

acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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TOWARDS THE 25th GENERAL CHAPTER

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Rome, 11 June 2000
Solemnity of Pentecost

My dear Confreres,

We are pursuing with profit the jubilee process we had set before us. I receive confirmation of this from numerous confreres and communities, and I see it reflected in our young people. Reconciliation, the Eucharist, the plan for youthful spirituality, the orientation of the Salesian Family towards communion for the mission, the coming extraordinary missionary expedition, have all revived the fundamental features of our charism at a historic moment of many challenges and not without a few difficulties.

At the heart of the jubilee events we reach a deadline foreseen by our Project of life, our Constitutions, to help us to grow as individuals and communities in union with the Church and to respond to the signs which the Lord is giving us: the convocation of the General Chapter.

We all know that this is not merely the fulfilment of a law. “The general chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation’s unity in diversity”.¹ It engages the Congregation and the individual provinces for a lengthy period of time in an effort at verification, a new understanding of the demands of the

¹ C 146

charism, and adaptation to the circumstances in which they must be expressed. It marks therefore a key moment in our process of constant renewal, as we know from the experience of these last thirty years.

We shall come together all over the world and from all over the world as brothers, to rethink our fidelity to the Gospel, to Don Bosco and to the times. The Congregation will adopt an attitude of complete docility to the Holy Spirit, in an effort “to discern God’s will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service”.²

The General Chapter, in the sense of a community commitment, always touches on the vital points of identity, unity, and effectiveness of the salesian presence, no matter what central theme is chosen.

Through signs and events the Lord addresses to us as a Congregation the invitation of the Book of Revelation: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”.³ This is an encouragement pregnant with hope, but one which implies a pressing call to simple and genuine fidelity in the new situations which challenge us at the present day.

It is right that we should be aware of such implications of the General Chapter, that we should feel ourselves to be sharing the responsibility for its results as we take part in common prayer and become actively involved in the reflection of our own province.

1. CONVOCATION.

In accordance with art.150 of our Constitutions, **I intend by this letter to convoke the GC25.** It will take place at the Generalate in Rome, Via della Pisana 1111, and will begin on 24 February of the year 2002. The Moderator will be Fr An-

² *ibid.*

³ Rev 2,7

tonio Domenech, General Councillor for Youth Pastoral Work.

The specific purpose⁴ of the GC25, within the general scope of animation, orientation and government proper to every General Chapter, is to study more deeply and reach common criteria on an essential aspect of our life, with regard to which the Congregation has shown itself particularly alert and concerned.

We have defined and specified this aspect with the expression: **“The salesian community today: its fraternal life, its evangelical witness, its animating presence among the young”**.

The theme is the result of ample reflection by the General Council on the current guidelines of the Church, on aspects of culture, on the lines of renewal of consecrated life and on the process being followed by our Congregation in recent years.

In a first study in January 2000, the General Council singled out some thematic areas which, on the basis of extraordinary visitations, team visits and other meetings, appear to be those most keenly felt, promising and needing consideration. Such areas were:

- The salesian community in its new pastoral model.⁵
- Our ability to propose the salesian vocation today: “Come and see”.⁶
- An effective presence among the young: “Here in your midst I feel completely at home”.⁷
- The “grace of unity” in our life today.⁸

The result of this evaluation of the life of the Congregation was sent to the Provincials so that, with their Councils, they could indicate a priority among the points identified, or add

⁴ cf. R 111

⁵ cf. C 49. 51

⁶ cf. C 16. 37

⁷ cf. C 14. 39

⁸ cf. C 3. 24

others. By a large majority they chose the first theme, considering it to be directly connected with the practical guidelines of the GC23 and GC24.

To this, the first and principal objective, has to be added the fulfilment of a practical guideline of the GC24 which asked the Rector Major and his Council to study “the manner of making a deeper verification of the structures of the central government, involving the Provincial Chapters, with a view to the GC25”.⁹

Another purpose of the GC25 is also to elect the Rector Major and the members of the General Council for the period 2002-2008. This is the responsibility of looking ahead to the service of unity and guidance which they are called upon to provide.

All the confreres can and must take part with shared responsibility in the election to be made by the Chapter members, through intense and constant prayer that God may give to the Congregation the guidance needed at the present time for the Church, the world and the young.

The “Technical Commission”, appointed in accordance with Reg.112, has already worked with the Moderator to prepare the procedures so that the reflections of the Provinces may be made in good time and in the proper form, and their contributions be submitted to the Moderator of the Chapter in the technical form required. It has drawn up an aid which specifies the implications of the theme and clarifies its aspects. This aid, included in the present number of the Acts together with some indispensable juridical norms,¹⁰ is intended to be a means for sensitizing the Provinces and guiding them in the carrying out of their Chapters.

“The hour” of the GC25

This will be the first General Chapter of the third millennium. During the present Jubilee, which celebrates the

⁹ GC24, 191

¹⁰ cf. R 112

passing of 2,000 years since the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Pope has invited the Church and humanity to concentrate their gaze on the person of Christ, to renew their Christian mentality and life, to become more aware of their vocation to holiness, to become committed with zeal to a new evangelization, to take up the new dimensions of communion and to make this more evident as the first evangelical sign.

The preparation and realization of the GC25 will be a time of grace for us, an extraordinary opportunity for profiting from the gifts and results of the Jubilee.

The continental Synods and those of the universal Church, celebrated in the broad context of the Jubilee, have made a pressing appeal to consecrated life to continue its self-renewal process, and make itself eloquent and significant for people of today.

In the evangelization of every context this is far from secondary in importance. Its members, therefore, are invited to live their personal and communal adherence to Christ the Saviour with greater intensity; to accept the commitment to a holiness capable of speaking to people of today; to produce through their communities an effective witness to fraternal life, to become involved in an evangelization capable of dialogue with society and culture, being in them leaven, prophecy and challenge.

The greatest and most specific expression of this invitation is the Synod on the consecrated life and the corresponding Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*. But significant references are also found in the continental Synods and in the respective Exhortations,¹¹ and also in those concerning the laity and bishops.

In the light of these proposals there is taking place in religious Institutes a wide-ranging reflection and lively search for renewal. One sign of this is the deeper study carried out in re-

11 cf. *Ecclesia in America*, 43; *Ecclesia in Africa*, 94; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 44

cent years by the Union of Superiors General (USG) on the theme of the refounding of religious life, its re-location in ecclesial communion and in social contexts, and its inculturation in the different geographical areas.

Immersed as they are in a world which is pluralist from every point of view, often agitated and distracted, and sometimes oppressed with multiple and pressing tasks, religious must return to the sources of their vocation, calmly examine the gospel quality of their lives, and endorse the commitment of their particular consecration, so as to bear witness with joy to the absolute character of God, i.e. that God is Love, capable of filling the heart of every human being, and the indispensable aim and objective, if human life is to be what it is meant to be.

The critical situation of some religious Institutes, linked to a great extent with the imbalance between management obligations, quality of life and vocational capacity, requires at the present day a reorientation towards experiences of faith and the sources of the charism, so as to be visible and transparent witnesses of God who is manifested in Christ Jesus.

On the other hand, the new forms of consecrated life, which the Spirit is raising up in the Church, clearly show that the radical nature of the Gospel still speaks eloquently to man.

The pressing and dramatic situations of poverty and oppression in which millions of people are living, the new plagues that have arisen as a consequence of globalization, challenge consecrated life to be creative in renewing charisms so as to be a prophetic and efficacious sign of freedom and self-donation.

Consecrated life can continue to exist effectively in these times only if, like the house built on a rock, it is firmly fixed in unconditional adherence to Jesus Christ, firmly anchored in the evangelical options which lead it to assume the joys, hopes, sorrows and anguish of men and women of our time, placing itself in the forefront of the Church's mission.

In such a process of ecclesial, cultural and social development, a decisive point is the quality of fraternal life, with the

community following a significant and prophetic model, of which we feel an urgent need, even though we may not yet see clearly all its implications. The experience of communion between consecrated persons comes to be considered not as an individual grace, but as a charism giving dynamism to ecclesial communion within the Christian communities themselves, and also in line with ecumenical meetings, interreligious dialogue, and further reconciliation and acceptance between persons and groups.

In our own Congregation too this strong movement is perceptible towards a renewal which will express our vocation in a more lively fashion. Many Provinces have recently sought practical ways for helping communities to live more clearly and faithfully the salesian family spirit, the characteristics of our spirituality and a renewed presence among young people. There are positive and promising experiences, but also some concerns, because situations have changed and some means and supports which helped us to live the various aspects of our consecrated life in unity and tranquility, have waned.

This creates among the confreres a widespread unease which gives rise to the desire for greater human authenticity, greater spiritual depth and more radical vocational coherence. The response of the Provinces which have given priority to the theme of the salesian community as being the most important and necessary at the present time is a reflection of this desire.

It is an authoritative request which we must examine together. At the beginning of the new millennium we are called upon to live more effectively the transparent joy of our fellowship in Christ, not least as a response to the deep aspirations of our heart,¹² so as to be truly signs of the love of God among the young, centres of spiritual animation of the EPC and of the Salesian Family.

Society and culture display characteristics of great significance which challenge our religious life in respect of the human model we present and the educative and evangelizing commit-

ment we carry out. Globalization, already well established in the economic field, becomes ever more extended to other aspects of social life: problems assume worldwide dimensions and become interdependent.

The development of pluriethnic, pluricultural and plurireligious societies and, at the same time, the rise of exclusive nationalism and the assertion of religious integralism challenge our ability to live together and engage in dialogue.

Mass communication about everything, and information technology, are producing a new mentality; they call for new kinds of relationships and create new demands in education and formation. Dialogue, in fact, becomes ever more complex and difficult, almost chaotic; rapport can become impersonal. Paradoxically therefore a sense of loneliness and isolation begins to spread, and there is a search for contacts and sharing, of which the manifestations in youthful, social and ecclesial areas are well known, and have been the subject of our frequent comments.

In such a context our fraternity can constitute a stimulus and a prophetic sign.

Our journey.

Recent General Chapters have formulated guidelines and structured proposals for the education of young people to the faith¹³ and for the participation of the laity in the salesian mission.¹⁴

To realize such proposals, the Provinces have taken care to give life to educative and pastoral communities, and to direct particular attention to the present youth situation, especially as regards hardship and marginalization, to formulate together pastoral and educative projects, to organize and improve the

¹³ cf. GC23

¹⁴ cf. GC24

quality of provincial animation of youth pastoral work, to think up formation procedures for collaborators and animators, and to give effect to various experiences of shared responsibility with the laity in the management of our works.

Recent years have also seen many new kinds of work, and numerous foundations have become more complex, while many communities have been reduced in the number of confreres with an increase of those more elderly. Pastoral and management tasks have increased and become more burdensome. The active presence of lay people, now in the majority, the new role of animation attributed to the salesian religious community in the EPC and in the formulation of the PEPS create in the salesian religious communities uncertainties and questions, in particular with regard to their own spiritual experience and reasonable conditions for their own work.

In the Team Visits consideration was given to the pastoral model the salesian component has to provide as a group animator. It was clear that the quality of life of such a group is the determining factor and active force behind everything; that is where it all starts and that is where it always returns; it is where in daily life all the expectations for effectiveness, animation and apostolic impact are concentrated.

It is the salesian community, in fact, which is the subject to which is entrusted the implementation of the important deliberations of the last two General Chapters. The journey of faith, to be proposed to the young and to be made with them, requires the witness of a community in continual renewal¹⁵ and the insertion of such a community in the youthful world and context with a new pastoral quality.¹⁶

At the same time, the animation of the educative community and of the Salesian Family¹⁷ presupposes a salesian nu-

¹⁵ cf. GC23, 219-224

¹⁶ cf. GC23, 225-231

¹⁷ cf. GC23, 232-238

cleus which lives a life of brotherhood, works in solidarity and constantly adapts its criteria of involvement.

Commenting on the Synod of the Consecrated Life, Fr Viganò wrote: "Both the education of young people to the faith (GC23) and the involvement of many lay people in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco (GC24) require that we concentrate our efforts of ongoing formation on the intensification of *life in the Spirit* and on prior attention to fraternal *life in community*. This is the road to the third millennium, and now is the time to set out on it in an authentic manner".¹⁸

Similar reasons were put forward by the Provinces for the choice of the theme for the coming Chapter, as also the issues they pointed to as being the more disturbing and challenging.

From many places, in fact, it was said that today's culture challenges our community life in respect of both style and evangelical significance. In this context emphasis is laid on solicitude for salesian communities in precarious situations, through the reduced number of confreres, their advancing age, or their dispersal over many fields of work.

The importance of the animation of the community, and especially of the role of the Rector and Council, is emphasized. Insistence too is laid on the need for formation of both young and adult Salesians (initial and ongoing formation) in order to come to grips with the crux of daily relationships based on the following of Christ, and for a positive presence in communities where there are the above-mentioned tensions. A reflection is asked for also on possible new forms of community in line with our charism.

¹⁸ AGC 351, p.32

2. THE THEME OF THE GC25

The Salesian Community

The theme of the GC25 centres reflection on the subject of the educative and pastoral mission. It is meant to assess the conditions of life and action that can foster a joyful and encouraging experience of vocation, a way of life that can be both witness and prophecy, an environment that becomes vocationally attractive, a school of spirituality, a factor of communion and animation for all who share with us the spirit and mission of Don Bosco.

It is not therefore a matter, as some could have thought after a rapid and superficial reading of the theme, of looking at ourselves in isolation from the young and the laity. We are in fact focusing much more keenly from a practical standpoint on what recent General Chapters have said with regard to the mission among young and lay people.

Our life of community is the first gift to be offered to young people, the more immediate and specific gospel sign which precedes and accompanies all our pastoral activity.¹⁹

The objective of the GC25 is not so much what the community and confreres must still do for the young, but what – at the present day – they must be for them as they live with them. Before all else we must keep in mind what we are and how we live, so as to act more effectively from an evangelical point of view for the benefit of those to whom our mission is directed.

It is a question of carrying out an evaluation of our community life with the *spirit and method of evangelical discernment*, so as to discover ways of salesian fellowship able to respond to the demands of the following of Christ and of the mission, as these have been presented in the latest ecclesial documents and by General Chapters, and how they appear after the

¹⁹ cf. C 50. 57, *Fraternal life in community*, 54

educative and pastoral changes which we have tried in recent years.

“Today”.

This word, which has been deliberately inserted in the theme, emphasizes the presupposition and the awareness that we are living in a new context, with all the associated risks, demands and possibilities, which we need to understand.

“Today” implies a reference to the present situation of the Church, committed to the new evangelization in which consecrated life must play a role of witness and proclamation, which is specific and irreplaceable.

‘Today’ recalls the situation of the world, and especially the world of the young, which needs people who are credible and significant role models for a new way of living, and relationships in societies which are interethnic, intercultural, interreligious, pluralist, free and fragmented. ‘Today’ brings to mind the situation of our Congregation and of the individual Provinces in different parts, living in different conditions because of their obligations and the personnel they have available.

In the face of these pressing requirements we feel the urgent need to deepen the roots of our vocation, to renew the dynamism and effectiveness of our form of life, and to make the religious life in educative and pastoral activity among young people and the poor clearer and more challenging.

I have referred to discernment. It is not a matter of repeating and stating once again the doctrine on the religious community; this is already abundant at the level of both the Congregation²⁰ and the Church.²¹

The theological criteria and charismatic inspirations must certainly be recalled and made the subject of meditation so that

²⁰ cf. SGC, 483-555; GC21, 33-61

²¹ cf. *Fraternal life in community*, 1994; *Vita consecrata*, 1996

we do not lose sight of our aim. The GC25 will be an opportunity for deepening and making our own what the Church is saying to us with regard to the effective and evangelizing strength of Christian communities, among which consecrated communities are a sign, incentive and example.

But the main and ultimate goal is to find effective ways of giving a new motivation to the communities to manifest in a simple and clear manner the religious elements of the new situations; to identify the essential conditions or criteria which allow, or rather encourage, a joyful and humanly significant way of living the fraternity we have professed as followers of Christ.

What is proposed, therefore, is not an intellectual process (repeating and reorganizing the doctrinal content of documents) which is essentially deductive (deducing practical consequences on the basis of the doctrine alone). We want rather to begin from what the confreres and communities think of their present experience, and reflect on what they feel called to be and to express in their various situations: i.e. to read the reality in a way which will bring to light resources and positive aspects, so as to strengthen and deepen them; as also to reflect on the apprehensions and conflicts to examine them in the light of the Word, of the gospel demands, and of the rich elements of our charism.

The Chapter would want to focus on the life of the fraternal community of the present day, and suggest a practical way for its realization. Efforts at present being made can be highlighted, together with experiments that have been tried and that can throw light on and encourage other forms of salesian community life to meet prevailing needs and demands.

Main points of reference.

In the statement of the theme four fundamental aspects are specified, on which I invite you to concentrate your attention: *fraternal life, evangelical witness, animating presence*

among the young, and the grace of unity.

They correspond to the challenges presented to our life as consecrated persons by today's culture and religious experience. They should not be considered as opposed one to another, but as inseparable and characteristic elements of our religious community life.²²

The indispensable contribution of fraternity to our maturing as consecrated persons, to our assuming with joy and internal conviction our own personal vocation and the continual rebuilding of our unity of life, is a permanent element in the history of the Church. Today, indeed, it is felt as a pressing need because today's world leads to dispersion and fragmentation.

Young people, on the other hand, need *witnesses*, persons and environments that can show by example the possibility of living a life according to the Gospel in our society. This evangelical witness which is at one and the same time a communion between brothers, a radical following of Christ and an active presence which stimulates and brings life to the young, constitutes the first educative service we offer them, the first word of the proclamation of the Gospel. From a vocational point of view they feel attracted to join communities with a purpose, rather than merely engage in a particular kind of work.

I will dwell briefly on each of the four points already indicated.

Fraternal life.

Among the vast movement of persons and groups that he brought into being around himself, Don Bosco, under the Lord's inspiration, deliberately wished to create and in fact succeeded in shaping a community of religious. They were his most faithful and closest followers; they had an animating role in fostering the common spirit and a task of leadership in the mission. Don Bosco dedicated a great part of his time and en-

²² cf. C 3

ergies to passing on to them his own spiritual style and pedagogical practice.

Such a group is characterized by the *habitare in unum* as brothers: living physically in the same house, i.e. in a common life; *in unum spiritum*, i.e. with shared mentality and values, growing in the charity manifested in a joyous mutual affection able to create a family; *in unum agendi finem*, i.e. firmly committed to a common mission.²³

Salesian fraternal life corresponds to proposals of Christian perfection and of effective educational work, and at the same time meets deep aspirations of the person such as the desire for authentic relationships, the sharing of experiences, of communication, of friendship and affection. This, on the other hand, is a preparation and training for the educational rapport presupposed by the preventive system and for the youthful environment which the same system sets out to create.

Interpersonal relationships, in fact, are linked with the human and spiritual maturity of the individual. Their quality, the way in which they are practised and handled, are an indication of how far love, the first Christian commandment and source of the greatest educative energy, has developed in us and to what extent we have learned to express it.²⁴

In the SGC the confreres were already asking that in the communities an effort should be made to create an environment of more human warmth, and precisely that of a family; a climate of friendship founded on respect and mutual esteem.²⁵ Since then the desire has grown for relationships which go beyond habit and formality, because they are continually renewed in contacts, deepened around the Eucharist and rebuilt through the daily practice of reconciliation.

Our communities feel the need today to emphasize the human dimensions of fraternal life to help the individual to

²³ cf. SGC, 498; BM 9, 266

²⁴ cf. AGC 363, p.30

²⁵ cf. SGC, 483

mature, and to support him in all life's vicissitudes.²⁶

And so we want these rapports to be not merely working relationships but such as to lead to true friendships in the following of Christ and in solidarity for the mission, and especially that they be inspired by sacrifice and self-donation, and not centred only on the individual or on his own affairs.

We must grow in the ability to establish such relationships through ongoing formation. We need to educate ourselves and educate each other to accept and love each other as brothers. The GC24 speaks of our relational spirituality: a spirituality which not only loves with an interior charity but, as Don Bosco had already taught through his dealings with his boys, is able to build adult relationships consistent with the vocation and prevailing sensitivities.

In salesian fraternal experience it is very important to learn how to overcome in a positive way the tensions which are part and parcel of life, to integrate freedom and personal autonomy with the demands of a real communion. For this reason we must go back to the supernatural motives which are at the foundation of our brotherhood; we must cultivate the elements of an ascetical process both in individuals and in the community.²⁷ In fact, we are living in times of privatization and of individualism, but in which are also manifested a strong dependence on the affection and thought of others. True freedom, combined with an efficacious desire for communion, will enable us to educate young people to these values.

Together with the ability to form relationships, there is also need for communication. Nowadays in communities people want this to be not limited to organization but to extend to personal experience; that we exchange not only news items or work details, but evaluations, requirements, intuitions concerning our life in Christ and the way we understand the

²⁶ cf. SGC, 485 -486

²⁷ cf. *Fraternal life in community*, 23. 25. 28. 37

charism. This is the aim of the practice of the revision of life, the verification of the community, interchange in prayer, discernment with respect to situations, projects and events.

Communication is necessary also because of the positive pluralism of views and gifts that exists in the community. The different kinds of involvement of the confreres justify the importance given by the Constitutions to community assemblies. Reducing the possibility of dialogue and mutual exchange in the religious community would lead to a lack of development and a failure to accompany the growth processes of the individuals.²⁸

Communication requires learning, practice and also animation; by learning I mean of a spiritual rather than a technical kind. With communication at some levels a certain reserve which holds us back from saying what we think has to be overcome; and there is also need for confidence in the other person which has to be fostered. Experience shows that not everyone has the courage to do this. We have to learn how to do it, with opportunity for conversation and the ability to listen.²⁹

The GC24 encouraged the individual communities to foster the sharing of the educative and pastoral experiences of the confreres by means of the 'community day' and other meetings as an opportunity for growth through interpersonal communication.³⁰

Quality in relationships and communication requires the humble acceptance of the vocation to communion as a gift rather than as a burden: "God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love".³¹ From this it follows that each one must apply himself to the daily building of fraternity, which leads to the overcoming of selfish tendencies, to accept fraternal corrections, and to participate diligently in the common life and work.

²⁸ cf. AGC 370, p.10

²⁹ cf. AGC 363, pp. 32-34

³⁰ cf. GC24, 133

³¹ C 50

We find the strength to follow out a process of this kind especially in common prayer and in our personal relationship with Christ. The community is not born of human will but is the fruit of the Lord's Paschal mystery. "In praying, the salesian community (...) deepens its awareness of its intimate and living relationship with God"³² and of its fraternal communion.

Especially in the celebration of the Eucharist the community allows itself to be built by Christ as fraternal and apostolic. This is why the times of common prayer and celebration are so important.

Don Bosco – as is recalled in art.16 of the Constitutions – wanted everyone to feel "at home" in his establishments, so that the salesian house becomes a family. This kind of witness arouses in the young and in lay people the desire to know and follow the salesian vocation and mission.³³

In a world which is divided and torn apart, in an impersonal society that treats persons as numbers, the testimony of apostolic fraternity provided by our communities will be all the more effective.

In particular, the GC23 asks that the salesian community be the centre of communion and the animating driving force of the educative and pastoral community and of the Salesian Family.³⁴ The dynamism of our community life makes us able to bring together and involve many other people in Don Bosco's spirit and mission.

As charismatics, we are called to be a presence which raises questions, provides reasons for hope, gathers people together, prompts collaboration and gives effect to an ever more fruitful communion to achieve a project of life and work according to the Gospel.

This evidently needs an improvement in our way of working together, so that the community becomes the place

³² C 85

³³ cf. C 16

³⁴ cf. GC23, 232 ff.

where the change takes place from *I* to *we*, from *my* work or sector to *our* mission, from the pursuit of my means and objectives to focusing on animation and the good of the young.³⁵

The Constitutions and Regulations provide many and varied opportunities for mutual understanding, coordination and agreement. Community councils and assemblies can present a common response to situations in the light of the Gospel and of our vocation, to plan together the major aspects of pastoral work; for this reason participation in them is important, as also is the quality of the meetings themselves.

Nowadays many young people and lay persons want to “see” and “take part” in our work with us. And so we must arrange this in such a way that it is possible to pray with the youngsters, share moments of fellowship and planning with our lay collaborators, and even welcome some of them to share with us an experience of community life.

This means that we must be alert to the quantitative and qualitative nature of our communities, as the GC24 asked, so that they may be able to live in the way they are called upon, and as is expected of them.³⁶

Evangelical witness.

The second point in the statement of the theme regards the quality and expression of our religious and spiritual experience. The salesian community is called to live and be seen as consecrated, as a group of people who are following Christ, powerfully attracted by him, by his person and his Word, by his mystery operating in the world; a group that makes of all this a common experience, which is felt and enjoyed, witnessed to with total dedication to the mission to the young, to fraternal life and to the living out of gospel values.³⁷

³⁵ AGC 363, p.34

³⁶ cf. GC24, 173-174

³⁷ cf. C 3

The soul of this witness is spirituality, the desire to shape one's life according to the Spirit. The mission is its mature fruit and the place for its expression and growth. We know by experience that the simple satisfaction gained from success will not take us very far forward in our apostolic commitment. It needs much more than that.

The mission is before all else the work of the Spirit within us. He makes us "signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor".³⁸ Without the experience of the Spirit there is no mission, either on our part or on that of the laity. The contemplation of God, who loves and saves man, and the desire to be involved, give rise to and maintain our commitment to the young and the people of God.

The salesian community therefore cannot base its missionary dynamism and its effective force on anything other than an intense spiritual experience.

The GC23 and GC24 went deeply into the specific characteristics of salesian spirituality, and promoted in the Congregation the knowledge and esteem of its cardinal points. But there is need to be still more aware of it, to draw up a pedagogy to develop this particular style of holiness, overcoming the risk of superficiality, activism and mere habit.

The Constitutions declare that holiness is the most precious gift we can offer to the young,³⁹ the principal contribution of salesian religious to human education and advancement. Holiness has a temporal value not only through works of charity for the benefit of the poor, but for the vision, meaning and dignity it gives to human coexistence. "In a world beguiled by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possession and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, and that his love can fill a life completely".⁴⁰

³⁸ C 2

³⁹ cf. C 25

⁴⁰ C 62

When spirituality is taken up and lived, it becomes the secret for achieving what was proposed by the GC23 and GC24. It is the soul of the EPC, the core of the journeys of faith we have to make with the young, in a climate of the exchange of gifts. To become an animating nucleus we have to live our spirituality consciously and with conviction, and express it in a spirit of community with joy and spontaneity.

It sometimes happens that the salesian spiritual experience is lived only occasionally or in part by the community and confreres, rather than as a pattern, the constant aim and plan of life. Often it is reduced to certain 'moments', or else it is taken up by individuals while its communal expression is weak and of little relevance.

The spiritual experience cannot exist without an attitude and assiduous practice of *prayer*. The community is called upon to be a place and school of prayer. Only if it has an esteem for and a personal attachment to prayer will it be able to safeguard itself from having its prayer-time invaded by other concerns and be able to live its communal moments of prayer with care and calm, free from haste and distractions.

Finally the community must learn to live the *communication of faith*, the sharing of spiritual experiences, the placing in common of vocational motivations, the practice of community discernment, and of discussion of pastoral projects. It is here that the exchange of talents takes place between confreres, that the riches of each one are offered and welcomed by all.

Briefly, it is a matter of following within our communities authentic processes of growing in fidelity to the Word and the presence of Christ, and of manifesting and communicating this kind of faith; only on this condition can our communities be "signs, environments and schools of faith".

In evangelical witness, a privileged place belongs to the Evangelical Counsels. They reproduce and make present in today's world Christ's way of living; they indicate what is definitive in the face of what is conditional; they have a critical

and therapeutic function with respect to freedom, richness and love, that is lived solely in terms of self-realization and not of self-giving; they present a successful way of fully realizing human existence. The following of the obedient, poor and chaste Christ, as well as being the expression of a personal love for Jesus, has a pedagogical aspect of motivation and the proposal of a blueprint for a new humanity.⁴¹

Nowadays there is much insistence on the anthropological significance of the evangelical counsels. "The decision to follow the counsels, far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation. (...) Thus, while those who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they propose, so to speak, a spiritual 'therapy' for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God".⁴² This requires an effort on our part to live them not only with consistency and truth, but also in deep dialogue with present-day culture, so that their humanizing value is clearly seen.

Some ambiguities and unconscious compromises find their way, in fact, into our style of life and make it lose its evangelical effectiveness.

The Counsels complete and *characterize fraternal life and make possible the dedication of our whole being to the mission*,⁴³ making clear its gratuitous nature, the unconditional life-offering, the measureless and unreserved love for the very poor.

Not infrequently the salesian community fails to make all this clear and intelligible, and so the testimony is not understood. We must find ways to give expression to an evangelical life-style of this kind, because only prophetic and radical options will make our communities attractive and capable of drawing in others.

⁴¹ cf. GC24, 152

⁴² VC 87

⁴³ cf. C 61

Animating presence among the young.

One of Don Bosco's characteristic traits which contributed to his spirituality was that he was always among the youngsters, to such an extent as to transform **assistance** into an educational system and a spiritual experience. "Familiarity with the young especially in recreation... The teacher who is seen only in the classroom is a teacher and nothing more, but if he joins in the pupils' recreation he becomes their brother".⁴⁴ He himself deplored and criticized certain tendencies which impaired this kind of presence: you cannot share the life of the youngsters if you are concerned about your own affairs, if you live apart from them, or if you assist without any real attention to individuals but just to fulfill a duty; or if you fail to show a love and real interest for each youngster.

The first community of Valdocco, the constant criterion for discernment and pastoral renewal,⁴⁵ was a community not only *for* the young but *with* the young: it shared their life and adapted itself to their needs. The participation of the youngsters determined the timetable, the kind of work, the manner of praying. Staying with Don Bosco meant staying with the young.

Today conditions have changed. Many of our works have become complex with many organizational demands. In present day society many relationships are formed, but they are often of a fleeting nature with little human depth. Those between different generations are less immediate than they were formerly, not least because of changing styles and tastes. This increases in everyone, but especially in young people, the desire for communication and for relationships.

On the occasion of the GC24 the young asked the Salesians to be with them more and share their life, particularly in informal moments; to help and accompany them in their formation, and to provide them with opportunities for an effective in-

⁴⁴ Letter from Rome, Appendix to Constitutions, p.259

⁴⁵ cf. C 40

volvement in educational work and evangelization.⁴⁶

What requests do we receive today in this connection from the young people around us, the young animators who share the salesian mission with us, and the laity themselves?

We are asked for a **physical presence** among the young, which leads us to love what they love, to understand and share the many positive values and aspects of their world; a **friendly presence** that is selfless and interested in individuals and not just institutional and concerned mainly with the organization of activities; an **active presence**, able to make suggestions, offer motives inspired by reason and faith, reawaken creativity and shared responsibility in the young, and at the same time accompany them in life's pilgrimage; a **presence of witness** which is a living reflection of the values proclaimed. And all this not only as individuals but especially as communities.

This salesian presence among the young becomes **spiritual animation**. The GC23 asked every community to be a "school of faith" for the young and the laity.⁴⁷ It is not, in fact, only a question of involving lay people in the many sectors of educational and pastoral service, but of making them participants in a spiritual adventure, and of us living so intensive a life of salesian spirituality as to give rise in them to a desire to share it, so as to build together an educative environment spiritually highly charged, a climate of shared holiness as the GC24 recalled, quoting the example of Valdocco.⁴⁸

In the letter *Experts, witnesses and craftsmen of communion* I wrote: "We are not a welfare society or an educational organization which has as its final objective specific material or cultural realizations; we are charismatics. That means giving life to a work which raises questions, gives motives for hope, brings people together, prompts collaboration, and gives rise to

⁴⁶ cf. GC24, 284

⁴⁷ cf. GC23, 217

⁴⁸ cf. GC24, 104

an ever more fruitful communion for the realization together of a plan of life and action in line with the Gospel".⁴⁹ It is important to examine to what extent this is true of the individual communities, and how we can make it possible and apply it.

This presence becomes proclamation and prophecy, proposed in an alternative life style according to the Gospel. To be prophetic, consecrated life must be able to shake up the world which is drifting away from the Gospel. What are important are not only material achievements but the questions and challenges to which they give rise. We have to ask ourselves what to include in education today and how to characterize our presence among the young so as to produce the innovative impact in expressing love that Don Bosco had in his own times.

In the face of a world marked by poverty and rejection, especially of young people, our presence must be a clear proof of solidarity and freely given service; in the face of a plurality of cultures, in which there is frequently discrimination against what is different, our presence must promote dialogue and sharing; in the face of a society which encourages superficial attitudes and consumer exploitation of things and of nature, our style of life and work must be a synthesis between reflection and action, between the use of material goods and respect for nature. We shall ask ourselves how our style of living and working communicates these values to our youngsters and lay people, or to what extent we let ourselves be led by the overpowering criteria of present-day society.

In this way our presence can become a **vocational call**. Today vocational promotion is expressed through the logic of "come and see", i.e. by providing an image which will give rise in the young to an attraction and the desire to share a mission and life. We achieve this especially by the witness of our joy in living the salesian religious vocation without fear or reserve, concerned only to develop in every youngster an openness to

⁴⁹ AGC 363, p.22

God's call, i.e. a willingness to consider life as a gift and service; and also by the ability to communicate and share salesian spirituality and our style of education, and to provide motives for inspiration and encouragement, notwithstanding difficulties and personal or institutional limitations; and by dedicating our time and energy primarily to fostering and accompanying individuals, so helping them to discern and accept God's plan in their regard.

The grace of unity.

These dynamic elements of our personal and community life must be lived according to what we call the "**grace of unity**", i.e. in a synthesis which stems from pastoral charity. This, declared the Pope in his address to the GC23, "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".⁵⁰

Today our life seems exposed to all sorts of tensions, due to the cultural models of life and the multiplicity of commitments. It risks becoming fragmented, of opposing the practice of the evangelical counsels to models of human realization, of failing to find enough space and time for its integral expression and of emptying the mission of its evangelical content.

We must recover the synthesis in mentality and in life which helps us to live positively in this situation. What is essential for this is a new focus and relationship with Christ the Good Shepherd, who becomes the inspiration of our life and the key to the combination of prayer, study, pastoral educative work, and fraternal life.

We also need to reconsider how we can give unity nowadays to our personal life by combining the primacy of God with

⁵⁰ GC23, 332

dedication to the mission and mature fraternal rapport. This must be rethought and realized in fraternal and welcoming communities which are seeking to follow Christ, feel themselves sent by him to the young, and are trying to act according to the heart of Don Bosco. It means being able to single out and give effect today to a new personal and community balance between the different aspects of our life.

The community is the place of the **vocational growth of each member**; it helps the confrere to live his salesian vocation with transparent joy; it becomes the environment in which he matures.

It is important that it be the ordinary place for the ongoing formation of the confreres; the GC23 had already insisted on this option, linked with the fact that it is the quality of daily life within the community that ensures a process of continual growth. It is fostered by the animation of the community on the part of the Rector and the 'community day' each week.

In addition to stimulating personal responsibility for growth, the community guarantees the forms of personal accompaniment. The revival of the colloquy with the Rector, frequent confession and the use by each confrere of a spiritual guide will help personal growth within the community.

3. SOME CONDITIONS FOR THE ANIMATION OF THE SALESIAN COMMUNITY TODAY

The ministry of the Rector.

The animation of the salesian community is entrusted to the shared responsibility of its members; but the successful exercise of such responsibility has its main point of reference in the Rector. Hence the quality of direction is felt by the Provinces to be a strategic element in the life of the communities in every way.

The GC21 has given us a hierarchy of the duties and responsibilities of the salesian Rector. It gives first priority to his service to salesian unity and identity. Then comes pastoral guidance in the salesian mission and direction of the educational commitments. And finally the Rector has the primary responsibility for the overall management of the work.⁵¹

In the manual of the salesian Rector it is stated that his first task is to stir up in the individual members the awareness of who they are: to bring their abilities and charisms to the fore; to help them to keep the spirit of the theological values, etc; in a word to create an environment and the conditions which will enable every Salesian, in submission to grace, to mature in his vocational identity.⁵²

In this responsibility the Rector is helped by his Council⁵³, and particularly by the Vice-rector.⁵⁴ Together they foster the spiritual and pastoral animation and coordinate the administration of the community and the work.

In recent years the implementation of this ministry has become more complex and difficult, with the risk that less important functions are crowding out those more central from a religious and pastoral standpoint.

For this reason many Provinces are asking for a practical reflection to suggest concrete ways for helping salesian Rectors to give priority to the fundamental roles of their ministry.

From what I have seen for myself, I think I can state that in recent years – precisely because of the new situation in consecrated and community life, and in the new conditions in the world of education – an urgent need is felt for a further three-fold emphasis in the Rector's role, one that requires sensitivity, perception and the ability to make decisions.

There is a **charismatic focus**, which responds to the pre-

⁵¹ cf. GC21, 52

⁵² cf. *The Salesian Rector*, Rome 1986, n.105

⁵³ cf. C 178

⁵⁴ cf. C 183

sent state of consecrated life. The Rector, as the religious superior, must be able to explain, illumine, guide and animate salesian consecrated life, to help in the living out of the human and Christian dimension of its commitments, and in the understanding of what it means to follow Jesus Christ in Don Bosco's way.

Today a need is felt for charismatic animators, who keep alive in the confreres and communities the awareness and enthusiasm for their vocational choice. Charismatic focus is concerned with the fostering and deeper study of the salesian spirit and its characteristics.

There is also a **pastoral focus**: the Rector with his council and community guides all the work towards the objectives of evangelization, even the more specific ones.

Educational and management tasks and roles, taken on by different persons, must have the same aims regarding the style of formation to the faith of each youngster, and on the creation of an environment in which human and religious values are immediately obvious.

One must never be satisfied with the minimum. Special care must be taken of those who respond to the invitation of faith and who show signs of a vocation. All this requires the Rector to encourage, guide, specify, revise, and continually emphasize the requirements for the mission to be fulfilled.

And the third form is **fraternal focus**, i.e. dedication to the fostering of relationships, dialogue and co-responsibility: an aspect very much felt at the present day. From the vocational point of view it is evident that young people are attracted by fellowship. They show no great enthusiasm for forming part of communities which are no more than groups for intensive work – that does not attract them. They want to know how and with whom they are going to live. Fraternity is therefore becoming a determining factor, and the animation of the different forms it takes is entrusted to the care of the Rector.

To realize all this, the Rector brings into play his **priestly charism**.

The Constitutions say that the Rector must be a priest.⁵⁵ That does not mean simply that he must have the juridical requirement of priestly ordination, but that he must exercise the priesthood in and for the religious and educative community, i.e. it is there that he must provide the gift and ministry of the word. He must render fruitful the gift and role of sanctification through friendship and spiritual animation, including the use of the sacraments. He must direct and guide the community towards Christ, making it one in Him.

There is no need for a Rector to wait for the weekend to be able to do priestly work in the parish. He does such work in the educative community. This is his parish and his church. It is here that he must offer the Word of God in its many forms: by advice, in meetings, good-mornings, good-nights, in the school, and so many other circumstances.

We must not so separate the religious and the profane as to think that there should be no connection between our homily and what we say to a boy in the playground. When we welcome a youngster at the school gate or help him in the playground with a word in his ear, for him this can be the word of God, because it uplifts and encourages him, shows him a mark of esteem, and predisposes him to respond to grace.

The priest operates *in persona Christi*. This is not just a function of the priesthood, but of its essence. The same applies to the gift of sanctification and to the role of support.

Ongoing formation in daily life.

The effectiveness of our community life and of our pastoral work is guaranteed not so much by the structure and exercise of authority, but before all else by the presence and action of confreres who live with competence and enthusiasm the values of the salesian spirituality, pedagogy and vocation, and are able

⁵⁵ cf. C 121

to pass them on with clarity and conviction.

For this reason the continuing formation of persons is today a priority. It presupposes a new mentality ready to respond to questions and launch the challenges of the Gospel, an inner conviction about the values which make us able to overcome resistance and fears in the face of changes, to acquire a more mature and well founded awareness of the values and criteria of salesian pedagogy, and develop a renewed capacity for learning from daily life.⁵⁶

True formation, the kind that transforms persons and groups, is born of life and of the life of every day; and so the living of a life of fellowship, of evangelical witness, and of animating presence among the young and laity, means taking on a form and rhythm of life which fosters and in a certain way predisposes to animation. When this happens, daily life not only does not wear down the confreres, but helps them to feel well and grow from a cultural, psychological, social and – above all – spiritual point of view.

It is fundamental therefore to give back to Salesians a sense of the priority of formation; we are called to be animators of other people's maturing, and hence we must ourselves develop a dynamism of constant and integral growth.

4. INVITATION TO THE PROVINCES.

The General Chapter encompasses not only the Assembly of the Provincials and Delegates that takes place in Rome, but the whole process from its convocation to its application. It is fully realized in the reflection, study and work of all the Provinces. It will therefore be a lengthy period of renewal of community life in the individual Provinces. The Capitular Assembly will be a fraternal sharing of efforts to identify those el-

⁵⁶ cf. GC23

ements which experience in various contexts has brought out as fundamental and more able to generate community life and dynamism in the present situations.

Let this period therefore be a time of grace for the Provinces, in examining our fidelity to our religious and communal vocation, as we search for a more meaningful way of living in community as a “sign of faith”, a “school of faith” and “centre of communion” as the GC23 already urged us to do.⁵⁷

In this verification it will be useful also to listen to the expectations of those to whom our mission is directed: how they see us, and what they expect from our communities. Dialogue with them can help us to understand what God is asking of us at this time in order to bear witness – in a language intelligible especially to the young – to the values of the Gospel by our own lives.

It is also a providential moment for meditating together once again on the abundant doctrine on the salesian religious community which we already have in salesian and ecclesial documents. This will help to enlighten us and guide us in our choices for living in unity the different aspects of our vocation in the complex settings of daily life.

In our reflection and chapter work two dangers need to be avoided: that of simply repeating former objectives and proposals, and that of becoming discouraged in face of the ideal presented by the Constitutions as though it were simply not realizable in practice at the present time.

For this reason I invite you to seek the circumstances that will make it possible for us to approach this ideal in the awareness that the first gift and service we can offer to the young is our being disciples of Christ, involved in an alternative form of life which can fill the deepest expectations of the human heart. To this end it is important to share the positive experiences now taking place in the Provinces and to launch new ones.

The preparation for the next General Chapter will compel

⁵⁷ cf. GC24

us, dear confreres, to intensify two aspects of our consecrated life: spirituality and formation. For us they are decisive aspects and they also closely affect those for whom we work.

That all this may be accomplished successfully I ask for a special remembrance in community prayers. The renewal of our consecrated life is a work of the Spirit which must revitalize in each of us and in our communities pastoral charity and the gift of predilection for the young. It is a grace we must ask for with faith and trust, opening ourselves to it through our effort of reflection and sharing in community and with the young and the laity.

We invoke Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of our Family, around whom Don Bosco wanted to build up his communities as true families.

With every best wish for the success of your chapter preparations, I send you my cordial greetings and blessing.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Juan Tuckin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" that loops under the rest of the name.