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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Juan E. VECCHI Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. <i>Our missionary obligation in view of the year 2000</i>	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Fr Luciano ODORICO Cornerstones of salesian missionary praxis	42
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(None in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major 4.2 Chronicle of the General Councillors	51 58
5. DOCUMENTS AND NEWS ITEMS	5.1 Intervention of the Rector Major at the Synod 5.2 Communication to the Accademic Senate of the UPS 5.3 A service for Salesian Institutions of Uni- versity level 5.4 New Salesian Bishops 5.5 Rector of the Pontifical Salesian University 5.6 Deceased confreres	85 88 97 99 100 102

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**LOOK AROUND YOU, AND SEE
HOW THE FIELDS ARE RIPE FOR HARVESTING¹.
*Our missionary obligation in view of the year 2000***

1. With our gaze fixed on Christ. - 2. A missionary family. - 3. A new phase in our missionary praxis. - 4. The primacy of evangelization. - 5. A necessary and delicate task: inculturation. *Deeper analysis of the mystery of Christ; an adequate understanding of the particular culture; in community; the process of inculturation; the stages.* - 6. Interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. *Salesian attitudes and manner in dialogue.* - 7. A watchword: consolidate. - 8. New frontiers. - 9. Together towards 2000. - Conclusion.

Rome, 1 January 1998
Solemnity of Mary Most Holy, Mother of God

1. With our gaze fixed on Christ.

*"Lift up your eyes and see the fields":*² this was the invitation made by Jesus to his disciples when, after his conversation with the Samaritan woman, they suggested he should take something to eat. A mysterious gaze of the Lord who saw the harvest waiting to be gathered!

We find the secret of his glance in his words: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work".³ The Father's will is the salvation of every human being and with Christ, the universal Saviour, this is proclaimed and extended to all nations and to every era.

¹ Jn 4,35

² Jn 4,35

³ Jn 4,34

While this is being done, the Father is active in humanity. He is preparing the heart of many persons and is keeping alive the expectations of peoples so that they may succeed in reading the signs of their salvation. He inspires the interventions of those who keep to his will and have the same love of Christ for mankind. And so there is much in the world that must be gathered in. Jesus affirms it of the present time: "Now is the time for harvesting".⁴

The fact that the harvest is ready is due also to the wonderful communion which the Spirit creates between generations in the real history of salvation. "Others have laboured before you, and you have entered into the fruits of their labour".⁵ Nothing is ever lost of the efforts of the past despite the appearance of sterility and delay.

The mission of Jesus in Samaria is like the prelude to the work of the evangelization of peoples. He suggests the spirit in which it should be carried out. To the disciples, who are unaware of God's plan, he indicates the time when it should be given effect: now!

They must learn to see and start working without, as it seems to them, any waiting for further development. Everything is already arranged, prearranged by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They have to get on with the harvest and sow new seed: "One sows and another reaps".⁶ Sight and trust must guide the enterprise he will entrust to them: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole of creation".⁷

Jesus also teaches them how to tell that the times are mature. The gift of God reaches even those who were considered outcasts and becomes in them an interior source of understanding, of love and peace; in their turn they too become announcers of Jesus through their words and witness; there is a

⁴ cf. Jn 4,35

⁵ cf. Jn 4,38

⁶ cf. Jn 4,37

⁷ Mk 16,15

new space within which man can meet God, over above and independently of all preceding laws of religious experience, and it is valid for all. It is the space created by God who offers it and by its sincere acceptance on the part of man: "The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth".⁸ At the same time is declared the historical and unique character of the event which marks the manifestation of God: "Salvation is from the Jews".⁹

I too, with the gaze suggested by the Lord to the disciples, have been able to perceive the abundance of the harvest to be gathered in at the present day, and the extent of the terrain to be sown for the future. I have caught a glimpse of the work of preparation which the Father has already done and is still doing in expectation of those he will send to work.

The time is ripe. This is evident from the heed being given by so many people to the proclamation of the Gospel, from the welcome being given to good suggestions, from the generosity of those who join us in apostolic and missionary initiatives. Fruits are being gathered everywhere, even if there are also arid and infertile spaces in line with what the Saviour had foretold.

On 28 September last in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, I presented the missionary crucifix to 33 new missionaries. It was the 127th expedition and it recalled the first one, laden with daring and prophecy, which Don Bosco prepared and sent off on 11 November 1875. While I was carrying out the rite I thanked God for the signs of new fertility emerging in the group. The missionaries came from every continent and there were also lay people among them. In one case (a young married couple!) the missionary vocation had been joined to and integrated, as it were, with their marriage vows. Some were going to continue a work previously begun, while others were

⁸ Jn 4,21-23

⁹ Jn 4,22

entrusted with the breaking of new ground and making new foundations: harvesting and sowing!

And I thought of the "laws" which are always verified in apostolic work: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few".¹⁰ It is a constant refrain in evangelization. The Father fills the world with his gifts and his invitations. Christ's riches are immense. The workers, even if they were a hundred times as many, would always be too few for the distribution of such abundance.

The same thoughts were in my mind when I visited our former mission in China, or when I rejoiced with the confreres at the new sowing in Cambodia, when I saw the abundance of results in Southern Africa (and especially in Swaziland and Lesotho), and when I saw in my mind's eye what would take place in other places which today are in the first phases of the work.

2. A missionary Family.

Don Bosco felt an attraction for missionary work. His desire and intention did not become immediately translated into a departure for foreign parts as would have been his own desire. The enlightened discernment of his confessor foresaw that other roads had been planned for him.

But the missionary spirit remained in him with the same intensity and inspired his vision, his thrust and his pastoral background: he was a missionary there in Turin. He began by making contact with the forgotten youngsters on the fringe of society; he pushed on to the urban frontiers of evangelization and education.

Later he realized also his missionary intentions in foreign lands in many different ways: every year from 1875 he sent off

¹⁰ Mt 9,37

missionary expeditions, kindling in youngsters and confreres the ardent desire for the spreading of the Gospel and enthusiasm for the Christian life, dreaming day and night of new enterprises, spreading missionary sensitivity through the Bulletin, seeking resources and cultivating relationships which would help the work of the missionaries.

In this way the missionary trait became part and parcel of every Salesian, because it is rooted in the salesian spirit itself. It is not something additional in certain cases. It is like the heart of pastoral charity, the endowment which characterizes the vocation of all.

Each one, wherever he may be, considers his "highest knowledge is to know Jesus Christ, and his greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery".¹¹ He thinks therefore of those who have need of Christ's light and grace; he is not satisfied with those who are already 'in the fold', but moves out to social and religious frontiers.

It was not just by chance that Paul VI called us "missionaries of the young": catechists for some and bearers of a first proclamation of life for so many others, educators in institutes and also travellers in the vast field of youth situations not reached by such institutes.

In the same missionary expeditions Don Bosco united two directions of missionary mentality and endeavour. Don Ceria has spoken of them in the Annals: "He had very much at heart", he wrote, "the condition of Italians who were becoming dispersed in large and ever growing numbers (...). Voluntary exiles in search of fortune, without schools for the children, and a long way from any possibility of religious practices, and who through distance or the lack of priests of their own language ran the risk of forming large blocks of populations without either faith or laws".¹² The missionary project in-

¹¹ cf. C 34

¹² CERIA E., *Annali*, Vol.I, p.252

cluded also Christians who were lapsed, forgotten, abandoned and emigrants.

In recent times it became customary to speak of "mission lands", not just as an appealing image, but in reference to contests marked by a Christian tradition. The parish has been defined as a "missionary community", the school a "missionary setting". Except for technical distinctions, it is evident that every one of our communities is nowadays facing a situation similar to those of first evangelization.

Since the missionary sense is not an optional trait but forms part of the salesian spirit in every time and situation, in the programming of the Rector Major and his Council we have proposed it to all the provinces as an area of special attention for the six-year period from 1996-2002.

Among the practical interventions we have indicated to make this effective we have indicated: strengthening the commitment of the Congregation to those most in need, concentrating on a more intense education of young people to the faith so as to give rise to vocations, and directing decisively the greatest possible amount of energy (personnel, projects and means) to the missions "ad gentes".

The missionary spirit and style are eloquently marked by the availability of many confreres to work in areas of first evangelization and of foundation of the Church; but they are adopted and lived by all in the carrying out of their own mission. The will to evangelize and the ability to give transparent expression to the message of the Gospel is the point in which the two different realizations become one.

The confreres working in the front line feel themselves supported by the prayer, closeness and practical collaboration of all the others who share their same ardour and enthusiasm. This is why the Constitutions declare that we look upon missionary work as "an essential feature of our Congregation".¹³

¹³ C 30

On our movement towards the very poor I have already had the opportunity of expressing my thoughts in the letter "He had compassion on them",¹⁴ and this remains one of the fundamental criteria for our relocating. It is in fact the trait which marks the beginning of our charisma and reveals the impetus which moves the community of Christ's disciples: charity.

The mission "ad gentes" is the object of the present letter. I intend to put forward some blueprints on two lines of action which seem more urgent at the present day: to strengthen our existing missionary works and to move towards new frontiers. To consolidate and advance: to give "pastoral" consistency to what we have recently begun and to push ahead to still untrodden territories and peoples not yet reached, so as to bring to all of them the light of the Gospel.

I have always in mind, and it is a basic starting point also for the indications I offer you, a particular characteristic of the missionary work of the Salesians: it is committed to first evangelization and the foundation of Churches, but from the outset it is called to enrich the Christian community with a particular charism: that of predilection for the young with special regard to the education of the poor and middle classes.

The charisma determines, without closing it off, the manner and direction of missionary work, while the latter gives vitality to the charism restoring its evangelical vigour and ecclesial sense.

I would like to stir up a renewed enthusiasm for the missions in all the Provinces and invite the confreres, of whatever age, to consider the possibility of a missionary commitment.

May the Lord grant that at the present day there may take place what happened at Valdocco when Don Bosco envisaged, prepared and sent out the first expedition and those which immediately followed it.

"Meanwhile", say the Annals, "the words and deeds of Don

¹⁴ cf. AGC 359, April-June 1997

Bosco with regard to the missions had created a new ferment among pupils and confreres. Vocations to the ecclesial state multiplied: there was a noticeable rise in applications to enter the Congregation, and a new apostolic fervour gripped those who were already members”¹⁵.

3. A new phase in our missionary praxis.

Our missionary praxis of the present day is following in the wake of a tradition of enterprise, zeal, tenacity and creativity, and its results are undeniable. It would deserve a deeper study so as to understand it at greater depth and obtain greater results. It has been inserted and proved in many different cultural and geographical areas over a span of time which provides a sure guarantee of its consistency. The first missionary project for expansion in America (1875-1900), the one that led to the spreading of the Congregation in Asia (1906-1950), and the recent expansion in Africa have moulded a typical manner of missionary activity of which the characteristics are synthetically expressed in the Constitutions and Regulations.¹⁶

At the present day the praxis needs some rethinking. The reflection of Vatican II and the deeper study of theology have given new perspectives to missiology in the light of events which are marking the life of the Church and today's world: the ecumenical movement, the reawakening and exploiting of religions, the human and social values of cultures, intercommunication at world level, the growth of the new Churches and the way they live the faith in interaction with their contexts, and the decline of ancient areas of Christianity.

Such phenomena have brought about a deeper understanding of the grace of creation and the work of the Father in

¹⁵ CERIA E., *Annali*, Vol I, p.252

¹⁶ cf. C 30; R 11. 18. 20. 22

the salvation of every individual, and also of the presence of the Spirit in the life of humanity.

Together with the new perspectives questions too are emerging, which we must know about and duly resolve from a doctrinal and practical standpoint. They regard the value of Christianity for the salvation of man, the implication of the universal mediation of Christ, the role of the Church and consequently the sense of evangelization itself and of its modern means.

Perspectives and questions are dealt with in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, of which a careful study becomes therefore indispensable. On the same arguments the continental Synods, which were convoked in view of a new evangelization, are now expressing themselves with a richness of reflection and circumstantial analysis.

Indications for our missionary praxis today come also from the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, which entrusts to religious the study of certain aspects which have emerged in recent years.

Paul VI had already emphasized the participation of religious in missionary work: "They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration. They are generous: often they are found at the outposts of the mission, and they take the greatest risks for their health and their very lives".¹⁷

John Paul II had pointed out in *Redemptoris Missio*: "History witnesses to the outstanding service rendered by religious families in the spread of the faith and the formation of new churches: from the ancient monastic institutions, to the medieval Orders, up to the more recent congregations".¹⁸

In more direct terms, *Vita Consecrata* considers the "mission ad gentes" a dimension of all charisms because it is in-

¹⁷ EN 69

¹⁸ RM 69

cluded in the total donation presupposed by consecration. Their mission, says the document, is expressed not only through the works proper to the charism of each Institute, but especially through participation in the great ecclesial work of the mission *ad gentes*.¹⁹

The Church awaits from consecrated persons at the present day "the greatest possible contribution"²⁰ and entrusts to them the specific task of proclaiming Christ to all peoples with new enthusiasm.

In addition to the quantitative contribution, realized in the past, verifiable in the present and hoped for in the future, the Apostolic Exhortation emphasizes certain present aspects of missionary activity for which religious appear to be particularly talented.

It attributes to consecrated persons a particular capacity for inculturating the Gospel and the charism in the different peoples. "Supported by the charism of their founders and foundresses, many consecrated persons have been able to approach cultures other than their own with the attitude of Jesus, who 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant' (Phil 2:7). With patient and courageous efforts to initiate dialogue, they have been successful in establishing contact with the most diverse peoples, proclaiming to all of them the way of salvation".²¹ Much is therefore expected of them in the way of effort and direction of inculturation.

Something similar is said with respect to religious dialogue. Since the life of consecrated persons is centered on experience of God, they have a particular disposition for entering into dialogue with other equally sincere experiences present in different religions.²²

To the new implications acquired by religious life there cor-

¹⁹ cf. VC 72. 78

²⁰ VC 78

²¹ VC 79

²² cf. VC 79. 102

responds, on the other hand, the new impulse given to the lay condition. If the new Churches must manifest from their beginnings the holiness and newness of life of the people of God, the Christian formation of believers becomes a prime necessity. The laity, on the other hand, are called to develop their ability for active participation in the community and for service to the world. The new dimension of the laity modifies the very image of the Christian community and its way of functioning. Lay people, says the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, "are to be helped to become increasingly aware of their role in the Church, (...) Consequently they are to be trained for their mission".²³

In this frame of reference the efforts and competence of consecrated persons and of priests are arranged differently.

In the light of these incentives let us now focus on some questions, taking for granted the normal salesian praxis.

4. The primacy of evangelization.

Evangelization implies a plurality of aspects: presence, witness, preaching, appeal to personal conversion, formation of the Church, catechesis; and in addition: inculturation, interreligious dialogue, education, preferential option for the poor, human advancement, and transformation of society. Its complexity and articulation has been emphasized and presented in authoritative form by *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.²⁴

But there is a principal nucleus, without which evangelization is not evangelization at all, something which gives sense and shape to the whole, and even dictates the criteria and manner according to which the rest is carried out: it is **the proclamation of Christ**, the first announcement which presents Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know him, and the

²³ EA 90

²⁴ cf. EN 17

subsequent process by which his mystery is more fully explained, even to prompting others to the apostolate.

The Synod of the African Church says in this connection: "to evangelize is to proclaim by word and witness of life the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified, died and risen, the Way, the Truth and the Life".²⁵ To proclaim the Good News is to invite every person and every society to a personal and communal encounter with the living person of Jesus Christ.²⁶

In what way are the aspects set out above to be considered or result, in reality, complementary and convergent towards a single goal which is precisely the ever deeper knowledge of Christ, adherence to his person in faith and sharing in his life? It is a question which must be solved not only doctrinally by the missionary communities, but also in the daily plan of activity.

In missionary praxis, in fact, there can be lack of balance, through choice, through limited vision or ability, or through lack of attention. To foresee such things we must **establish priorities and yardsticks**. One of these is a proper relationship between the explicit proclamation of Christ in its different forms (the first proclamation, catechesis, care of the community of the believers, the Christian formation of individuals), and human advancement. The Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* has presented very clearly the deep linkages and distinction between these; it has also offered enlightening principles for understanding the import and deep sense of liberation as announced and realized by Jesus Christ and as practised by the Church.²⁷

Salesian spirit and tradition emphasize the harmony and mutual relationship between these dimensions of evangelization; at the same time they make quite clear the order of significance. The clearest formulation we find in our Constitutions: "We educate and evangelize according to a plan for the total well-

²⁵ EA 57

²⁶ cf. *ibid.*

²⁷ EN 31

being of man directed to Christ, the perfect Man";²⁸ "For us too evangelizing and catechizing are the fundamental characteristics of our mission".²⁹ From it, and from him who is its object, our commitment for man draws its significance.

We must therefore give priority to evangelization in its various forms: in our preparation, in our dedication, and in our use of time, personnel and resources.

The ideal of a missionary situation is that envisaged by the practical guidelines of the SGC when it asked that the Province should become "communities at the service of evangelization",³⁰ that every salesian community should become an "evangelizing community",³¹ and that every Salesian be an "evangelizer".³²

The ecclesial trend, in the time of new evangelization, leads us more than ever before to concentrate our gaze and hope on Christ. Knowing and welcoming him transforms the person and saves him, without ignoring or neglecting his temporal conditions but transcending them. To offer such an announcement of salvation is the specific task of the Church's mission.

Within this there is another balance to be established: that between the first announcement and attention to the growth in faith of individuals and Christian communities through efforts at diffusion and consolidation. The latter includes the education of young people in the faith, the formation of adults in line with their different situations, the preparation of workers and ministers, the unity and witness of Christian communities, and apostolic commitment on the part of believers.

The two aspects must be suitably satisfied: extending the proclamation and giving consistency to the community. This is the task of the Provinces, of the individual communities and of

²⁸ C 31

²⁹ C 34

³⁰ SGC 337

³¹ SGC 339

³² SGC 341

each person, who must become capable of taking the process of evangelization to its optimum levels.

Finally there is the opportune proportion between means and declaration, between structures and presence among the people, between organization of works and direct communication, between service and insertion. Means, structures and organization are functional for proclamation, presence and communication. And they should be proportional to them and corresponding in style. When means and structures are too great and cumbersome, or when in order to create and maintain them we have to put excessive limits on our meditation of the Word to be proclaimed, on direct communication, on dedication to preaching and the formation of individuals, then we need to rethink them in the light of a project better centered on what is essential.

5. A necessary and delicate task: inculturation.

This is a theme which nowadays is frequently the focus of attention and is more deeply analyzed. It is presented in organic form in various ecclesial documents. The continental Synods have considered it at length. The preparatory texts, discussions and the Exhortations which have followed, have spoken clearly of it emphasizing its urgency, expounding its theological foundations, indicating criteria and ways for its realization and singling out preferential fields for its application.³³

Our typical synthesis between education and evangelization makes us particularly sensitive to inculturation; this is why we Salesians have given attention to the point. Fr Egidio Viganò dealt with it in various letters.³⁴ The GC24 referred to it as a need and process to be able to educate and bring about participation in the salesian spirituality and mission.³⁵

³³ cf. EA 59-64

³⁴ cf. AGC 316, 336, 342

³⁵ cf. GC24 15. 55. 131. 255

The risk for practical workers like ourselves is that in all the enlightenment, which is necessary but also articulated and applicable in various directions, we do not find any common lines of realization, and in consequence we do not make the required effort or we get lost in small personal experiences not always properly assessed. It will be well therefore to recall some practical guidelines.

The centrality of the mystery of Christ

The first is evident and fundamental to the topic of inculturation. It concerns historical reality and the unique character of the coming of Christ.

Christ is not a symbolic reality, a generic object of religious sentiment, a summation of humanity's aspirations, the synthesis of everything noble and generous found in cultures. He is a concrete historical person, with a unique biography, different from all the elements acquired and expressed by humanity put together. It was a unique and unrepeatable event. Of him the Apostles bore witness. The Jesus their eyes had seen and their hands had touched ³⁶ is Christ the Lord, the same everywhere, yesterday today and always, who remains with us till the end of the world.

The Kingdom he preaches and the life he proposes are not the accumulation or the summation of all the good things that man can desire or experience. They are the gratuitous communication of God, made concrete in a promise and covenant which have received historical realization in his person.

He does not leave behind him only a "doctrine" which we have the task of translating into adequate words and concepts, a morality to be adapted to various situations, but he offers saving gestures and facts to be "lived" and "celebrated" in a relationship which is lived personally and shared in community.

³⁶ cf. 1 Jn 1,1

He can assume all the "seeds" of truth and of good scattered throughout human history but not just anyhow. The criterion and model for inculturation are the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, definitive events for the salvation of man.

Inculturation of the faith means causing the faith which Christ proposes to penetrate into the life and thought of a human community, in such a way that it can express itself with cultural elements and take on an inspiring, stimulating, transforming and unifying function of the culture concerned.

The Incarnation is not a fusion of two elements of equal dignity and energy, but the assuming of a human nature by a divine Person. The Word, who has his own divine and complete personality in the Trinity, becomes man. Hence there is a determinate subject who assumes humanity and a nature which, purified and redeemed, gives him the historical possibility of expression.

From this derive certain indications for the practice of inculturation. **Since the person, life and message of Christ** have a proper identity and essential role, a principal and main attention must be given to it. It would be useless, not to say dangerous, to want to inculturate the Gospel without an ongoing deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ, without the experience of a personal relationship with him and communion with his body, the Church. Unfortunately one frequently notes a limited understanding of the mysteries it is desired to communicate or a too individualistic meditation with little reference to the sources of faith.

An adequate understanding of the particular culture

On the other hand, that **knowledge of culture** is necessary which comes from being immersed in it for a sufficient time, and from the study in a reflexive and organic manner of its significant aspects, as they are presented in relevant studies and as lived by the community.

But it must be kept in mind that no culture is monolithic

and uniform. In every environment, nowadays especially, different cultural models exist side by side. Culture is not even a "fixed" reality. It is always evolving, through the development of its own elements and through interchange with other cultures. It is subject to changes, transformations and evolutionary processes, which come about through progressive changes but also through leaps due especially to free causes.

And so for culture one must consider not only what it was and what it is, but also what it is likely to become.

In community

One must also keep in mind that inculturation takes place in a community, which is at the same time the subject of culture and of the experience of faith; within it both of these interpenetrate. Collaboration is given by those of the faithful who in their daily lives live out the demands of the Gospel without any theorizing; and there is also the influence of experts and specialists who reflect on the faith and examine and interpret cultural forms; there is the work of the Pastors who accompany and educate the people to the following of Christ in line with their particular context; and of decisive importance are the "spiritual people" who have more intuition than others, possess the capacity for promoting agreement, and discover the seeds of the Gospel to be found in certain cultural trends.

Rightly therefore is **ecclesial communion** indicated as a fundamental criterion for inculturation. Transferred to a salesian setting, this criterion suggests that a problem should be approached through communal reflection at provincial and local level, so as to move in the right direction.

The process of inculturation

Another factor to be considered in inculturation is **time**. It is not so much a matter of "chronological" time, i.e. the mere

passing of the years, as the amount of time filled by the presence of Christ in which the Holy Spirit is working. The efficacious expression of the Christian mystery in a culture is that culture's "fullness" of time. The rapidity of the process depends on the intensity with which the Christian community lives the mystery of which it is the bearer and on its capacity to make itself a leaven in society.

This leads us to understand how the process of inculturation takes place and prevents us from wandering off down impracticable side alleys.

Inculturating the Gospel implies the evangelization of culture. And this follows a process which is certainly not rigid but is historically observable: faith is received wrapped in the cultural garb of the one who proclaims it. The acceptance of the message, according to the words and intentions of those already living it, is the first and necessary step for inserting the Gospel in a culture.

The deeper assimilation of the proclamation gradually produces a change of mentality in the persons who receive it; a progressive conversion transforms personal habits, and little by little modifies the life and relationships of the Christian group until the evangelical leavening of everything that is human gives them a new and original appearance, just as the humanity of Jesus characterized the historic presence of God. Similarly faith assumes the forms typical of a people and becomes a ferment for change among them. The process is not linear but circular. This is evident from the fact that the more intensely one works for the conversion of the person, so much the more rapidly and efficaciously are levels of inculturation reached.

The stages

Finally inculturation proceeds in some typical stages. Substantially they are continuity, prophetic opposition, and creation.

Continuity leads to the taking up of the “*semina Verbi*” which one finds in a particular context, correcting them, purifying them, giving them a new significance or opening for them a new phase of development. St Paul at the Areopagus in Athens can provide us with an example. The religious background of the Athenians offered a space for the proclamation and so the Apostle took that as his starting point. But there came a time for the Athenians when their religion was no longer sufficient even from a human standpoint, because of an event which marked a new phase: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day...”³⁷ There are many aspects of a culture that can be taken up, but not without first discerning their significance and comparing them with the mystery of Christ.

Not everything in a culture is compatible with the Gospel. There can be in it concepts and realities which are not reconcilable with the Christian experience. And there are also “systems”, “ensembles”, “constellations of elements”, of which the very point of internal coherence is “non-evangelical”. And so the Christian and the community are invited, through a comparison with the Christ event, even to abandon and leave aside some elements which may be solidly rooted in culture. If the facts of the Incarnation suggest the condescension of God who took on human nature, the death and resurrection of Christ indicate the passage through which the same human nature can attain the form to which it is destined and for which it was assumed.

Finally the Christian faith, since it is not only subjective sentiment but the acknowledgement of historical facts and a real salvific mystery, is capable of producing **particular cultural expressions**. The Eucharist bears a culture, with human significance, words, gesture, behaviour, forms of social relations inextricably linked to its nature and to the historical

³⁷ Acts 17,30

moment of its institution. Such culture therefore crosses the Christian universe in the sense of space and time. We still read with emotion what Paul says of what he had received from the Lord concerning eucharistic celebration,³⁸ and we see it today repeated in Christian communities scattered everywhere under heaven.

This also takes place for prayer, which is inserted in that of Jesus, and in other signs in which the Christian community recognizes itself. This is universally valid of Christian experience, which stems from historical truth and from the unique nature of the event of Christ. To express this *unum* the Holy Spirit gives to the ecclesial community a diversity of tongues, gifts, charisms and cultures. The Christological principle is the criterion of unity; the reference to the Holy Spirit justifies plurality.

There is an evident interaction between faith, culture of faith, and cultures. The more one meditates on the Christian mystery and the significance of the words and gestures with which it was expressed at its beginnings, so much the more does one grasp its newness and hence its internal need to "convert" culture. The more deeply one examines the structure and elements of a particular culture, the more one understands the way through which a people seeks the fullness of humanity, and hence what expressions, what intuitions, what models are suitable for expressing the Gospel.

Dialectics are permanent. There can never be peace, in the sense of absence of mutual challenges or a kind of definitive peaceful living together which eliminates confrontation.

Inculturation represents not only the process of penetration of the Gospel in a human group, but also the complete conversion of the Christian community. It becomes evangelized, not in a decorative manner as with a superficial veneer but only when it gets right down to the root of the culture, starting from

³⁸ cf. 1 Cor 11, 23-26

the person and returning always to the relationship of the persons with each other and with God.³⁹

And so inculturation is felt everywhere as urgent. We cannot fail to take on the task in communion with our local Churches.

6. Interreligious and ecumenical dialogue.

The foregoing considerations on the Incarnation, the uniqueness of Christ, and the need of his mediation for the total salvation of man serve also to illustrate another line of commitment: that of dialogue with other religions and Christian denominations.

Interreligious dialogue is complementary to proclamation. It brings us closer to those who in some way feel the presence of God, gives due value to the seeds of truth present in different religions, and fosters mutual acceptance and living together in peace. We are reminded of the challenges and demands addressed by Jesus to his contemporaries regarding religious practices and beliefs (Jews, Greeks, Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians).

It is also an important part of the process of inculturation, if we are to believe what more than a few experts say, that religion represents the deepest aspect of a culture and that, in some cases, it forms with them a single reality for poor people.

Perhaps never in the past has there been so immediate an experience of the plurality of religions as exists today. The mass media have fostered at least summarized information in this regard. Greater possibilities for travelling have made it possible to gain partial and temporary experience of this, even on the part of those who wished to profit by certain manifestations or merely satisfy their curiosity. Various phenomena con-

³⁹ cf. EN 20

nected with religion are known, such as search for spirituality, the reawakening of traditional beliefs, and fundamentalism.

In the Church there has been a long and patient process of encounter, understanding and evaluation of different religions. Collaboration with them takes place in common causes, such as the pursuit of peace, overcoming poverty, the defence of human rights. We can all still remember the pictures of the big meeting at Assisi, those of the visit of the Pope to Morocco and his address to the Moslems or, more recently, those of the funeral of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

The Salesians work in plurireligious contexts in which Catholics are often a minority. To educate and evangelize they must have an adequate knowledge of the religious facts of their own context and the incidence it has on persons and culture to be able to interact with regard to attitudes, traditions, beliefs and religious practices.

Dialogue is concerned not only with the formulation of truth. It includes also acceptance, respectful and simultaneous presence in educational and social environments, shared experiences in the promotional field, in witness and in service. It takes place therefore not only in formal circumstances but also in ordinary daily life. In more than a few settings, where we are at present working with young people and personnel of other religions, such things are already happening. Now it is necessary to add on other more explicit items on doctrinal and moral content, and cultist aspects of religions. In this way prejudice is overcome, a more adequate understanding is acquired of the sense and norms proposed by each religion, and religious freedom and sincerity of conscience are fostered.

Experience tells us that this form of dialogue is not always easy. The suspicion that the Christian religion is linked with the cultural predominance of the West creates several barriers. The conviction that Christ is the necessary and universally valid mediation of Salvation appears as an almost insurmountable obstacle. The idea is being insinuated more and more that

every religious expression, if followed with a sincere conscience, can have equal value for man.

In this way interreligious dialogue loses interest, and the desire for it and the capacity for proclamation declines. We ourselves are not totally immune from such a risk.

A further difficulty arises from the new religious movements, generically known as "sects". So great is their variety and diversity that one cannot generalize about how to dialogue with them. The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod for America repeats several times that their aggressive proselytism and fanaticism, the dependence they create in persons through forms of psychological pressure and moral constraint, the unjust criticism and ridiculing of the Churches and of their religious practices, seem to render impossible every form of dialogue, comparison and collaboration.⁴⁰ All the same we are invited to understand the reasons for a certain incidence they have and to foster freedom of conscience and their peaceful co-existence.

With the due distinctions suggested by the above comments, we too must insert ourselves into interreligious dialogue in the course of our pastoral missionary work. Certain convictions will sustain us in this.

The light and grace brought by Jesus do not exclude valid processes of salvation present in other religions.⁴¹ Indeed they assume them, purify them and perfect them. "The Incarnate Word is thus the fulfillment of the yearning present in all the religions of mankind: this fulfilment is brought about by God himself and transcends all human expectations. It is the mystery of grace".⁴²

The Spirit is present and active in every conscience and every community which moves towards the goal of truth. He

⁴⁰ *Instrumentum Laboris* 45

⁴¹ cf. LG 16

⁴² TMA 6

precedes the action of the Church and suggests to every person the way to what is good. At the same time he prompts the Church to evangelize those groups and peoples which he is already preparing internally to welcome him. The point is made in many recent documents of the Magisterium. The Spirit, we are told in the Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, is manifested in a particular manner in the Church and in its members: nevertheless his presence and activity are universal, without limits of either space or time.⁴³ He is at the origin of the existential and religious demand of man, who is born not only from contingent situations but from the very structure of his being... The Spirit is at the origin of noble ideals and good initiatives of pilgrim humanity... It is the Spirit again who scatters the "seeds of the Word" present in rites and cultures, and prepares them to mature in Christ.⁴⁴

A reading of this kind leads on the one hand to the overcoming of religious relativism which considers all religions as equally valid approaches and paths to salvation, ignoring with grave detriment to their members the fullness of revelation and the singular nature of the healing grace brought by Christ. On the other hand it encourages us to offer with enthusiasm our experience, and that of the Church, with attitudes of respect and expectation, aware of the difficulties of change, open to the surprises of grace, grateful and joyful at so many responses, even though they be small ones and even though only partial.

I add only a remark about **ecumenical dialogue**, the kind that is carried on with other Christian Churches. Unity is one of the targets urgently endorsed by John Paul II. It is a condition and sign of our evangelization. Prayer, attitudes and efforts to build it are an essential part of pastoral work at the present day because they respond to the desire of Jesus and the

⁴³ cf. DEV 53

⁴⁴ cf. LG 17; AG 3.15; RM 28

needs of the world. Every community is asked for commitment in this regard. With some of these denominations a process has already been started up and the way is open for interchange in prayer and in active collaboration.

Salesian attitudes and manner in dialogue

Because of the usefulness of incorporating interreligious and ecumenical dialogue into our missionary praxis, it may be helpful to indicate some attitudes and ways for intervening in such dialogue with a salesian spirit.

I put in the first place the ability, typical of the preventive system, to discover and **exploit what is positive**, wherever it may be found. This is something proposed to all Salesians by the Constitutions: "Inspired by the optimistic humanism of St Francis de Sales, (the Salesian) believes in man's natural and supernatural resources without losing sight of his weakness. He is able to make his own what is good in the world...: he accepts all that is good...".⁴⁵ They refer this particularly to missionaries when they state that "following the example of the Son of God, the salesian missionary makes his own the basic values of the people and shares their hopes and anxieties".⁴⁶

Then there is **the desire to meet** with persons, inspired by trust and hope. The Salesian takes the initiative of making the first move towards the other, be he Christian or a member of some other religion. He approaches him full of humanity (kindness!), with the conviction that in every heart there is fertile territory for the unveiling of truth and for generosity in doing good.

And finally I recall the **patience which can rejoice in small steps forward**, awaiting further results, accompanying intuitions or discoveries, entrusting to God the moment when

⁴⁵ C 17

⁴⁶ C 30

faith will mature, profiting by every occasion for communicating one's own experience of the Gospel through friendship and conversation.

In religious dialogue particular importance attaches to **the communities**. This kind of dialogue is in fact more of a choral work than for single pioneers. The ecclesial community is a "sign and instrument" of salvation and is in continual communication with society, giving out signals by what it is rather than by what it does by preaching. Within the Church individual communities, like educative communities or those of consecrated persons, open or close the possibility of dialogue by their style of life and their capacity for welcoming others.

It has been found that in plurireligious **educative communities** animated by our confreres, the members live together, gain in tolerance, know each other and give value to elements of other religions; Christian signs and practices are evident and there is a readiness for a deeper dialogue with those who want to acquire a better knowledge of Jesus Christ.

As regards communities of consecrated persons on the other hand, the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* emphasizes the particular role they can play in communication with other religious experiences through mutual knowledge and respect, cordial friendship and sincerity, "shared concern for human life extending from compassion for those who are suffering physically and spiritually to commitment to justice, peace and the safeguarding of God's creation",⁴⁷ dialogue of life and spiritual experience.

In mission areas it will be important, in these as in other sectors of missionary life (inculturation, formation, etc.), to build up a constant and ample **collaboration** with other missionaries, religious or lay, so as to provide a richer contribution to the common commitment for the Kingdom.

⁴⁷ cf. VC 102

7. A watchword: consolidate.

In the last twenty years the Congregation, despite the scarcity of vocations over large areas, has opened up with generosity to new missionary foundations. The salesian charisma has been taken to numerous countries. To Project Africa has been added soon afterwards an intense movement towards Eastern Europe and expansion in South-East Asia (Indonesia, Cambodia).

In some of these contexts the foundational phase has been happily completed, and consolidation is now in progress as regards communities, structures and the pastoral project.

Precisely in view of this consolidation, and recognizing the results already achieved, I want to indicate some urgent points we must attend to. I entrust them in a particular way to the missionaries working in the field, and to the Provinces responsible for the foundations concerned.

The principal effort must be directed to **formation**. As far as initial formation is concerned, with the sites and formation communities already established we must now provide for the preparation of personnel and the constitution of teams which are sufficient in terms of both numbers and quality. It will be a good thing to set up at the same time the commission for formation and draw up the Directory prescribed by the Regulations.⁴⁸ By including the common normative guidelines and what is suggested by local experience, the directory will become an instrument of inculturation in line with what I recalled in previous pages.

Everywhere we are finding it necessary to get to know the **cultural and religious background of candidates**, in order to make an accurate discernment of their capacities and motivations and accompany them pedagogically, so that they

⁴⁸ cf. R 87

may be able to interiorize their attitudes to consecrated life and live in a personalized manner the genuine salesian spirit, conveniently adapted to the context. In the deep and convinced assimilation of the spirit, in addition to external practice, consists the true founding of the charism in a country. Great care must be taken therefore of the formation communities, starting from the prenovitiate, particularly in what regards personnel.

Initial formation at the present day takes its model and profile from **ongoing formation**, and aims at making it general and efficacious. Ongoing formation is therefore an indispensable element of consolidation. It includes a personal commitment of prayer and spiritual life, of reflection and study, of progressive qualification and preparation for the mission, from which the work of evangelization can never be disjoined. It covers also the quality of life of the local and provincial community. It has been found always and everywhere that the evangelizing efficacy depends on the community style of fraternal life, of prayer and of well ordered planning, rather than on individual activity.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* recalls that communion is already mission by force of its evangelical witness. Perhaps the missionary communities more than others are called to become the place of permanent growth.

For each member times should be set aside for updating, synthesis and 'rewinding'. These are for the purpose of a suitable periodic rest, but especially to give back depth to daily life and to commitment as evangelizers. It will be well to make them regular and specific.

A second point to which attention should be given is the **qualification of our work**, both educative and pastoral. In the light of experience I mention some elements that need special care.

One is harmony and integration between evangelization, human advancement and education.

The first, **evangelization**, constitutes the main objective. It is the reason for our existence and our work. Hence, as we have said, it should be given preference in time, means, use of personnel, qualifications and planning.

Education is for us our typical way of working. It mainly regards young people, but it also prescribes the style for us to follow with adults. Of its nature it is addressed also to those who are not Christians and do not intend to embrace the faith. To Christians we offer a complete human formation, integrated with a catechetical process and initiation to the faith.

Human advancement is an indispensable aspect of evangelization. This too regards man and society as such; it has its own objectives, methods and dynamism, and can take on different orientations. And so Paul VI qualifies as "evangelical", "founded on the Kingdom of God", the advancement which the Church favours. This must appear in its constancy and mode of action, so as to make evident the specifically religious purpose of evangelization, which would lose its *raison d'être* if it left the axis which governs it: the Kingdom of God before all else in its fully theological sense.⁴⁹

All this finds a means of clarification, orientation and convergence in the **Educative and Pastoral Project**, which motivates and synthesizes the various dimensions of our work: those which are educative and cultural, those of evangelization and catechesis, the communal and group aspects, and the vocational dimension.

Its elaboration and realization appear necessary for overcoming improvisation and too individualistic visions which are unbalanced in some direction and divert us from our objective. The preparation of the project and putting it into effect will provide an opportunity for rethinking our activity through common accord and ongoing formation.

Pastoral work does not attain its purpose, and the project

⁴⁹ cf. EN 32

has no guarantee of proper functioning, unless attention is centered on the **qualification of persons**. In this case we refer to the neophytes, the faithful, animators, parents and, in general, those available for formative processes. To some of these categories particular care must be dedicated. The experience they make gives them the opportunity of entering more deeply into a relationship with Christ, and the work they do has a decisive influence in the Christian community. I am referring to catechists and educators.

In practice my intention is to make an energetic call to everyone to invest principally in the formation of persons: as many as possible and at the highest possible level.

The use of money should be verified so that it can be allotted to the support of the most important activities, and our structures and the orientation of our occupations should be reviewed to ensure that what is only instrumental does not stand in the way of what is of foremost importance. Even in the missions the community must function as an “animating nucleus”.

A third point to which attention must be given regards the **conditions** needed for the Gospel and salesian charisma to take root in different contexts. Inculturation is not an operation carried out by experts around a table. It is the Christian and salesian life which as it progresses produces a typical interpenetration between the Gospel and customs.

This must be realized first of all in ourselves. It demands a sense of being part of the locality, the learning and daily use of the vernacular, the assuming of habits – improved if you wish –, the participation in simple and humble relationships, the understanding and adopting of popular religious devotions. In other words, it means becoming part of the place and being perceived as such, “becoming all things to all men”.

This process (belonging, language, local usages, insertion among the people), already undertaken by those who take upon themselves the first development of a mission, will facilitate

living with the native generations and the passing of responsibility to them when the time is ripe.

This is the purpose of the **creation of circumscriptions** which group foundations together, strengthen the sense of belonging, create shared responsibility, and permit the setting up of communities made up of confreres from different countries who will have to model their kind of life on the criteria of insertion and inculturation.

Contributing to inculturation, to the quality of evangelization, to the communication of the salesian spirit, and to the preservation of memory of the past, are also things like archives, specialized libraries on local culture, collections of ethnographic material and of letters etc. which document missionary progress.

The salesian missionaries of the early days had this historical dimension much at heart; it responded to the recommendations of the superiors, starting from Don Bosco, and to the cultural preparation of the pioneers. It is a concern we must take up again at the present day.

8. New frontiers.

We have several missionary projects in the pipeline, all of them promising. The expectations manifested in the areas where they will begin, the human and cultural richness with which they will bring us in contact and the extreme needs they will meet, encourage us to go ahead with them. They are fields ready for the harvest. I present them to you to render our thoughts more concrete and share with you the joy of looking forward to the future.

In Africa, in addition to strengthening and organizing the foundations already made, we shall go ahead also in new contexts: Zimbabwe, Malawi and Namibia.

In Asia the first foundation in Cambodia is now fully active:

a vast and modern centre for professional training with 500 young people and the possibility of a youth centre and missionary activity. A second work is in preparation, while we explore the possibilities offered by Laos. Recently communities were established in the Solomon Islands and in Nepal, and we are aiming at beginning a foundation in Pakistan, where four confreres will be sent in the second half of 1998. All the Provinces of India have undertaken new missionary initiatives.

And then there is China where there are signs of new times full of promise because of the dimensions of the territory and the population, the human characteristics, the former missionaries and the strong religious currents. The work is going ahead for the moment in very original and non-typical forms. The future shows signs of hope and of problems. However, the Congregation is following political events closely so as to move towards a consistent presence as soon as conditions permit. With this prospect ahead applications are already coming in from candidates who feel themselves called to work there.

In Europe we have to support some communities of recent foundation, as in Albania, while we proceed to establish the work in Rumania with the involvement of the Provinces of Venice and Austria. Don Bosco has gone there before us and the diffusion of his biography has already given rise to local vocations, who have already embarked on the first phases of formation.

In America we are looking at Cuba, where in recent years we have had positive signs of increasing vocations and where the needs of the Christian context appear immense for the scarce forces available. And in the new atmosphere of collaboration and solidarity foreshadowed in the GC24 and reaffirmed in the Synod for America, we are planning works for Hispanic immigrants in the United States.

Within various countries there are also natives to whom we have given care and attention in the past, and whom we continue to follow. To them are being added at the present day nu-

merous groups of Afro-Americans for whom, in line with the Churches of America, we have some projects in preparation.

I close the list with a reference to the painful problem of the refugees, millions of them, especially in Africa, and among whom the gravest consequences are felt by children and young persons. I have entrusted to the Missions Department the task of drawing up a proposed plan of action, starting from a knowledge of the phenomenon in every continent, so as to produce an effective initiative from an educative and pastoral standpoint.

"The harvest is great". Following the example of Don Bosco and his successors, who have presented to the Congregation new missionary enterprises to arouse generosity. I too appeal to the confreres who feel the desire and the call to put themselves at the Lord's disposal. I address the appeal to all. The presence of aging confreres may prove providential because of their witness, their prayer and their contribution of wisdom in missionary communities which are very young. Similarly the period of life, which in many countries can no longer be dedicated to educational work, could be most valuable for the missions. Nevertheless I would like the younger confreres feel that this appeal is addressed particularly to them.

Missionary generosity has been one of the reasons for the good health and expansion of the Congregation during its first one and a half centuries of life. I am convinced that the same will be true of the future.

In this appeal I would like to accent two particular points. The first concerns Provinces which today have an abundance of vocations. For a long time the Provinces of Europe have provided the greater number of missionaries, and thanks to them the Congregation has been planted in other continents. In the recent European congress on vocations held in Rome it was found that the contribution of the European Churches to the mission "ad gentes" in the last twenty-five years had gone down by 80%, while they maintained an exemplary economic solidarity and other assistance of various kinds. At the same

time the contribution of other continents is gaining consistency, as I was able to verify for myself when presenting the crucifix to those taking part in the 127th missionary expedition.

John Paul II, at the conclusion of the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* declares: "I see the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians, and missionaries and young churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time".⁵⁰ We too must spread a mentality and enthusiasm in the recently flourishing Provinces and open to the young the world's possibilities.

Missionary reciprocity should make us available for the mutual sharing of means, personnel and spiritual helps.

The second point on which I want to lay emphasis is the involvement of the laity in the mission "ad gentes". With the general growth of awareness of the laity and their participation in the communion and mission of the Church, there has been a parallel attention among them to the mission "ad gentes". The desire is spreading, applications are increasing, the preparation of candidates is improving, and ways are being sought to make possible their participation in a manner suited to their particular conditions. To proclaim the good news is a right and duty of lay people, based on their baptismal dignity. We are witnessing an unprecedented mobilization of volunteers committed in the front line of the Church's pastoral work and in human advancement carried out in a Christian sense.

The GC24 endorsed in many forms this possibility of the missionary commitment of the laity. It is now time to go beyond the first realizations and move on to broad and well organized forms of salesian missionary laity.

⁵⁰ RM 92

9. Together towards the year 2000.

To this work of consolidation and to the new enterprises for the extension of the Kingdom we are all called. The "missions" form part of a single ecclesial mission. The salesian "missions" form part of the single salesian mission. They are realized, without any lack of continuity, wherever the Church must preach the Gospel, or the Congregation is called to offer its particular charisma.

Among those who work in the different "missions" there is a deep communion of goods and a mysterious solidarity of efforts and results.

We share the missionary trait of salesian spirituality, with the desire that the light of the Gospel may reach all. We share in missionary praxis so that the priority of the proclamation, the opening to religious dialogue, the movement of inculturation, and the effort to consolidate the community through the formation of members, may be taken up everywhere in the measure each situation requires. We share missionary life by sharing in both sad and consoling events through information, and try to see God's will in them through a Gospel reading of the incidents. We maintain communion with the missionaries especially by daily prayer and in special circumstances or anniversaries preserved in our memory or indicated by the Church.

An expression of the same sharing is **pastoral youth work** which in the journey of faith brings about an intense living of the missionary dimension of the Church. In the course of human maturing, of deepening of faith, of ecclesial experience and vocational guidance, there is place for incentives of all kinds coming from the world of the missions. In youthful group movements space is found for groups with an apostolic bent who take their inspiration from missionary interest. In them they cultivate flourishing Christian attitudes and behaviour, like willingness for self-dedication, esteem for different cultures, the ability to get beyond the surface in the case of per-

sons, the communal sense of work and activity, the taste for communication, and a world mentality.

Another expression of sharing is the spreading of **missionary sensitivity**, or the witness by our poor life among Christians or simply those of a kind heart. This is to be done in line with the principles and purpose of evangelization, rather than merely according to the techniques of publicity and seeking of agreement. The contribution of the Mission Offices at world, interprovincial and provincial level, has made possible the inception and growth of many missionary projects and continues to be the sign of the involvement of many persons in the missionary enterprise and of the practical sense which has characterized it from the time of the first expedition.

It hardly needs saying that it is to be lived not with a merely functional mentality, but with the desire to leave nothing undone so that as many as possible may enjoy the happiness of experiencing Christ's salvation.

The proximity of the year 2000 prompts us to give a new proof of our ability to undertake wide-ranging missionary initiatives together.

And so we have reached 125 years since the first missionary expedition, and our history shows that no important anniversary of that event was allowed to pass without being marked by particular celebrations.

At the beginning of the century it fell to Don Rua to commemorate the 25th anniversary. The Salesians of America very much wanted him to visit that continent, and brought important influences to bear to achieve that result, but they were not successful.⁵¹ The celebrations took place, however, in the presence of the Catechist General, Fr Paul Albera, in connection with the International Congress of Cooperators at Buenos Aires, the second following that of Bologna.⁵²

⁵¹ cf. CERIA E., *Annali*, Vol.III, p.106

⁵² cf. *ibid.*, pp.104-128

Better remembered is the commemoration of the 50th in 1925, at the wish of Blessed Philip Rinaldi, which coincided with a jubilee year. The first point in his program was "a great function and a numerous missionary expedition".⁵³ And such an expedition was in fact prepared. It comprised 172 Salesians and 52 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It fell to Card. Cagliero to bless the expedition and present the crucifix to the departing missionaries.

On the 75th anniversary, Fr Peter Ricaldone asked for an extraordinary contribution of personnel from the Provinces which had been the beneficiaries of the first missionary efforts, and urged the founding of some missionary aspirantates outside Europe.

In 1975, at a hundred years from the date which is so dear to us, Fr Ricceri invited us to remember it with some practical initiatives of which the second was: a missionary expedition worthy of the centenary. "I come now", he said, "to make you not a proposal but a warm invitation. The Congregation, grateful to God for all the good it has been able to do for souls in the past hundred years and aware of how much remains to be done, trusting in the Providence which will reward the action of anyone who leaves his Province for the missions by raising up new and generous vocations, intends to realize a missionary expedition worthy of the event".⁵⁴

The dimensions of the Congregation and the vitality of the new Provinces, the widening of the world and the new areas awaiting the sowing of the seed, prompt us to give life to missionary reciprocity.

I propose to you in view of the year 2000 to form a band, with a minimum contribution of one confrere from every Province, to consolidate the works recently begun and to

⁵³ Minutes of Superior Council, 16.6.1925

⁵⁴ Circular Letters of Fr Ricceri, 35 "On the Centenary of the salesian missions" Vol.2, p.779

advance in the places now being opened. Provinces favoured with many vocations can contribute according to their wealth in personnel, beginning immediately a work of sensitization and motivation among the young confreres. In this way we shall link the Pope's appeal for a new evangelization with thanksgiving to God for the ten thousand or so missionary vocations he has sent to our Congregation.

Conclusion.

At the end of these reflections my thoughts turn to Mary Help of Christians. It is not by chance that our expeditions set out from the Basilica dedicated to her as the centre of irradiation of the faith and the Congregation. Even if today, because of missionary decentralization, there are many points of departure, the presentation of the crucifix before Mary Help of Christians will always be the gesture with which the Salesian Congregation as such renews its missionary commitment.

Her picture gives us a synthesis of missionary spirituality with the reference to the Father who is at the origin of the mission, to the Incarnation of the Son, which was the first mission and the source of all others, and to the presence of the Spirit sent to animate the Church which in turn is sent to evangelize the world.

Mary makes us think of the word received at the Annunciation, of the joyful message brought in the Visitation, of the Word meditated on in the birth of Jesus and progressively become life in the participation in the public ministry, and fully realized in union with the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The territories where we have sown the seed are almost all of them marked by a sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians. The communities which have been formed have learned to

invoke her. The three Christian communities with whom we celebrated the Eucharist in China asked spontaneously as we were leaving for the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. It is a practice and a souvenir which so many years of isolation could not succeed in obliterating from the memory of those attached to the faith.

To her, who has opened and guided our missionary history, we entrust our present and future projects.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Juan Turchi". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" that extends downwards and to the left, forming a large loop.