

acts

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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Egidio VIGANO Reading the Founder's charism again at the present day	3
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2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Fr Luc VAN LOOY The Volunteer Movement and the Sale- sian Mission	36
	2.2 Fr Luciano ODORICO Education to the missionary dimension	45

3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	None in this issue	
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4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major	57
	4.2 Chronicle of the General Council	57

5. DOCUMENTS AND NEWS ITEMS	5.1 Two new Servants of God: Mamma Margaret and Attilio Giordani	63
	5.2 18th Week of Spirituality of the Salesian Family	65
	5.3 New Provincials	68
	5.4 New Bishops	70
	5.5 First vol. of 'Bibliografia Generale di Don Bosco'	71
	5.6 Salesian statistics at 31.12.94	73
	5.7 Deceased confreres	75

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READING THE FOUNDER'S CHARISM AGAIN AT THE PRESENT DAY

Introduction - A lived experience - Two fundamental convictions - The paths to be followed - The redrafting of the Constitutions - The spirit of the Founder - From the 'mission' to the rediscovery of the 'charism' - The duration of the reinterpretation and those involved - Sensitive points in the process of discernment - The urgent need of a practical methodology - Animation and government - A visit of the Holy Spirit - We have a valid and updated 'identity card'

Rome, 8 February 1995
Introduction at Valdocco of the cause
for beatification and canonization of
Mamma Margaret

My dear confreres,

Today finally in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, there took place the solemn opening of the official process for the beatification and canonization of Mamma Margaret; and it happened precisely there at Valdocco, where for ten years she bore what we may call heroic witness by her generous collaboration with her son John in starting up the providential salesian charismatic work of the oratories. Our Father and Founder knows how much it cost his mother and how great was her contribution to the success, the style, the family environment, and the spirit of kindness and sacrifice, which still continue to characterize all

Don Bosco's institutions at the present day. Let us thank God and pray that the cause may proceed rapidly and with positive results.

And so, on a date of such great significance, I offer you a reflection on a theme I was requested to deal with for the 20th Congress of the Institute of Theology of the Religious Life, organized by the "Claretianum" here in Rome on 16 December 1994. I was assigned the delicate and important theme "*The foundational rereading carried out by the Salesians*". The theme was not developed with ourselves directly in mind, but in a certain sense it can prove more useful to consider it in the context of other consecrated persons too.

In offering you the contents of what I said on that occasion, my intention is to invite you to give careful consideration to a historical and charismatic synthesis which will serve to illustrate from a salesian point of view the processes of renewal in which we are engaged after Vatican II.

A lived experience

The style of my address is substantially that of a critical review of chronological events. The theme "reading again at the present day the Founder's charism" I intend to develop, not so much as an indication of how it must be done, as to recall what in fact has been done in my own Institute. It is an experience I have lived personally from Vatican II to the present day.

A lived experience is not a thesis to be defended but a reality of life, strengthened by decades of experimentation, which can provide suggestions, some of them already tested, for a better interpretation of one's own spiritual origins.

Two fundamental convictions

The reinterpretation of our Founder's charism has kept us busy for the last thirty years, and in our task we have been helped by two great beacons of light: the first is the *Second Vatican Council*, and the second the *epoch-making acceleration* of history at the present time.

We began from the conviction that *the Council* was a historic visit of the Holy Spirit to Christ's Church for a new era of its mission in the world: the greatest event of the twentieth century, with a view to its authentic renewal. It was possible to draw from it also lights and guidelines for renewal of Religious Life as well. It was a question of homing in on certain strategic points in the great conciliar message, studying them more deeply, adopting them and applying them to the reinterpretation of our charism.

In particular, in the light of what is said in *Lumen gentium*, we tried to do the Council's bidding in the decree *Perfectae caritatis* at n. 2: the "up-to-date renewal" with its two components, the "return to the sources" and the "adaptation to the changed conditions of our time".

The complementary nature of the two criteria ensure the avoidance on the one hand of the danger of rigidity, sclerosis and formalism, and on the other of a break with the origins.

The application, however, of these two criteria, so clear and simple in their expression, turned out to be much more complicated in practice.

The epoch-making change, already described with keen perception and perspective in the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, was forcefully presented, especially in some western areas where

our Institute is operating with many foundations. A growing problem was being met with from cultural innovations which had a powerful influence on the specific mission of the Institute and also, to some extent, on the style of religious life. At the same time there were signs of pressure for changes of doubtful authenticity which could have led astray a healthy process of renewal or destroyed it altogether.

The cultural innovations could neither be excluded or ignored, but they had to be seen in the light of the evangelical innovations inherent in any true charisma, and this opened up a field of work that was both vast and delicate. It was then that the famous expression was coined: "With Don Bosco and the times, and not with the times of Don Bosco!".

The clear awareness of this unavoidable challenge led those responsible for the Institute to give extraordinary importance to the Special General Chapter desired by the Apostolic See. They set about its preparation with a seriousness never seen before, and one which involved all Provinces and all confreres. Teams of specialists were organized to prepare detailed analyses of the vital themes that must be tackled and a draft of a possible re-elaboration of the Constitutions was prepared. No fewer than twenty small booklets were carefully prepared for the use of the capitulars. All were conscious of a great responsibility, almost of a re-founding: what Don Bosco had done 'personally' had now to be rethought and redrafted 'communally', in a certain sense, in relationship with the demands of the changed epoch and in complete fidelity to the origins.

We were helped to a great extent not only by

historical studies but also by a serious analysis, albeit synthetical, of the challenges of the cultural changes (secularization, socialization, personalization, liberation, inculturation, the acceleration of history, the advancement of women, etc.).

Never before had we attempted a work so vast and realistic.

The paths to be followed

The foundational reinterpretation could not be a simple and more or less scientific study of the sources; it had to be a spiritual discernment made by committed disciples from within the same vocational experience. It had to be a consideration by those able to grasp the soul of their own Institute, what it stands for, its dynamism, its manner of following Christ and of working in the Church, and of loving the young people in the world in the state in which they are at present found. The return to the sources could not be an archeological voyage of discovery through ancient documents but a revisiting of moments in the foundation process and of the heart of the Founder in his original experience as a disciple of Christ. It had to be an organic and dynamic reevaluation implying personal communion with the Founder through the experience of a whole Institute which had shared his spirit and mission through the years. The ability was needed to harmonize in appropriate degrees historical events, theological principles and special moments of grace.

To undertake such an enterprise it is necessary to follow complementary and interdependent paths, seeking a specific contribution from each of

them. The principal paths followed were:

a. *The historical path*: the charism is a lived experience and not an abstract theory. Consequently a serious study was made of sources referring to the person of the Founder and to the foundation itself: the prevailing cultural and social context and its influence on the Founder; his life and works; the people who influenced him and with whom he had special contacts; his writings etc.

b. *The path of experience*: in the foundational reevaluation an important and concrete part is played by the lived experience of the vast community of the Founder's followers and the values they have embodied, beginning from the awareness of and responsibility for the vocation itself. The faithful journey constitutes a kind of a congregational 'sensus fidelium'. If a faithful and persevering experience of this kind were lacking in the followers, there is the risk:

— of being subject to continual changes in identity, in trying to bring about a forced modernization of the charism to fit the current trend, confusing what is transitory with what is essential;

— of setting the Founder aside on the pretext that his aims and objectives are no longer relevant.

c. *The path of the signs of the times*: The 'historical' path and that of 'experience' help us also to approach with greater sensitivity and tranquility the contribution of the signs of the times. To ignore these, as I have said already, would be to condemn the charism to enclosure in a museum – an unnatural fate. If on the one hand the signs of the times call for deep study and adaptation on the part of the Institute, on the other they make possible a

new and very relevant understanding of the Spirit's gift. They help towards a perception of how far the Lord is pushing his Church and its charisms.

d. *The spiritual path*: this is a path which does not exclude any of the preceding ones but unifies them and embodies them as regards fundamental attitude and aspects: the discernment of God's will and obedience to his calls in the course of history. Only 'spiritual' persons, i.e. those who cultivate a special docility to the Spirit, can follow this path. It enables one to get beyond the social and cultural context of the life of the Founder, so as to draw out against the background of the present day his evangelical intentions and foundational intuitions, so as to be able to realize them in the modern context of new times, and transform them in the culture of today.

The redrafting of the Constitutions

In our foundational reinterpretation an important role of practical guidance was played by the effort to produce a fundamental redrafting of the text of the Constitutions. At the outset this was resisted for various reasons; and even at a later stage, when the work had already been started, there were some who still thought that it would have been sufficient to touch up the previous Constitutions here and there. The result was a wise and bold decision to embark on a complete rethinking and redrafting of the whole text in fidelity to the original.

This delicate work was, of course, put in hand in line with the new conciliar guidelines.¹ The objective was to produce a "Basic Code" with an authentic description of the identity, evangelical va-

¹ cf. *Motu proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* II, 12, 1966

lues, specific characteristics, ecclesial dimension, healthy traditions, and also the indispensable juridical norms for ensuring the character, ends and means of the Institute.

A change from the previous norm desired by *Ecclesiae Sanctae* was that the renewed Constitutions should be rich in evangelical, theological and ecclesial principles, not indeed as an artificial conglomeration introduced from outside and at a theoretical level, but rather as perceptions and declarations emanating from the life lived by the Founder and from within his plan of life. They had to contain an integral synthesis of an original plan of consecrated life and indicate the substantial principles with which the Founder wanted his followers to be disciples of Christ with a specific ecclesial sense.

In them a harmonious integration had to be achieved between gospel inspiration, apostolic criteriology and structural practicality, going beyond the institutional requirements to make clear the historical experience of the Holy Spirit lived by the Founder and by him passed on to the Institute.

Don Bosco, our Founder, did his utmost to instil his own personal experience into the Constitutions (as far as was possible at the time) so as to leave a 'living testament' which would be like a mirror reflecting the characteristic features of his spiritual and apostolic countenance. Rightly was he able to declare that "to love Don Bosco is to love the Constitutions"; and when he handed a copy to Don Cagliero, who was leaving for Patagonia at the head of the first missionary expedition, he said with winning emotion: "Here is Don Bosco going with you".

Naturally, in the redrafting of the Constitutions the effort was made to refer back as much as possi-

ble to the spirituality of the Founder, to his more charismatic writings, to his well proven experience, as a model from which to derive the genuine aspect and indispensable key for the foundational reinterpretation.

The work was not easy; it went on for more than ten years, but it constitutes in fact the clearest and most authoritative synthesis of the enterprise. It was subsequently enriched by an official commentary, article by article, as a valid help for the correct interpretation of the Constitutions. In addition a manual of government was prepared in two volumes – one for Provincials and the other for local Superiors – in view of the renewal of the exercise of authority. It was also possible to draw up an appropriate “*Ratio institutionis*” for the initial and ongoing formation of the confreres.

The spirit of the Founder

In the redrafting of the Constitutions particular importance was given to their organic structure in a global and unified presentation. A plan of life cannot tolerate a fragmentation which conceals or does harm to the implications of a scheme which is in itself vitally organic. But to be able to do this we had first to be clear about two concepts which lie at the basis of everything: that of ‘consecration’ and that of ‘mission’ and their mutual relationships. We may say in fact that on this point there developed a veritable battle in the Chapter; it was not easily resolved, as we shall see, but in its solution we finally found the key to the organic unity.

Meanwhile, as a separate and basic element (at least for the work we had in hand), we wanted to

be sure that we had the correct description of the most significant traits of the Founder's spiritual countenance. Within the great gospel values common to all the Institutes of consecrated life we had to single out the daily style of life, the personal and communal attitudes, and the manner of living and working, or in other words the climate and atmosphere of life which constitutes our particular physiognomy; certainly in this too it was necessary to establish a hierarchy among the components, because it was a matter of a deep reinterpretation with a central motive force, which could not be allowed to become a mere logical theory but had to remain a typological description.

In the important first part of the new text of the Constitutions there is a completely new chapter of 12 articles (from 10 to 21), which are a condensation of what is considered to be the substance of the 'spirit of Don Bosco'.

Vatican II, as we have already said, had asked religious to concentrate their attention on the figure of the Founder as an original expression of the many forms of holiness and evangelical life in the Church. Every Founder is born of the Church and lives for the Church.

Paul VI reminded everyone: "The Council rightly insists on the obligation of religious to be faithful *to the spirit of their Founders*, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity. In this it finds *one of the principles for the present renewal and one of the most secure criteria* for judging what each Institute should undertake. For while the call of God renews itself and expresses itself in different ways according to changing circumstances of place and time, it nevertheless requires a certain constancy of orientation".²

² ET 11-12, Rome 1971

We have spoken of 'spirit' rather than of 'spirituality' so as to remain more faithful to the facts of history and to the life of the Founder as a 'kairós' become model; 'spirituality', on the other hand, customarily refers to more abstract concepts.

The work that was done certainly constitutes today one of the meritorious elements of our foundational reinterpretation; we are convinced that it would have pleased Don Bosco himself who, speaking with humility of the constitutional text he had drawn up according to the norms then prevailing, said that it could be considered a 'rough copy' of what he really desired, but that the 'fair copy' would be written later by his sons.

Concentrating attention on the spirit of the Founder meant giving priority to interior matters and attitudes of the heart, having the same sentiments with which he copied those of Christ.

This enables us also to understand the qualitative leap forward desired by the Council as regards the concept of the Constitutions: from a text that was rather normative and juridical, to a pleasing and stimulating synthesis of the evangelical experience of the leader of a new movement in holiness and the apostolate.

The spirit of the Founder is certainly bound up also with the culture of his time; it is manifested in it but transcends it, so that it is able to constitute an ensemble of spiritual traits that can be embodied in other cultures. This, therefore, is due to the transcendence and adaptability of the charism, though its transmission is not brought about by words alone but by a continuous tradition of life linked, in fact, with a long and delicate process of sound inculturation.

From the 'mission' to the rediscovery of the 'charism'

I have already referred to the capitular discussion on the fundamental notions of 'consecration' and 'mission'. A deeper understanding of the mutual relationship between these two vital aspects was central to our reinterpretation and at the foundation of the final synthesis. A sound interpretation of the Council led us to a convinced and dynamic convergence.

When the Special General Chapter began its work, among the commissions set up was one dedicated specifically to the charism of the Founder. It ran into great difficulties, and after a certain space of time was dissolved. Why?

The basic reasons were of two kinds, at odds with each other. Some did not want a study of the charism to be made at all, because it would have left the future open to arbitrary experiments; others did not want it because it would have rendered sacred what were only fleeting cultural elements of the last century. Both groups were eventually able to agree on one thing only: there was not yet a sufficiently enlightened mentality on the point.

It is useful also to recall that in the documents of the Council the expression "charism" of the Founder is never used, even though characteristic elements of its specific nature are indicated. The first official use of the expression "charism" of the Founder is found in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio* of Paul VI in 1971.³ An authoritative and more specific clarification, and a more detailed description is found in the document *Mutuae relationes* of 1978.⁴

³ cf. ET 11

⁴ MR 11

On the other hand there was a general conviction that, in a period of rapid change, the aspect felt to be the more challenging was that of the 'mission'. And so the mission became the central point in the concerns of reinterpretation.

But in what did the mission consist. It was all too easy to forget its theological nature and restrict it to the practical theatre of activities. And so an 'essentialist' kind of mentality maintained the ontological primacy of the kind of 'consecration' which many thought must precede and guide the whole project.

A far from easy problem, and one rendered still more difficult among the capitulars by reductive and imprecise ideas of the concept of 'consecration' and of 'mission'.

The path which opened up to us the authentic sense of the reinterpretation of the charism was the realization of the meaning attached by the Fathers of the Council to the famous verb "*consecratur*" in *Lumen gentium* n. 44. A long work of discussion was needed to change the mentality concerning the concept of religious 'consecration'.

First it was being identified with the more typical interior human aspects (prayer, vows), and with the individual religious as its agent ("I consecrate myself"). This led to a prescinding from the true concept of charism and gave a secondary place to the 'mission' with its requirements, as if it pertained only to activity and works and was not theologically inherent in the consecration itself. All this evidently had an influence on the structuring of the Constitutions. A deeply felt discussion was necessary to overcome the dualism between 'consecration' and 'mission' which went to the very root of the identity of our apostolic vocation.

We were greatly helped by what the Council asserts in n. 8 of the Decree *Perfectae caritatis*, and especially by the consideration that God is the active agent in both consecration and mission. This led to a rethinking of the significance of Profession, and the formula was redrafted.

In particular the inseparable theological nexus between 'consecration' and 'mission' was examined at greater depth, and this gave a renewed sense to the whole project of the specific character, and opened up the possibility of rethinking the constitutional structure. This vision of our apostolic consecration is summed up in an article of the Constitutions which says: "We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who *consecrates us* through the gift of his Spirit and *sends us out* to be apostles of the young. Through our religious profession *we offer ourselves to God* in order to follow Christ and work with him in building up the Kingdom. *Our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements* of our consecration which we live in a single movement of love towards God and towards our brothers.

Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families".⁵

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It is a matter, therefore, of living a Christian existence which is simultaneously consecrated and apostolic, rather than being apostolic because it is consecrated. The gift of the Spirit to the professed religious involves in him a '*grace of unity*' which makes him capable of a vital synthesis between the fullness of consecration and the authenticity of apostolic labour. "This type of life – declared the Special General Chapter – is not something fixed

and prefabricated, but is a project in permanent construction. Its unity is not static, but is a unity in tension and in continual need of balance or revision, of conversion and adaptation".⁶

⁶ SGC 127

This grace of unity, the result of pastoral charity, has recently been described also by the Holy Father in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores do vobis*.⁷ And the same John Paul II in an address to the members of our 23rd General Chapter on 1 May 1990 said: "First of all I want to emphasize as a fundamental point the *strength of a unifying synthesis* that stems from pastoral charity. It is the fruit of the power of the Holy Spirit which ensures the *vital inseparability* between union with God and dedication to one's neighbour, between depth of interior evangelical meditation and apostolic activity, between a praying heart and busy hands. Those two great Saints, Francis de Sales and John Bosco, have borne witness to this wonderful 'grace of unity' and brought it to fruition in the Church. Any deterioration on this point opens up a dangerous path to activism or intinism, both of which are insidious temptations for Institutes of Apostolic Life".⁸

⁷ cf. PDV 23 and 24

⁸ GC22, n. 80

In this vision of vital synthesis we found the spark of our identity, the one that flashes at zero hour where everything begins, where friendship explodes and the covenant is ratified, where pulsates the grace of unity. It is the meeting of two loves, of two freedoms which fuse together: that of the "Father who consecrates us" and "sends us out", and that of ourselves who "offer ourselves" totally to him in accepting to be "sent". In this mutual fusion of friendship the initiative and very possibility of the apostolic covenant come from God, but are confirmed by our free response: he it

is who has called us, who has sent us and has helped us to respond, but we are the ones who give ourselves and become 'missionaries'

For us the term 'consecration' emphasized especially the initiative on God's part: He is the one who consecrates! We were well aware too that the same term 'consecration' – with respect to its contents – is not in itself free from ambiguity; in fact it changes its meaning in line with various levels of ecclesial life. We did not enter immediately into a consideration of such differences, leaving to the elaboration of the Constitutions what the concrete significance was for ourselves.

What we were concerned about in the first place was highlighting the qualitative leap stemming from the recognition of God's initiative: "consecratur a Deo"! This it was that opened up horizons for us.

From this standpoint of apostolic consecration we were led also to contemplate the Founder: God, who chose him and guided him, made of his existence in mission an experience of the Holy Spirit, to be continued and fostered in the Church in the future.

And so in this way we reach a theological vision of the "charism of the Founder": "*an experience of the Spirit transmitted to their followers to be lived by them, to be preserved, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in a process of growth... with a distinctive character which also involves a particular style of sanctification and apostolate*".⁹

⁹ MR 11

The dynamic element which has brought about the maturing of this theological category of *charism* has been precisely the recognition of the divine initiative in the *consecration* as a specific ac-

tion by God. This, in fact, was a true conciliar reversion which brought about a rethinking of the significance of the Profession and the specific work of the Founder. It also served to give the name of *consecrated* life to Institutes which had been previously known as "states of perfection".

'Apostolic consecration' and 'charism' have become for us two theological categories which are superimposed on each other and mutually interchange. We are dealing, in fact, with an exclusive initiative of God, which does not lose its force in a faceless genericism but consists in an original intervention which establishes a particular mission and a gospel plan of life to give to the Institute a concrete physiognomy ("style of sanctification and apostolate").

We may say that the conciliar vision of 'consecration' implies a viewpoint of an initiative of the Holy Spirit which, when applied to the painful historical work of foundation, manifests the substance of the charism given to both the Founder and the Institute, which has as the permanent source of its continuity the religious profession of the individual members.

And so in our foundational reinterpretation, although we began by temporarily excluding the category of 'charism' we have been forcibly led back to it through the providential deeper analysis of the event of 'consecration' as envisaged by the Council.

The duration of the reinterpretation and those involved

We can consider in general terms four stages through which our work of reinterpretation pas-

sed: the Special General Chapter and the three General Chapters that followed it; in practice they were two decades of intense work, from 1970 to beyond 1990.

— *The GC20* (from 10 June 1971 to 5 January 1972: seven months, no less!) was the “special” Chapter desired by the *Motu proprio Ecclesiae sanctae*. It was the longest and most laborious stage of rethinking and reelaboration of the elements of our identity; it remains the fundamental Chapter of all the work done.

— *The GC21* (from 31 October 1977 to 12 February 1978) was a further period of revision and consolidation. It completed some particular aspects of our identity (e.g. the Preventive System, the role of the Rector, the figure of the Salesian Brother) in harmony with the doctrine and guidelines of Vatican II, and prolonged for a further six years the experiment of the renewed Constitutions.

— *The GC22* (from 14 January to 12 May 1984) represents the final contribution and the goal which concluded the experimental period of the previous twelve years, and gave to the Congregation the Constitutions and Regulations in a renewed and organic form.

— *The GC23* (from 4 March to 5 May 1990) differed from the three previous General Chapters precisely because it was an ‘ordinary’ Chapter. The previous three Chapters belong in a certain sense to the category of the ‘Special’ General Chapter, because of their overall concern with the identity of the charism and the consideration of various related matters. The GC23, on the other hand, dealt with a single concrete argument, chosen to inten-

sify the process of renewal. It is interesting to note that whereas the three 'Special' Chapters led to an identity now clearly described in the Constitutions, the GC23 applied the charismatic identity in a sector of accelerated evolution *for a practical application in the mission*; and this reminds us that the reinterpretation of the identity does not close the door *on the search* for fresh commitments in the new evangelization, but rather opens us to them with greater courage. Hence, the reinterpretation serves also for a more fruitful research for the benefit of the mission.

It is interesting also to observe that the four stages constitute, we may say, a *single continuous and complementary process*. This means that the redrafted text transcends not only the labours of the restricted groups of particular confreres but also the four individual General Chapters. In each of them, with a distance of six years between one and the next, there was a turnover of a good part of the members, with new lived experiences and reflections each time, and in each subsequent Chapter it was possible to reduce the possible influence of earlier elements resulting from circumstantial considerations of the moment; a deeper and more prolonged reflection enabled ambiguities and lack of precision to be corrected. Time allowed the deeper understanding of delicate aspects to mature, while the accelerated rate of change enabled clearer distinctions to be made between permanent and transient values, between what pertained to the identity and what was linked only with culture, thus increasing the awareness of the ecclesial and worldwide dimension of the evangelical project of Don Bosco.

Sensitive points in the process of discernment

In the conciliar view of *Ecclesiae sanctae* the Constitutions had to provide an authoritative presentation of an evangelical plan of life; they had to indicate the fundamental principles of the following of Christ, the ecclesial dimension, the charismatic originality, the healthy traditions and adequate service structures.

They present, in fact, a harmonic integration between gospel inspiration and a concrete structural nature. They are the fundamental document of the Congregation's particular law. More than laying down a priori detailed norms to be followed, they describe mainly a spiritual and apostolic manner of bearing witness according to the spirit of the Beatitudes. They help in rereading the mystery of Christ from the standpoint of the Founder, which is for us the salesian standpoint of Don Bosco. Their general structure has been rethought with a style and arrangement which induce a prayerful reading and prompt a commitment of life. A person meditating on them in faith, i.e. with 'new eyes', will draw from them both life and strength.

Guiding criteria, shared by all (sometimes indeed after long and deeply-felt discussions), were followed and can be considered sensitive points in the process of discernment. In addition to the living sense of the Founder, of which I have already spoken, I would list the following:

— The significance of the religious profession

The reinterpretation of the charism has reawakened especially the awareness of a new starting point for consecrated life with an overall commit-

ment to a new beginning to really relaunch the Founder's plan. This sensitivity as regards a relaunching has brought with it the rediscovery of the vital significance of religious profession.

We have come to realize that religious profession cannot be reduced to the simple making of the three vows, as though they were identical in all Institutes of consecration. It was not a matter of writing into the Constitutions a kind of general treatise on consecrated life, but of providing a description of what the Council called the "particular character" of the evangelical project that was being professed. We needed to describe the spiritual traits and existential attitudes which would distinguish and characterize us among the People of God. These aspects, of course, presuppose and require the constitutive elements of all Christian and consecrated life, which we necessarily have in common with other religious and members of the faithful.

The particular character is brought about by existential aspects and nuances described and specified in the text of the Constitutions and explicitly assumed in the act of profession as practices for the following of Christ: something, in fact, which is by no means insignificant and which cannot be set aside by the professed. For us the manner of being disciples and living our Baptism is that of practising our "Rule of life". To become true Christians we must live as good Salesians. "There are not two levels", our Special General Chapter told us: "that of religious life which is a little higher, and that of Christian life which is a little lower. For the religious, testifying to the spirit of the Beatitudes with the profession of the vows is his only manner of living out baptism and of being a disciple of the Lord".

In religious profession we discover the full living and overall significance of our special Covenant with God.

— *The oratory criterion*

This refers to the question of what groups we work for: a crucial point in the Special General Chapter. In Don Bosco's heart the priority was for the work of the Oratories for those to whom he felt he had been specially sent. In our reinterpretation of the charism the first Oratory at Valdocco was taken as an apostolic point of reference. As a model this is not identified with a particular structure or institution, but rather with a specific pastoral standpoint for assessing our present works or those to be taken up in future.

At the centre of this 'oratorian heart' there is a predilection for the young, especially those who are poorer, and for the working classes; before and above the works themselves there are the people, the young people; the disciple of Don Bosco must feel himself a *missionary of the young*.

The inspiration of this criterion throws light on the ecclesial commitments Don Bosco wanted for the Congregation. They are: the evangelization of the young, especially poor youngsters and young workers; the fostering of vocations; apostolic initiative in densely populated working-class areas, especially through the means of social communication; and the missions.

For a faithful understanding of the reach of this criterion it is well to have in mind some constitutional requirements at three different and complementary levels:

- the preferential choice of those for whom we work: poor youth and, at the same time, those who show signs of a vocation;
- the spiritual and educative experience of the preventive system;
- the ability to recruit numerous collaborators, chosen from among the laity and the youngsters themselves, to share with us responsibility for the work.

It is a question, therefore, of a complex but concrete criterion which leads us to transcend the material character of the works and enter into Don Bosco's heart to make judgements and plans in line with the specific style of his pastoral charity.

In point of fact, this criterion has led among other things to a courageous *Project Africa* which, after 15 years, now sees more than 800 salesian missionaries working in 36 countries of that continent.

— *The community dimension*

Another sensitive point in the reinterpretation was that of the community dimension, which is intrinsic to the religious life, albeit – in our own case – with a particular style all its own.

It was not, however, just a matter of intensifying a genuine 'family spirit' among the confreres – something that had been emphasized from the origins, but of insisting on the special communion or sharing of responsibility in the mission: this is entrusted in the first place to the community, which is the subject responsible.

Hence the particular manner of exercising authority; hence the community aspect of the educative and pastoral plan; hence the commitment to

formulate it, realize it, and revise it together; hence the stimulus to offer personal contributions to the exclusion of all individualism and arbitrary independence. The community is called to a continual pastoral discernment so as to remain united and faithful in the apostolic realization of the charism.

This sensitive point has had a great influence throughout the long process of renewal.

— *The “form” of the Institute*

The form of the Institute (i.e. whether it is “clerical”, “lay”, “mixed”, “indifferent”, etc.) implies constitutive traits which express and ensure, even from a juridical point of view, the particular character and characteristics of the charism. It has, in fact, a theological and spiritual importance in the growth and vitality of the charism: “According to our tradition,” reads the text of the Constitutions, “communities are guided by a member who is a priest, and who by the grace of his priestly ministry and pastoral experience sustains and directs the spirit and activity of his brothers”.¹⁰

» C 121

The mission, which determines the tenor of the whole life of the Institute, is *pastoral of its nature* and the whole spirit of the Founder emanates from the pastoral charity of his priestly heart.

Our Institute is not strictly ‘priestly’, nor is it simply ‘lay’, and neither is it ‘indifferent’ properly so-called. The members are clerical and lay. “Our Society is made up of clerics and laymen who complement each other as brothers living out the same vocation”; each one is aware that he shares responsibility for the whole before considering himself cleric or lay. “The priestly and lay components of

the Society do not imply the extrinsic summation of two dimensions, each belonging to groups of confreres, distinct from each other, running on parallel lines and eventually putting together the efforts of each group, but rather a single community which is the true recipient of the one salesian mission. This requires *a particular formation of the personality of each member*, so that in the heart of each clerical Salesian there is an intimate feeling of being linked to and coinvolved with the lay dimension of the community, and in the heart of each lay Salesian in turn, there is the same feeling in respect of the community's priestly dimension".¹¹ This is a single characteristic bound up with the specific 'secular dimension' of the Institute. For this reason it is of the greatest importance for us to promote simultaneously an awareness and harmonious growth of clerical and lay members in the spirit of the salesian tradition.

¹¹ GC22, n. 80

And so the service of authority in the Congregation is linked with this originality of 'form'. It exerts a delicate function of identity in the spirit and unity of apostolic action. Its specific role is that of promoting and giving direction to the 'pastoral charity' which is the centre and synthesis of the salesian spirit and the soul of all our activity. The grace of priestly ordination (which is the sacrament of pastoral charity) enriches and confirms the potential for service, and ensures that a genuine pastoral criterion lies behind all our participation in the evangelizing mission of the Church, including also human advancement and an incisive effect on culture.

It is a contribution useful to all members because it is intimately connected with the oratorian criterion.

— *Decentralization*

We were convinced of the urgent need to indicate and embody through flexible methods the common identity in different local cultures. This is an arduous task; it demands a clear idea of the identity in the process of formation, and an acute sensitivity and intelligent discernment in respect of cultural differences.

We felt ourselves in full agreement with Fr Voillaume: "There is a tendency nowadays to place in doubt the unity of a Congregation on the pretext of developing the regional or national characteristics of the foundations. Such a tendency is ambiguous. It is lawful to the extent that it is a reaction against a uniform commitment to a univocal expression of religious life too much dependent on a single mentality, but nonetheless it throws doubt on one of the characteristics of the Kingdom of God which is above every culture, in the fraternal unity of the People of God which should know neither race nor culture".¹²

A charism which is not open and adaptable to cultural values becomes institutionalized and cuts itself off from the future; but a culture which is closed to the signs of the times, to mutual exchange with other cultures and to the transcendence of the mystery of Christ and his Spirit, risks becoming a museum piece from the past or a reductive interpretation of universality.

From this one can see how delicate and crucial formation has become in the Institute at the present day, and at the same time one comes to realize the importance of an adequately decentralized authority to ensure in the Provinces and groups of homogeneous Provinces a practical possibility of inculturation.

¹² R. VOILLAUME, *La vita religiosa: conversazioni di Béni-Abbès*, ed. Città Nuova 1973, p. 95

— *The Salesian Family*

Convinced that the Founder has launched his spirit and mission over a wider range than our own Institute, and that he has bequeathed to us special responsibilities for the animation and coordination of many apostolic forces, we considered anew one of the great paths of our renewal to be the development of what is called the “Salesian Family”.

It is made up of various groups (both Institutes of consecrated life and lay Associations and movements), which share – in different ways – Don Bosco’s spirit and mission. This has become a vast and fertile field which provides at the present day special possibilities for the committed laity. We are already following this line in a decisive fashion, following in the footsteps of the Founder, and we intend to intensify and perfect this option in the coming 24th General Chapter of 1996, with its theme: “Salesians and Lay people: communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco”.

Urgent need of a practical methodology

The process of functional reinterpretation has been in itself an intensive and far from easy research into our charismatic identity. We are satisfied with what has been done, and we thank the Lord for it. But we must add that the lengthy process *has not ended the period of research*; quite the opposite. It has, indeed, opened up a kind of exploration still more accelerated and intense. It is as though the foundational reinterpretation has loosed all available energy in view of a greater significance and apostolic creativity.

It is not, therefore, a matter of a work already concluded, but a kind of prophecy which re-launches the process of renewal starting off on a double new track: that of the assimilation by all the confreres of a *personal renewal* of individuals and communities, and that of *practical involvement* in facing the challenges of the new evangelization.

Knowing more clearly *who* we are in the Church (through our foundational reinterpretation), we feel ourselves challenged as bearers of a charism relevant to the present day. And this requires a special methodological capacity in planning and action. The process from the charismatic identity to the actualization of the mission at the present day (from orthodoxy to orthopraxis) is quite complex. Here is concentrated all the great pastoral problem of the Church, "a new enthusiasm, a new methodology, new expressions", the capacity for planning, the serious element of revision.

The clearer our identity as consecrated persons, the more demanding is the search for a dynamic updating of the charism.

This is why our first 'ordinary' General Chapter of 1990 (GC23) after the reinterpretation of our identity, was concerned to give new life to Don Bosco's mission today for the "education of young people to the faith".

We know that the road ahead is a long one with innumerable unknown elements, and constant progress along this pastoral path will be the best proof of the authenticity of our foundational reinterpretation.

We feel the urgent need to promote a whole sector of theological reflection which will go beyond the fundamental and classical disciplines of the faith. It is a question of a kind of pastoral theol-

ogy which is in contact with real life and enters also into dialogue with the human sciences (history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, politics, etc.), keeping firmly in mind the official guidelines of the Church's magisterium which accompany an ecclesial praxis animated by the Lord's Spirit; such a practice essentially precedes scientific reflection. A pastoral mentality needs many contributions: together with theological reflection of a biblical, historical, dogmatic and liturgical character, it must be disposed to develop an appropriate manner of intervention. This in turn will be the result of a pedagogical and methodological reflection which involves strategy in activity, the study and the planning of times, modes, processes and means – in other words the elaboration of projects for passing from a challenging situation to a positive solution as the sought-for goal.

Anyone living in apostolic mission always feels the urgent need to improve his pastoral mentality; he keeps an attentive eye on the rise of centres of serious pastoral theology: a particular theology which does not pretend to set up a unique interpretation of everything but throws light on praxis. It "is inserted in the vast area of theology as a vital and important part, but not one that covers everything or is a unique criterion valid for everything. Pastoral applications do not seek to change the formal nature of theology; especially must they not change it when it turns its attention and reflection to something concrete and urgently vital. If the urgent aspect of reflection is precisely theological, i.e. polarized by the light and revelation of the mystery of Christ through the guidance of the Magisterium, it would be a serious mistake to deprive it (as unfortunately has sometimes happened) of this na-

tural polarization, and replace it by a horizontalistic approach which would pretend to manipulate the interpretation of Christianity to suit itself".¹³

And so our foundational reinterpretation has brought us to revise and renew the academic structure of our Pontifical University as well, so that it may have a greater pastoral influence and effect, while always ensuring a serious theological reflection, because it is precisely in an ambit of a certain so-called pastoral enthusiasm which also runs the risk of setting out on mistaken paths and so disjoining itself little by little from the authenticity of the charism.

¹³ cf. E. VIGANÒ, *Per una teologia della vita consacrata*, LDC Turin, 1986, p. 21-22

Animation and government

A concrete methodology in view of updated and more incisive apostolic activity has brought to the fore the indispensability of a commitment to ongoing formation for all confreres: to take up clearly the foundational reinterpretation and to stimulate every community to the ability to make practical plans for the new evangelization.

Such a wide-ranging commitment has changed the style of the exercise of authority in government, and the secret underlying this exercise is competence in animation. How many initiatives have been launched in this connection! It is neither a simple nor a short-term work, but is nonetheless indispensable; without it the foundational reinterpretation will end up only on library shelves.

It has been found that in a period of deep change the concept of formation has its fundamental and primary significance ("princeps analogatum") in *ongoing formation*, in which every reli-

gious house becomes a centre of formation, and initial formation is directed to ongoing formation to prepare the 'formandi' to be capable subjects committed to facing the pressing and widely varying challenges of the ecclesial and cultural future.

The epoch-making changes call on all religious to feel themselves undergoing in a certain sense a second novitiate in order to renew their own religious profession in line with the postconciliar reinterpretation.

Together with fidelity in the spirit, stimulation is also given to creativity in the mission with sensitivity as regards the variety of situations which prompt government to adopt a kind of structure and mode of action in view of pluralism in unity and unity in pluralism.

A visit of the Holy Spirit

We were and remain convinced – as I have already said – that Vatican II was a visit of the Lord's Spirit to his Church; it produced a qualitative leap in the whole of the pastoral area, starting from the identity of the Church's mystery, its relationships with the world, and its presence as leaven in history.

We set about making our foundational reinterpretation in this climate of Pentecost. There were certainly periods when things moved slowly, when preconconciliar residues were evident; there were fears and instances of shortsightedness which prolonged our work; here and there may still be found some obscure areas still to be clarified in harmony with the whole; but with simple faith we think that all the work that has been done cannot be explained with-

out the light, the creativity, and the intuition about the future, which can have come only from a special presence of the Holy Spirit. When we look back and read over the new Constitutions once again, when we note the development of the life of the Institute, its transformations and its vitality in every continent, we believe that the Holy Spirit, through the motherly intervention of Mary, has given us appropriate and clear lenses to enable us to read our origins once again and make a decisive leap forward.

In this way we feel ourselves called by the Spirit to collaborate in the People of God, through our specific mission, in the laborious ecclesial pilgrimage towards the third millennium.

We have a valid and updated 'identity card'

Dear confreres, let us be grateful and rejoice. The Holy Spirit has enlightened and accompanied us; he has shown us the highway we must follow; he has enriched us with a treasure of life; he has taken from us the distress of insecurity and deviations, and has ensured our identity among the People of God; but on this very account he has opened for us an immense field of work, where we have to search and labour, create and predict that spirit of initiative and originality which characterized the apostolic origins of our mission. May Mary be our guide through all our foundational reinterpretation, that we may be able to relaunch Don Bosco's charisma towards the immense hopes and possibilities of the third millennium.

With Mamma Margaret let us look to the future
with intuition and maternal fertility.

With every blessing on your work,

Cordially in Don Bosco,

Don F. Viganò