Bishops consider consecrated life is, in a certain sense, anterior to that followed by each Institute in its own regard, giving it legitimacy and enrichment by ensuring a better overall, unitary and integral vision.

It gives us strength and encouragement to know that the Pastors consider it their duty to give privileged ministerial service to consecrated life: “*de re nostra agitur*” (“consecrated life concerns us directly”) said Cardinal Hume, the General Rapporteur, in his first address at the beginning of the work, and he dedicated the entire first part of his report to an explanation of what he meant by this. He put forward a series of six verbs which he then went on to develop: “It is the duty of the Episcopate in communion with the Roman Pontiff, and of every Bishop in his respective diocese, to *recognize, appreciate, discern, protect, promote and harmonize*” consecrated life.

“The Bishop’s role as regards consecrated life thus extends beyond pastoral planning. He is also the shepherd and guardian of consecrated persons and of the gift of consecrated life, in different ways, depending on whether the Institutes concerned are of pontifical or diocesan rite, or are exempt, but always *de re nostra agitur!*” And he insisted: “The gift of consecrated life given to the Church is entrusted therefore to our pastoral care and charity”.⁷

⁵ Exhortation *Christifideles laici*

⁶ Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*

⁷ HUME, *Relatio ante disceptationem* 4

Hence, declared Card. Hume, the purpose and objectives of this Synod must be:

- to make the consecrated life understood, appreciated and welcomed by the whole Church;
- to promote it in its true theological, ecclesial, apostolic and missionary nature;
- to facilitate its qualitative and quantitative expansion.

Certainly interventions were heard in the assembly referring to some negative aspects experienced here and there in uneasy or agitated groups of consecrated persons. We may think, for example, of certain forms of "pastoral parallelism", of attitudes that prescind from the magisterium of the Pope and the Bishops, of the influence of fashionable ideologies, imprudence in the planning of formation, secular modes of life-style, abuse of freedom in the liturgy, cowardice in the exercise of authority, spiritual superficiality with an accompanying falling off in contemplation, asceticism and religious discipline. But it must be recognized that such interventions did not reflect the tone of the observations as a whole, which remained solidly linked to the three above-mentioned objectives to help consecrated life at a time of renewal.

The intimate nature of consecrated life

The Message of the Synod has emphasized very clearly that "an important distinction appeared in the discussions: that between consecrated life as such, in its theological dimension, and the institutional forms it has assumed across the centuries. Consecrated life as such is permanent; it will always grace the Church. Institutional forms can

be transitory, without guarantees of lasting indefinitely”.

This means that consecrated life must be considered not simply as a reality present *in* the Church but, of their nature, as a constituent element *of* the Church. This viewpoint links consecrated life constitutionally with the very mystery of Christ, with the lifestyle of Mary and of the Apostles. It is not therefore an ecclesial reality that began simply with monasticism; the latter is in fact an “institutional form” of consecrated life, even though it has been meritorious since the early centuries.

In this way we can better understand how consecration through the evangelical counsels (by vows or other ecclesial bonds) is vitally rooted in Baptism, the sacrament which incorporates directly in Christ; it has its source in him.

Hence arises a new vision of the manner in which we must direct in depth our renewal in fidelity to the first origins: we must refer back directly to the source which is the mystery of Christ. It was not the Founders who invented consecrated life: they received it from the living tradition of the Church; they then clothed it in a new and original plan for participating in the Lord’s mission.

Such a theological view of consecrated life takes us directly into the Gospel; it makes us think of our Founder, not so much in the guise of a modern monk but rather as a tireless collaborator with the successors of the Apostles, and shapes our search for models to contemplate and to follow to the very thresholds of Easter and Pentecost.

By our religious profession we undertake to reproduce the style of life to which Christ bore witness, obedient poor and chaste, in which Mary shared so splendidly, a style which was passed on

to the Apostles and flourished in the first Christian community (“one heart and one soul”). In our profession we become inserted in the very mystery of Christ and the intimate nature of the Church, and we feel impelled to avoid defrauding those who see us as “signs and bearers” of God’s love.

From this derives the urgency of concentrating renewal in what brings us more closely to Christ, especially in making the Eucharist the daily centre of the interior life of individuals and community, recalling the words of the Gospel: “The disciples recognized Jesus the Lord in the breaking of bread”.⁸

⁸ *Lc* 24, 35

Card. Baum emphasized that together with the Eucharist special care deserves to be given, as a commitment to contact with Christ, to the frequenting of the sacrament of reconciliation through which we see reflected in him our own poor countenance, not always clean because of so much dust that gathers during our daily life; this gives realism to the penitential dimension and the indispensability of ascesis and of living in accordance with religious discipline in line with the Rule that has been professed.

The Synodal Fathers discussed the precise significance of some frequently used terms, like “charism”, “consecration”, “sacramentality”, “profession”, but without arriving at any unanimity. The request was made⁹ that the clarification of such terms be entrusted to a commission of experts before the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation.

⁹ cf *Propositio* 3^a D

Amongst us in the Congregation the use of these very significant terms has long been accepted without any problems, as can be seen from the circular of '92.¹⁰

¹⁰ ACG 342

Importance of monasticism

The theological consideration of consecrated life in itself makes precise its authentic nature, and guides us in our search for its first historical model. Certainly the relationship which is customarily drawn between all forms of religious life and monasticism needs to be carefully reconsidered. It is not a question of depriving this classic form of "religious life" of its historical importance and objective influence. There is no doubt that monasticism offers a well tried example of what a concrete Rule of Life should be in its essentials.

In the Synod there was a discrete monastic representation which offered interventions of great worth; there were monks from East and West, and some Orthodox monks as well. We were able to appreciate the extraordinary nature of their witness of consecration and their efficacious evangelizing activity through the centuries, as well as admire the deep aspects of their life style.

Some of the Synodal Fathers belonging to forms of apostolic life had even feared that the weight of these monastic values might upset the Synod's overall significance. In reality the contribution of the monks turned out to be most enriching, making it clear that the Rules of Life of the various Institutes of Religious Life had, in fact, a particular linkage with the strong values and great traditions of monastic life. Thus, even in the Synod's Message a paragraph is dedicated to eastern monasticism: "The desert Fathers and the Eastern monks developed the monastic spirituality which then spread to the West. It is nourished by *lectio divina*, liturgy and unceasing prayer; and it is lived in the charity

¹¹ Message VII

of common life, in conversion of heart, flight from the world, silence, fasts and long vigils. Eremitical life still flourishes around monasteries. This spiritual treasury has forged the culture of nearby peoples and, at the same time, has been inspired by it".¹¹

Rightly is it stated in one of the *Propositiones* (n. 6) that those elements are to be held in high esteem which stem from the monasticism of the oriental Churches, i.e.: imitation of the kenosis of the Word, which constitutes the root of eastern monasticism; transformation to the image of God, or deification; renunciation; vigilance; compunction; tranquility; the total oblation of self and all that pertains to self in a perfect holocaust".

It is interesting to note that in the East and among the Orthodox the monastic life is the only form of religious life to have existed. There is found a secular practice of the radical nature of the following of Christ; there also is a special capacity for ecumenical dialogue between different monasteries; there too is a great possibility of influencing the whole local Church, not least because it was the custom to select the members of the hierarchy from among the best monks.

We, in our consecrated apostolic life, look in the first place to apostolic origins, but we cannot fail to learn from the monastic life the sense of contemplative listening, the concrete demands of kenosis, the practice of vigilance, the commitment to communal life, with the vital role of authority and the style of total self-oblation; we need to give new value to the ascetical dimension in individuals and communities: we must, as we recalled in an earlier circular, "be on the watch with robes hitched up and lamps alight"¹²

¹² cf ACG 348

The consecrated woman

Consecrated women are much more numerous in the Church than consecrated men; they make up some 72.5 per cent of the total. There are more than 3,000 female Institutes of pontifical or diocesan rite. And it must be noted among the signs of the times at the present day that the advancement of women has come much to the fore, even though marked in certain environments by deviant forms of feminism. It is significant, therefore, that the Synod spent a considerable time in reflecting on the dignity of the consecrated woman, emphasizing primarily the many ways in which she is able to manifest to people in general the motherly countenance of the Church, but also recognizing that she should have a more adequate role in ecclesial responsibilities.

Rightly the Synod's Message declares: "Consecrated women should participate more in the Church's consultations and decision-making, as situations require. Their active participation in the Synod has enriched our reflection on consecrated life and, in particular, on the dignity of consecrated women and their collaboration in the mission of the Church".

For the first time in a Synod it was possible for the "auditors", men and women (including some representatives of Protestant Churches) to speak for six minutes. The assembly heard some wonderful testimonies from women auditors, some of them expressing the hope that they might have more adequate responsibility, but the majority manifesting their special interior disposition of heart and heroic sensitivity in the service of the needy. Particularly moving was an intervention in

the form of an "audience" (the specialized exposition of a theme for the space of 15-20 minutes) granted to Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

In her intervention, Sister Stephanie-Marie Boullanger pointed out that "the sensitivity (of consecrated women) to the realities of creation, their innate sense of life, their sense of listening, their respect for the person, for dialogue, allow them to establish authentic human relations and to be an instrument of communion". The Bishop of Bordeaux recalled that consecrated women have the common charism of femininity directed towards Christ for the fertility of the Church; their consecration, he said, "sustains the consecration of all the members of the People of God".

Feminine evangelical witness, contemplative ability, intuition and delicacy, facility in dialogue and the courage to respond to the most demanding challenges, constitute one of the most significant and important aspects of the People of God. It is true, recalled Sister Boullanger, that female religious life down the centuries has generally relied heavily on men, although since the Second Vatican Council a certain number of doors have been opened.

In the Church too at the present day the signs of the times require a revision of the situation, acknowledging the dignity and feminine richness proper to consecrated women and giving them greater trust and space for responsibility. One of the fruits of the Synod will certainly be to open the Church to this new element of the times with more conviction and concrete application.

All this has made me think of our responsibilities and the manner of our animation in the Salesian Family. In the latter there are various groups of

consecrated women – we think particularly of the FMA. After Vatican II the importance of their proper autonomy has been more understood. This requires in them a growth in responsibility and in us an understanding of the conciliar ecclesiology and our conversion to it.

It is a question of a deep change of mentality, both for them and for us, something which it is not always easy to bring about with speed and truth.

The problem can be stated briefly as follows: an inadequate autonomy could obscure communion, which is the most important aspect. Autonomy, in fact, is not the final goal; it is an intermediate objective at which one aims so as to reach more securely the ultimate end, which is precisely *Communion: just and proper autonomy in view of a more authentic communion!* A communion which is not only the broad ecclesial communion but is centred for us in the common charism left to us by Don Bosco as a precious gift to the Church for the evangelization of the young, especially among the poor and the ordinary people.

The Synod should prompt us to take up with more intelligence and efficacy the attainment of this *Family communion*.

I would like to recall what I wrote to Mother Ersilia Canta on the occasion of the centenary of the death of Mother Mazzarello: “If we consider the profound significance in Revelation of the complementarity of man-woman, a spiritual family so composed will seem more perfect... (In fact), in the first of the great spiritual families, St Augustine’s (unnamed) sister and her companions were responsible for giving a feminine slant to the Augustinian Rule. Then there were St Benedict and St Scholastica, St Francis and St Clare, and others. Feminine

complementarity is a sign of the peculiar plenitude and importance of the charism, of long life and fruitfulness and of abundant contribution to the mission of the Church.

On this assumption it will mean that the feminine contribution of Mary Domenica Mazzarello and her spirit of Mornese to the salesian charism has only made a beginning in the past: the future must see its real growth".¹³

¹³ ACG 301, p. 70

The full dignity of Religious "Brothers"

In connection with male consecrated life, various interventions referred to the figure of the so-called religious "brother";¹⁴ in one of the "auditions", in fact, Bro. Pablo Basterrechea, ex-Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, presented specifically "the vocation of the Brother in lay, clerical or mixed Congregations".

¹⁴ N.B. This the term used by the Synod Fathers to avoid the ambiguous terminology of "lay" institutes and consecrated "lay" persons; cf. *Propositio* 8

The argument is one which served to throw light on the correct manner of understanding the proper nature of consecrated life. In many environments in fact (and even among the Pastors) there is frequently to be found a superficial concept of male consecrated life; it is identified with that of the monk or the religious-priest, and readily relegates the "brother" to a lower level, forgetting the source, dignity and vitality of consecrated life as such for everyone. Concentrating attention on the figure of the "Brother" meant taking seriously the fact that all consecrated life is rooted in baptism: the great dignity of all through sharing in a particular way in the priestly, prophetic and regal attributes of Christ. This is the surpassing result of Christian initiation (through Baptism and Confir-

mation) intensified by the new charismatic consecration through the profession of the evangelical counsels.

From here take their rise the specific spiritual endowments for the requirements of the mission of each one, including the ministerial mission of the priest further enriched by the graces of ordination. And so insistence was laid on the indispensability of a deep and integral formation for all in the dignity and responsibility common to all consecrated persons.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that no mention was made in the Synod of the delicate and complex problems associated with the *religious-priest*. Maybe the time is not yet ripe, and there is need for prior doctrinal research at a deeper level. But the fact that there exist properly so-called "clerical" Institutes (i.e. linked in a characteristic form with the ministerial priesthood, as the Jesuits for instance), in which this aspect is a constituent of their specific character and of the particular kind of mission they have to carry out, has led at least to the fact that one cannot lump together the Brothers of all Institutes for a possible revision.

Various Synodal Fathers, especially those of the Franciscan Institutes, insisted on the aspect of the so-called "juridical equality" of the Brothers as regards the exercise of authority. Some more precise statements were made however (and I myself sent in a written intervention in this connection) to clarify what exactly was being asked for as regards the future, in view of the specific nature of each charism.

Along this line, among the *Propositiones* to be presented to the Holy Father there is one (n. 10) which asks in the first place for the official recogni-

tion of some male Institutes that could be called "mixed" (of which nothing is said at present in can. 588 of the Code). In them should be clear the will of the Founder who did not see the difference between "priests" and "non-priests" as influencing the particular characteristics of the Institute; in such Institutes, through the deliberation of their own General Chapters, the exercise of authority could be open at all levels to every kind of member. (We now await the response, which we may believe will be positive, approved by the Holy Father).

What is important indeed in the whole of this problem is the full dignity, the integral formation, the indispensability and the corresponding role of responsibility of the figure of the Brother, in fidelity to the Founder and the specific characteristics of his charism.

From this standpoint the importance of these specific traits of every charism becomes clear. The type of mission according to the Founder's plan should be of concern to all members: each one enters the Institute to collaborate with all his strength – even though in different and complementary ways – in the realization of the specific mission common to all.

Our Constitutions give us an authoritative presentation of the specific work done in this regard in the great Chapters that have followed Vatican II. It is a matter of perceiving and understanding the unique nature and the excellence of a pastoral work for the young which gathers under the primacy of pastoral charity a kind of evangelization of youth which incorporates also human advancement and culture: always with a pastoral intent.

Insertion in the particular Church

In the Synodal Message the Bishops state: "Among several difficulties to which we have given our fraternal attention is the need for communities of consecrated life and their members to integrate themselves into their particular Churches".¹⁵

¹⁵ Message V

It is a fact that the ecclesiology of Vatican II has fostered the importance of the particular or local Church; it is also a fact that unfortunately "exempt" Institutions have not always taken up with generosity and in harmony with their particular charism their practical sharing of responsibility in local pastoral work. And the Bishops too have not always considered Institutes of consecrated life as true charisms for their local Church.

The document *Mutuae relationes* (n. 22) had already emphasized the renewal brought by the Council to the concept of "exemption".

It is in this effort at genuine insertion that is realized in a practical manner the "*sentire cum ecclesia*", in fidelity to the teaching of the Pope and the Bishops, in solidarity of commitment for the New Evangelization, in a working communion around the Bishop with the clergy, laity and other consecrated persons of the locality.

Apostolic attention to the geographical area in which their particular mission is carried out prompts both pastors and faithful to consider with greater interest the various charisms as valuable gifts for the Church.

The Synodal *Propositio* 29,2 emphasizes the importance for consecrated persons of a deeper knowledge of the theology of the particular Church so as to place their specific charism at its service,

and for the Bishops, clergy and laity, the urgent need to truly know and esteem groups of consecrated life so as to give them space in the pastoral projects and plans of action of the local Church.

In this context the efficient functioning of a "mixed commission" between Bishops and Major Superiors is recommended, and also the mutual exchange of delegates between Bishops Conferences and those of Religious Superiors.

In our own case the commitment to such insertion makes us think also of the greater practical communion which we ought to foster in an area where different groups of the Salesian Family may be present.

Commitment in the mission extends beyond individual works and prompts us not only to form lay collaborators, but also and especially to be able to create new initiatives with an enterprise particularly sensitive to the needs of the local Church.

A lived insertion of this kind will witness to the advantageous inclusion of the universal Church in the particular Church, as is said in the document *Mutuae relationes*: "The Bishops certainly acknowledge and greatly appreciate the specific help given to the particular Churches by these religious. They will see in their exemption an expression of the pastoral concern which unites them closely with the Supreme Pontiff for the universal care of all the people".¹⁶

¹⁶ MR 22

Challenges of the New Evangelization

In the Synod there was a marked emphasis on the "mission" in relationship with present-day chal-

lenges and the urgent need for new or renewed forms of apostolate.

In this sense consecrated persons are asked in the first place to analyze the challenges from a theological standpoint. It is not sufficient, though it is certainly useful, to describe from a sociological point of view the various situations of novelty, injustice or urgency.

The challenges are not simply a matter of statistics, but must be considered as interventions of God, who uses such signs to indicate particular needs to the various charisms. There is need for a *pedagogy of the signs of the times*, already suggested by the Council, which reveal in factual situations the voice of the Lord leading to fresh contemporary likenesses of the Areopagus.

It was the Holy Spirit himself who guided the Founders in such a sense, and with trust in the Spirit it will be well to cultivate a certain boldness in creativity.

The Synodal Fathers also proposed a certain criteriology as an opportune instrument for the discernment of challenges. It included the following main points:

- a clear awareness of the challenges posed by the Spirit to the Church's mission;
- a circumspect determination of priorities to be observed in meeting them;
- an adequate competence, in dynamic fidelity to the Founder's charism;
- sincere communion with other ecclesial workers in the same field;
- careful consideration of men of good will dedicated to the renewal of society.

In addition to the *pedagogy of signs*, the New Evangelization presupposes some other important

demands associated with a change of mentality.

In the first place it must be said that even in the so-called "first evangelization" there is need for a truly "new" mentality adapted, of course, to different cultures; even in the first evangelization, the concept of "new evangelization" applies today. Among the elements of this mentality emphasis was given in the Synod to some particularly relevant aspects.

First among them is the effort at *inculturation*, which seeks to perceive and promote the "seeds of the Word" in the different cultures and at the same time display the shrewdness and critical courage to single out and correct eventual deviations, some of them going back for centuries, which will surely arise.

Moreover "the Synod fervently desires that interest in both *ecumenical and interreligious dialogue* should grow, and asks consecrated persons in their different countries to develop this interest".¹⁷

And then there is the priority to be given to educative competence, which reaches to the heart of every culture, linking evangelization with human advancement. In one of the *Propositiones* the Synodal Father recommend the *apostolate of education*, recalling to this priority the Institutes which have this kind of charism and the need to prepare for it also a large number of lay people. The Synod recognizes the importance and relevance of the Catholic school, and of Catholic Faculties and Universities, without overlooking initiatives and commitments that extend beyond purely formal education.¹⁸

An area calling for ever greater competence is that of *social communication*¹⁹ in harmony and collaboration with the local Church, and with the

¹⁷ Message VIII

¹⁸ *Propositio* 41

¹⁹ *Propositio* 44

concern to prepare a greater number of competent workers in this field.

Special insistence was given to the *mission 'ad gentes'* which is the crowning point of all evangelization and which has seen, and continues to see, Institutes of consecrated life in the front rank with heroic generosity, not only those specifically dedicated to the missions but also all the others who realize with a missionary heart their life of prayer and work, as St Teresa of Lisieux has shown in so eminent a manner.

Urgent priority of life in the Spirit

In the circular of '92 to which we have already referred we spoke of the "great open horizons" and we placed in the forefront "life in the Spirit"; and to the question 'what can we expect from the Synod?' we replied that we hoped for renewed presence of the mystery of Christ in the world, by intensifying the commitment to vanquish that dangerous spiritual superficiality which does such harm to the vitality of the charism. The Synod has indeed proclaimed for all consecrated persons the urgent priority of this life in the Spirit.

Card. Hume, in his first address to the assembly, declared that "the first great challenge to consecrated life concerns *spirituality*, precisely because it is the heart of such life, indicates its primary contribution to the Church and is the source of apostolic vigour. It points to a personal relationship with Christ through discipleship, the primacy given to God through consecration and openness to the Spirit's action. It is expressed in contemplation, prayer, listening to the Word of God, union with

²⁰ *Relatio ante disceptationem* 19

God, integration of the various dimensions of personal and community life, the faithful and joyful observance of the vows".²⁰

Every consecrated life is rooted in spirituality and can never prescind from it; and the peculiar type of its own spirituality is important also for many others.

Everywhere to some extent, even in other religions and in widely differing ways of seeking after what is sacred, the theme of spirituality appears nowadays as one of the most important frontiers of the mission itself.

The fact that the Synod has emphasized the distinction between the theological nature of consecrated life and its institutional forms in the world, serves to accent ever more clearly the centrality of Christ's mystery and the sharing in its holiness.

The practice of the evangelical counsels needs to be related to a deep and daily personal and communal friendship with Christ so as to become truly signs and bearers of his love. The spirituality of every consecrated life, though differentiated by numerous charisms, consists in being able to bear witness to a lifestyle which makes visible, here and now, the style of life of the obedient, poor and chaste Christ; a style which is intimately linked with, or rather stems from, the deep dynamic elements of the *divine sonship* which fills the consecrated person with the absoluteness of God.

The *Propositiones* offered to the Pope refer at length to this vital theme which is considered the most significant element of consecration. They emphasize the importance of ensuring the primacy of this aspect in formation, adapting a deeper study of the individual evangelical counsels also to the innovations and cultural differences now in process of

evolution. They also make more specific some of the principal means to be followed in this regard; they are:

- the centrality of the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours;
- frequent use of the sacrament of reconciliation and of the revision of life;
- return to the sources of the Gospel and the spirit of the Founder;
- the "lectio divina" in listening to the Word of God;
- the ability to communicate to the faithful the riches of the mystery of Christ.²¹

²¹ *Propositio* 15, B

The daily effort to intensify this exercise of "life in the Spirit" lead us to emphasize the pneumatological aspect of every spirituality. There is need to rediscover the mission of the Person-Gift of the Trinity which is the protagonist of consecration and is present to bring us to Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and in Him to lead us to the Father. The Spirit is the soul of the renewal of every spirituality; his mysterious presence and action, begun in the event of consecration on the occasion of the profession of the evangelical counsels, leads to an intimate personal and community relationship with Christ, the Friend and Lord. The reciprocal nature of friendship with Christ matures the conversion of mentality and of life which makes us special witnesses to the sanctity of the Church in the apostolic sphere traced out by the Founder.

Intimacy with the Holy Spirit, who is Love, and docility to his inspirations, or in other words the spiritual heart-beating expressive of our whole life, leads us to the origins of both the mystery of the Incarnation and of the charism of the Founder; it reminds us that it was precisely in the Spirit that be-

gan Mary's role as mother and model of the Church; it reminds us that holiness in the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit; He it is, therefore, who permeates and guides consecrated persons in leavening the mission of all the People of God.²²

²² N.B. To read again the encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* would be time well spent.

This primacy of life in the Spirit, which is so urgent at the present day, leads also to the making of consecrated life a dynamic centre for the diffusion of spirituality. In the address already quoted Card. Hume declared explicitly that "this is a field to be carefully cultivated, sometimes to be sowed with farsightedness. Would it not be advantageous to increase the number of spirituality schools, where not only doctrine is taught but priority is given to initiation and experience? The spirituality of an Institute could be better spread not only among its own members but also in the Church, which has always been enriched and renewed by the spirituality of the saints and religious families".²³

²³ *Relatio ante disceptationem* 19

²⁴ cf. ACG 342

In this way the Synod strengthens the process of our renewal, towards the first "open horizon"²⁴ for future growth: to ensure that Don Bosco's spirit may be alive in individuals and communities, and be spread with vigour and authenticity even beyond our own houses.

In such a sense the Salesian Youth Movement has as the soul of its vitality a youthful spirituality which takes its inspiration from Don Bosco; and the communion and involvement of numerous lay people (theme of the GC24) has as its priority the ensuring of the long-term spreading of salesian apostolic spirituality.

We must be grateful to the Synod for the authoritative impulse it has given us in showing us the central nucleus from which will explode future vitality.

Strength of fraternal life in community

The dimension of communion in fraternal life – the Synod insisted – is a necessary commitment in all Institutes of consecrated life, even when the members do not live in community, as is the case in secular Institutes. But for religious congregations this communion is lived in community: it is one of their proper and distinctive characteristics. Every religious Institute, in fact, is always structured (albeit in different ways) on a concrete fraternal life in community. The Synod has made this explicit, recommending also the study of the recent Vatican document *Fraternal life in community*.

Card. Hume, in the same address already quoted, considers this as the “second great challenge of consecrated life”;²⁵ it includes also the consideration and right exercise of the indispensable service of authority.

²⁵ *Relatio ante disceptationem* 20

The strength of fraternal life in community is manifested especially by the witness of living together in communion, which is one of the aspects for which families and society at the present day feel most nostalgia.

The interdependence was emphasized between fraternal life and fidelity in the practice of the evangelical counsels. Its validity and efficacy were appreciated especially in the situations of oppression and totalitarianism which confreres and Sisters have been able to experience in a positive manner notwithstanding grave difficulties.

Its strength is felt, in particular, in greater efficacy and creativity in evangelization; the community appears as the true subject of the mission which multiplies its apostolic energies in a common project.

A community which practises ongoing formation, aware also of the limitations of each of its members, of the need for patience and forgiveness, is aware that the community is always in a phase of construction, because perfection will only be eschatological in the communion of saints. It is a community which lives and expresses itself in the first place in the celebration of the Eucharist, and which is able to manifest its "spirituality of communion" in the mutual exchange of gifts within the local Church, with availability for collaboration, with sincerity in dialogue, with the search for harmony and unity, and with mutual relationships with the other members of the Church.²⁶

²⁶ cf. *Propositiones* 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34

The joy of community witness brings with it also a vocational fruitfulness for ensuring the future of the particular charism in the Church.

Conclusion

The Synod dealt with many other important aspects; we have limited our reflections to some of those which are more significant for us.

In the meantime it is wonderfully encouraging to see confirmed and deepened the main lines of our own process of renewal: we have not worked in vain, we have indeed followed the correct path.

Of the celebration of this Synod we have to say that it has been truly an event of the Church for the future, a real moment of grace, or in the words of the Holy Father: "an experience of Pentecost. We sensed the action of the Spirit present with his incessant work which gives the Church so many charisms of consecrated life. As we took part, we were led progressively towards what is most intimate in

the life of the Church: the call to holiness".²⁷

What it all comes to, dear confreres, is that we are now well enlightened on what constitutes our identity in the Church, and that our efforts and commitments must now be totally directed to moving towards those "open horizons" which still remain unattained in the perspective of our renewal.

Both the education of young people to the faith (GC23) and the involvement of many lay people in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco (GC24) require that we concentrate our efforts of ongoing formation on the intensification of *life in the Spirit* and on prior attention to *fraternal life in community*. This is the road to the third millennium, and now is the time to set out on it in an authentic manner.

Let us entrust these intentions to our Blessed Lady: she is at the origin of our charism and motherly involved with us for its renewal. The Synod has shown us her fullness of consecrated life as "The first of the disciples and Mother of all disciples, model of strength and perseverance in following Christ to the Cross. The Virgin Mary is the prototype of consecrated life because she is the Mother who welcomes, listens to, beseeches and contemplates her Lord in heartfelt praise".²⁸

Let us think of her intimacy with God in obedience ("be it done to me according to your Word"), in poverty ("She laid him in a manger"), in virginity ("Full of grace", and without stain); the incessant contemplation in her heart of the events of Christ; her permanent union with God, as in the ample vision of the times displayed in the Magnificat.

It is wonderful to think of Mary assumed into heaven: though surrounded by the angels and saints, she shows not the least sign of vainglory. We can imagine her in the joy of the truest humility

²⁷ 29 October, words of the Pope at the closing lunch

²⁸ Message IX

proclaiming in the presence of them all her canticle which is a hymn to the goodness of God in history. "They will call me blessed": there you have the joy of humility which teaches us how to praise God from within the gifts of our own consecration and holiness.

May the Virgin Mother help us to bring to fruition in ourselves with joyful awareness the many gifts of this Synod and dispose us to receive with practical proposals for our lives the desired Apostolic Exhortation with which Peter's Successor will offer us authoritatively the pentecostal conclusions of this event of grace.

I take the opportunity to send to all of you my best wishes for the new year just beginning: may Don Bosco be our guide and stimulation.

With cordial greetings and affectionately in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò