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

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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## SICKNESS AND OLD AGE IN THE SALESIAN EXPERIENCE

*“Let my heart rejoice in your saving help” (Ps 12,5);*

*“O Lord, you are my portion and cup: my life is in your hands” (Ps 15,5)*

The seasons of life. – I. **SICKNESS** – The experience of sickness in our consecrated life – With our eye on Don Bosco – A new apostolic period – II. **OLD AGE**: a period to be used to advantage – A proper view – Old age and the mission to the young – Understanding the condition of the elderly – The right way to grow old is learned in youth – Ongoing formation, in the local and provincial community.

Rome, 15 August 2001

*Solemnity of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary*

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you after a year of illness, and I would like to share with you my thoughts and feelings during what has been for me a new experience, but one accompanied by God's grace and the affection of the confreres.

Illness caught me unexpectedly in the midst of the Ministry assigned to me by Providence. I had planned many things for my time in office, but this took me by surprise. God's grace and your prayers have helped me to face this vocational turning point at which the Lord called me to serve him in a new way.

Now I feel that I am in the arms of a merciful Father who has given me the grace to trust myself completely to him. Though I feel very much the frailty associated with sickness, I seem to feel also the supporting hand of the Lord who has stretched out his hand so as not to leave me alone.

Despite my progressive physical weakness, God has so far granted me a certain lucidity of mind, which allows me to

maintain relationships with the confreres, take part in some small salesian festivities, and continue to provide for the good of the Congregation.

My thoughts turn to the immense field of apostolic activity entrusted to the Congregation, to the appeals from so many peoples and especially the young, to the good will and esteem of the Church and of governments for the work of the Salesians in all parts of the world.

I look back with joy on the rich development of the Salesian Family and the abundance of the gifts it offers to the Church, while being able to appreciate at first hand the service which the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary are able to offer to their sick.

I have in mind the serried ranks of confreres and lay people I have met in so many parts of the world, and with whom I feel united through the patient offering of my suffering.

I think of the young Salesians preparing for their first or perpetual profession, or about to enter the novitiate, and I pray for them. I feel especially close to the sick and aging confreres; some of them I have been able to visit, and to all the others I have written a letter assuring them of my prayers and making my friendship and our common sharing of this experience of life more explicit.

For all this I bless the good Lord, and do not conceal from you the joy it gives to my heart.

I feel united with you in praying to Artemide Zatti, to ask for a cure and for all the graces I need. The letters I have written on prayer and on Artemide Zatti have been a further way for keeping close to you on our pilgrimage. The commitment I have asked you to give to the Salesian Brother is a way to cultivate our mutual relationship more closely.

I would now like to share with you some reflections which, from my special standpoint, seem useful not only for those who share personally the condition of suffering, but for all confreres in any community in contact with this experience.



## The seasons of life

I want to begin with a kind of parable on life. A certain spiritual director used to say that a person's life of faith has three periods or stages, each of them characterized by particular attitudes and dispositions.

The *first phase or period* is marked by the question: "How do you respond to life?" Life comes to meet us. It is a matter of understanding that it is an absolutely free gift, the fruit of an inconceivable love. It is not just something temporary, but eternal in both duration and quality; it finds its meaning in Jesus Christ, with whom we share our human experience; it implies commitment, and at the same time joy and risk. In this perspective the dominant feeling is that of trust in the faithfulness of God hymned in the psalms: You, O Lord, are my life, my strength, my hope, my light. "If I should walk in the valley of darkness, no evil would I fear. You are there with your crook and your staff; with these you give me comfort" (Ps 22,4). The good man is defined especially as a "thankful man", while the unbeliever is fundamentally ungrateful.

This phase is a period of faith which lasts all through life, but is particularly active in the young. The eager challenging seeking attitude of the young finds its response in education through the various influences of the family, youth pastoral work and catechesis.

When we contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation, we see that this journey of faith begins for Mary at the moment of the Annunciation, when she replies to the Angel: "Be it done to me according to your word" (*Lk 1,38*); while in Jesus it is expressed to the full in the availability shown in the words: "Lo, I have come to do your will, O God" (*Heb 10,7*). Our mission as people who have experienced the true life and want to be open to it is particularly precious and joyful. For this reason in salesian youth spirituality, which also includes educative elements, we concentrate on life and its values, and so we look to the Father as the giver of life, and the Son as its fullness and

guarantee against death. We remain transfixed before the resurrection of the lifeless girl<sup>1</sup> and we rejoice at the restoration to life of the young man who was dead<sup>2</sup>.

It is not surprising that many do not wonder at this gift of life, because they take existence as an accepted fact, without fathoming its meaning or because they live it only as a pastime. We however, through grace, have been able to reach the confession of faith: "this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it"<sup>3</sup>.

The *second period* is dominated by the question of "how to use life as a gift". These are the years of discernment and choice of vocation, in response to the needs of one's fellow-men and the will of God, made known through signs and circumstances. At the end of this period the fundamental choice is made: for the Kingdom or for some other objective. At this stage too our young people have need of witness, help and guidance.

For Salesians, who have accepted the call to follow Christ in the way traced out by Don Bosco, life is open to full apostolic commitment, which will continue through the years and enable them to experience the characteristic spirituality made up of union with God – which is true contemplation – and the joy of working with him for the salvation of the young and the poor. This is something deeper which does not come without difficulty but brings a great reward. There is growth in community life and relationship with the Church communion and through meditation on the Word, to the point of offering the whole of life in daily toil.

The *third period* is marked by the commitment to "handing over of one's life". If the response in the first period was linked with Christ's expression: "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God" (*Heb 10,7*), and in the second with the declaration of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lk 8, 54

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mk 9, 17-27

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1 Jn 1, 1-3

Jesus at Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives" (Lk 4,18), This third phase is linked with the words: "Father, into your hands I commit my life".<sup>4</sup>

There is a popular belief that each one dies as he has lived. It is not a fixed rule nor an inevitable fate. Even in the last stage of life significant exceptions are known, both positive and negative, consoling and distressing.

Jesus was certainly not compelled to wait for the whole process, the mockery and the cross; but he accepted all of it from the Father to reveal the total nature of the latter's love, and to work for our redemption. It was the unexpected good fortune of the repentant thief to meet the Messiah at the moment when his mercy was at its greatest. It was from the Cross too that Mary became Mother of the Church.

After reflecting on the series of personal events which accompany each one's journey to its end, theologians say that it is humanly impossible to define the last moment of awareness and consciousness, emphasizing that we leave the world without knowing with certainty that we shall be saved. But there can be new gifts and consolation. Among the painful items in the last stage of life there can frequently be long illnesses, which do not depend on life's habits, and of which modern medicine can sometimes block or diminish the worst symptoms but can rarely cure.

After 150 years of life, our Congregation has confreres in all three groups. In nearly every community there is some member who needs care; sickness and old age are a permanent presence among us.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ps 30, 6. 16; Lk 23, 46



## SICKNESS

In the youthful imagination and of people in general, the typical Salesian is one who leaps out of bed in the morning and – after prayer in common – goes down to the playground, welcomes the youngsters as they arrive, chats to them, joins in a kick-about with a football, and shortly afterwards gathers them together in a classroom for some catechism, frequently followed by the Eucharist.

It is a situation which is true enough: in many places it is authentic and happens like that. The Salesian watches for the favourable moment for making contact with youngsters, and the moment of their arrival is often one of the best for breaking the ice.

But in this there is a risk: that of isolating oneself, of thinking too much that pastoral results of our work are due to our own efforts, of forgetting the gratuitous filial and offertory dimension which was so typical of Christ, who made the Cross his moment of revelation and the Eucharist that of his communication.

Suffering and the cross always find a place in life, and it must be said at once that periods of sickness and limitation are just as fruitful as those of specific activity, if they are lived in the light of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

Sickness has neither agenda nor timetable. It can come unexpectedly and for reasons unknown at the age of twenty, thirty or forty years. Nowadays especially, with the wider diffusion of some ailments typical of modern life, it is possible to find cases of tumours, heart attacks, seizures etc. even from before birth. And this does not include the various psychic disorders, which are not so apparent but are equally serious (depression, exhaustion, sleeplessness, chronic tiredness, etc.).

Sickness, therefore, has become a quite normal presence in our communities, just as it is in families and in all human life.

## The experience of sickness in our consecrated life

From this an important fact follows at once: sickness leads us to meditate on the precarious nature of existence and especially on that of our own, recalling the idea – as the psalm puts it – that “this is the fate of those who have foolish confidence” (*Ps 48,13*). In prosperity man feels safe and runs the risk of failing to fully understand life, his fellow-men and the conditions for lasting happiness.

Sickness increases self-perception and renews community spirit. The sufferer acquires a more realistic view of his own human nature. He becomes aware of his limitations, his poverty, his needs, and (as in the psalms) he gradually gets a glimpse of a life without end for which he has to prepare himself. Life, therefore, through sickness and by way of the example that confreres and young people receive and through sufferings offered for them, takes on a new apostolic significance.

In connection with confreres who are sick, our Constitutions say: “They in their turn, accepting their condition and serving the community in whatever way they can, are a source of blessing for it; they enrich its family spirit and deepen its unity”.<sup>5</sup>

Those who follow a path of suffering are called upon to renew their sincere trust in God. God, who has called them to life, is faithful and calls them to eternal life through various trials which include suffering. The psalms, a prayer without equal for believers, speak of the sudden and violent distress of sickness, but their prevalent note is confident entrustment to God whose mercy is unfailing and eternal. The Christian, like the religious, is taught during his life by the words and deeds of Christ. Sickness therefore is an opportunity for him to assess, re-express and deepen his personal faith.

As far as community life is concerned, what the Constitutions say should be kept in mind: on the one hand to take care



of one's health sensibly and without anxiety; and on the other, in times of sickness to offer whatever service one is capable of giving. This capacity is to be assessed and exercised after discernment with the Rector, who will evidently be guided by medical opinion.

Sometimes limited capabilities can be used in a regular task which is not too stressful, e.g. doorkeeper, librarian, presence in particular places. Sometimes, if a sick member has particular talents and wants to study, he can produce good results by dictating his work to another confrere; this is a form of collaboration which should be kept in mind. We have examples in which members with failing sight or laid low by weakness have had to dictate their work to others. Our confreres, moreover, have been able to express their own spiritual experience of sickness in the pages of books which, in addition to achieving a modest circulation, have also been of value in consoling others afflicted by suffering.

But the contrary can also happen, i.e. a sick confrere can help one who is well. Sickness is not something programmed and the limitations to which it gives rise are not the same for everyone. And so remedies should not be devoid of imagination and creativity. It may be necessary therefore to devise work, to start up processes of collaboration and see to it that treatment is tailored to the individual, especially since long-term sicknesses are more general nowadays.

It may not be just by chance that today the Church is offering us examples of salesian holiness built on solidarity with the sick, like those of Artemide Zatti, Simon Srugi, Fr Luigi Variara, etc..

I want also to reassure our sick confreres that their condition is not a burden to those who are younger, but rather a help to them; this is not only because by their presence and what they say they provide a more mature understanding of life, nor because from their example the young learn to live sickness more serenely, but also because through them the young confr-



eres can grow in their own feelings of compassion, empathy and desire to help. There are already indeed young members who voluntarily look after the sick for several hours each day, but how fine it would be if in the Salesian Youth Movement there were to develop groups of "Samaritans" or "Nazarenes".

At the present day, dear confreres, health is a problem for the whole of humanity and is reflected in almost every family, requiring more care and more charity. It is a good thing, therefore, that there is being developed in the Church pastoral work for the sick, which already has its major manifestations in the World Day of the Sick and in pilgrimages to various sanctuaries. On the other hand, health has been the principal sign of the Kingdom, along with charity and power: "Preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons" (*Mt 10, 7-8*).

Let us not forget that the blind, the deaf, paralytics, lepers, epileptics and those possessed, have been the object of attention as miracles and signs of the coming of God's Kingdom.

And it is precisely here that the community comes in with great efficacy. The first thing to be done is to see the situation in a positive manner, by the discovery that in the light of the paschal mystery sickness is a grace. In this connection come to mind the men and women Saints who kissed mangled bodies and infected wounds, considering them as wounds of Christ himself. Nearer to home we recall suffering Salesians, such as the Venerable Andrew Beltrami or Alexandrina da Costa. It was Don Beltrami, incidentally, who was at the origin of the missionary vocation of Fr Luigi Variara, whom we hope soon to see raised to the honours of the altars.

### **With our eye on Don Bosco**

Underlying all this for us is the experience of Don Bosco. We are accustomed to speak of his youthful liveliness, his pastoral ingenuity, his ability in creating initiatives for the young,

his sheer vitality. But often we lose sight of some aspects of his life like that of suffering, perhaps spoken of less frequently because at first sight they seem less attractive, though of no less importance and significance.

To bolster this statement we may recall some occasions in his life when Don Bosco was struck down by illness.

A first such occasion was when as a seminarian he fell ill after his vision of Comollo. We recall the touching episode of his mother bringing him a bottle of "good" wine and a loaf of corn bread.<sup>6</sup> Humorous discussion still goes on about what kind of wine it was! Whatever it was, the cure was almost immediate on that occasion!

Don Bosco was afflicted by a serious illness in 1846, in the full flower of his priesthood. Because of his excessive work and great worries, he contracted a serious kind of bronchitis which brought him almost to death's door. The episode is well presented in the recent film of his life. The Biographical Memoirs tell us of the incessant prayers, fastings and mortifications of his boys to obtain his cure from God, even to the extent in the case of some of them of offering their own lives to obtain this grace. Famous are the words of Don Bosco to the boys after his recovery: "I am convinced that God has given me back my life in answer to your prayers; and so gratitude demands that I spend the whole of my life for your spiritual and temporal benefit. This I promise to do as long as the good Lord leaves me on this earth; and please help me on your own side".<sup>7</sup>

There was a similar case at Varazze at the beginning of the scholastic year 1871-1872, when Don Bosco was ill for seven weeks.<sup>8</sup> On that occasion too the youngsters prayed incessantly for his restoration to health and some offered their lives for his recovery.<sup>9</sup> On his return to the Oratory Don Bosco was so

<sup>6</sup> Cf. BM I, p. 357

<sup>7</sup> BM II, p. 385-386

<sup>8</sup> Cf. BM X, p. 122-156

<sup>9</sup> Cf. BM X, p. 137

moved that he could not speak. From that very moment he could have said the words he spoke with deep emotion to Don Viglietti in 1886: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys".<sup>10</sup>

These were three episodes in which the illnesses followed a normal course, even though they were serious. Don Bosco needed a long period of convalescence before he was cured.

Then there was the last period of his life when indisposition and ailments began to mount. We have impressive accounts of that period which tell of his physical suffering, reflection on his past life and the work he had done, of his desire to tell his sons what they should do for the future of the Congregation, and of his concern for the good of the boys. "The garment is worn out", he said to the doctor during his last illness, "because I wore it both Sundays and weekdays".<sup>11</sup> I remember that the late lamented Fr Viganò during his last illness liked to meditate on these pages to derive light and consolation.

Don Bosco's whole life was accompanied by considerable physical suffering, but it never discouraged him or led him to do less work. During such periods of suffering and illness, including the last days of his life, he never gave up his task of apostle and father of the young. For them he offered his sufferings and hardships, just as Jesus did for all men. He was well aware of the saving value of pain when united with the sufferings of Christ, knowing that it is Jesus himself who redeems, and anyone who unites his own sufferings with his becomes an effective sign of that redemption.

It is interesting to note that even during his periods of sickness Don Bosco continued with his work, as far as was possible. He never refused to receive people, to write and reply to letters, even availing of the help of others, to speak with Salesians, and to ask about his boys. We read in the Biographical Memoirs: "Despite all these ailments – enough to force a man to avow his

<sup>10</sup> MB XVIII, p. 258

<sup>11</sup> MB XVII, p. 57



infirmity and refrain from all work – Don Bosco never slowed down in undertaking and completing his astounding activities. Indeed, his courage constantly matched his problems and ailments”.<sup>12</sup>

### **A new apostolic period**

By analyzing facts like these we have recounted, we come to a clear understanding of the source of the suggestions in our Constitutions. On the one hand they invite the sick confrere to take due care of his own health, continuing as far as possible the work in which he is engaged, and on the other they encourage communities and the sick confreres themselves to collaborate so as to use their remaining resources as well as possible. “The community surrounds its sick and aged confreres with care and affection”,<sup>13</sup> and “supports with greater love and care those who are gravely ill”.<sup>14</sup> This is happening all the more frequently in our own case.

From this service in which we are all committed no one is dispensed. In the communities there may even be certain confreres, priests or brothers, who are specifically assigned to the care of the sick, a task no less important than others. It seems to me, and I thank God for it, that sensitivity and attention in such situations has notably increased. For work of this kind, if the confreres cannot provide the necessary attention it is praiseworthy to have recourse to external personnel, while seeing to it that domestic and clinical care and personal assistance are ensured.

Moreover, in our case a criterion is developing which requires foresight on the part of those in charge and availability on the part of the confrere. When it is possible to attend sufficiently to the needs of our sick confreres by ourselves, they remain in the

<sup>12</sup> BM IV, p. 152

<sup>13</sup> C 53

<sup>14</sup> C 54

community in the way proposed in the Constitutions. But when they need particular care and help, it is well that they be transferred to houses specially equipped with means and personnel and generally close to efficient hospital facilities. Provinces individually or in collaboration with others have already provided such centres, seeking to meet not only medical needs, but especially those of a fraternal and spiritual nature.

The confrere must be helped to understand that this is a particular phase in which life takes on a new apostolic meaning if limitations and sufferings are offered up for the brethren and the young, and if time is used for prayer, community life and whatever work is possible. More time is available, in fact, for prayer and reading, which can be done more calmly and without pressure. Visits, opportunities for the apostolate, and similar items should not be omitted. In short, sickness does not make apostolic activity impossible, but rather multiplies opportunities for it.

I think it wise to refer at this point, if only in passing, to a situation which is beginning to appear, i.e. responsibility and moderation in asking for costly treatment in distant places which are highly specialized and out of the ordinary. It is true that the health of the confreres is something good and valuable. But it is also true that we share community commitments and live as poor people. This is another place where discernment is necessary which must take account of personal situations, the hope of a cure, community perspectives and considerations of the mission, all of which can vary a great deal.

Temperance is therefore needed on the part of the confrere in his demands, and particularly his willingness for discernment. The superior and community need criteria which are not rigid, and should study the practical situation in dialogue with the doctors.

This is a matter I have been thinking deeply about for some time, especially since I have been compelled to accept a great reduction in the ability to move about, but this has been

increased through the close presence of many guardian angels.

After so many years of salesian service, I now find myself in the situation of one who is served by others, with great love and extreme delicacy. After some initial embarrassment, I have now learned the precious art of letting myself be served, accepting everything as a gift of love.

I thank those who are close to me with their service, like the dear doctors and Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the confreres of the UPS and the Generalate, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and particularly the Mother General, and numerous visitors and friends: together they enable me to feel at home, serene and of good heart.

I express my appreciation especially for my Vicar, who accompanies me with truly fraternal concern; and the members of the General Council who have been at my side in the most sensitive moments.

Fr Luc himself – who is close to me and continues to collaborate with his special responsibility – assures me from his own knowledge of the clear evidence there is of the assiduous and fraternal participation shown by the entire Salesian Family and by very many friends.

I confirm his impression with joy. Just as in every family the sick are the centre of attention, so I feel myself particularly close to the members of the Salesian Family who bear witness to the fact that the Family has a soul, and indeed a heart which generates and spreads the fire of charity.

I said to you on another occasion that I feel like one moving along and flanked by friends on both sides. I have become more convinced of this than ever.

In contact with so much friendship and receiving so much painstaking care, I feel myself in deep harmony with one who wisely defined service as “love in action”.

Truth to tell, I too make the effort to continue to serve, in line with the ministry which has been entrusted to me. I recall



that in the 24<sup>th</sup> General Chapter when a reference was made to the advancing age of the Rector Major and the risk of sickness connected with it, one of the capitulars strongly emphasized the ministerial and charismatic implication of such a situation, which should be transfigured rather than prevented.

His intention was to show that a Rector Major who was sick and suffering would not be outside but within and even at the very heart of his ministry. Was not the cross the context and basic theme of the Transfiguration?

And so I strive to go on living. And I do not find it difficult to see in all this one of the fruits of your prayers..

And now I move on to another aspect of my reflection.

## **OLD AGE: A PERIOD TO BE USED TO ADVANTAGE**

While sickness comes without fixed time or date but arrives and imposes itself compellingly often with no advance warning, old age comes upon us gradually, like the sun setting on a fine day. It can be prepared for and programmed. In recent times when it has been found that expectation of human life is getting ever longer, there has been a multiplication of initiatives and professional agencies which aim at delaying the advancement of old age by making the best use of physiological resources.

We know that in recent years there has also been a change in terminology: "elderly" is preferred to "old", the "third age" means healthy old age, while the "fourth age" implies an old age with chronic ailments, etc.

In one way or another, however, the fact remains that growing old is a natural biological reality which begins at birth. But it becomes a problem in life with the onset of the normal illnesses typical of old age, or when the process of progressive marginalization of the aging person begins by other members of society. One even hears references to a "conspiracy of si-

lence", i.e. the fear of facing up to all that refers to the third age, or the refusal to think of the topic at all.

At the same time society's expectations from the elderly are either excessive or minimal depending on whether they are presumed to have the same psycho-physical capabilities as they had at a mature age, or that they should quite simply retire gracefully. It should be emphasized, in fact, that while our society pushes productivity to the limit, it excludes from the productive cycle and condemns to inactivity a very large number of members who could continue to work, albeit in different ways, and whose considerable experience is allowed to go to waste.

Fortunately culture and even medical science itself have put paid to what could have been considered a negative view of old age. In this respect systematic studies have been done on priests who attain retirement age and now have within their reach all kinds of courses of re-qualification. We can therefore say with confidence that the view of old age seems more positive. We at least, in the field of education, must encourage them in those tasks which, though simple, have considerable significance.

Don Bosco used to say that "a good doorkeeper is a treasure".<sup>15</sup> So is a good music teacher, a sacristan, an archivist, a librarian, etc. But especially we cannot but admire the new empathy between young and old which recalls the relationship between grand-parents and grand-children. Many young people are very interested in little known historical circumstances and lived experiences. They are more for personal reminiscences than for ideology.

It is true that old age is rich in mature experience. It is an occasion for living a spiritual time of synthesis, of tranquility and self-oblation: one that is socially (and for us educators educatively), useful and fruitful.

And so it needs to be prepared for in advance, even from the time of youth, through the principle of ongoing formation and a positive assessment of its possibilities.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. BM IV, p. 550

The existing facilities should be put to good use, along the lines of old peoples' clubs, universities for the third age, places for meeting, etc.

Old age must be accepted with its gifts, and also its limitations which should be reduced as far as possible: this is the purpose of medicine, psychology and gerontology. Our general and specific courses of ongoing formation are already making use of these opportunities.

We must surround the elderly with the appreciation they deserve. There is an abundant bibliography available in this connection. The year 1999 was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations as the International Year of Older Persons, and was characterized by the slogan: "*A society for all ages*".

"We are dealing with a new problem", writes the gerontologist Giuseppe Baldassarre in his weighty volume *Da fardello a ricchezza, l'anzianità del nuovo millennio*, and from certain points of view with a new approach, full of unknown factors and with repercussions at different levels (political and economical). It is a problem which on the one hand needs urgent solutions, but on the other forcefully raises the question of the cultural re-foundation of individual and social life, and at the same time a review and maybe a revision of old and consolidated ways of living and of thinking, planning and acting".

Consecrated life has been at grips with the problem for some time now, after a first spontaneous reaction in face of aging. Our own experience, in common with that of many Institutes, can serve as a trial run for its application in pastoral work and social animation. Each of us therefore must live this phase of his life, drawing inspiration from Scripture and from the significance this attributes to the elderly in society, in the education of new generations, in the passing on of the covenant, and in the experience of faith.



## A proper view

The first need, therefore, is to acquire a right view of old age.

Among the ages of man, that of old age does not always enjoy a good name. Childhood is full of promise, youth is brilliant with increasing hope for the future, maturity is the full expression of resources, accepting responsibility for the present day. Old age, on the other hand, has to cope with physical decline, the risk of mental incapacity, pruning of relationships, retirement from responsibilities. And so in our present culture, in the best cases it gives rise to sentiments of gratitude, respect and love which become translated into professional assistance and affectionate care. Only rarely does it lead to a revaluing of original resources. At the root of such an attitude lies a concept of life in which what counts most is manual or intellectual productive ability, and as this decreases so does human life fall in value.

And yet it cannot be accepted that pensionable age be equated with inertia and passivity, though it is precisely to this that modern culture is leading since the aged are being relegated, even though only implicitly, to a state of uselessness.<sup>16</sup>

Exclusion from the productive process, if that is what is meant by retirement from work, reduces the elderly to the lowest levels of social prestige. In this way are created conditions of "left-overs" and "second class citizens". All of a sudden pensioners become economically unproductive, culturally anachronistic, and socially isolated. This is why old age becomes a "source of concern" at a juridical level (with all the consequences of stopping work), at a financial level (because of increased expenses for health care), and at a psychological level (through the feeling of being abandoned and useless. and the fact that the granting of a pension by law at a specific age

<sup>16</sup> M. Spandonaro, *Problemi del pensionamento e minimo vitale*, in: *Anziani e società*, Edizioni del Rezzara, Vicenza 1982, p. 117-122

seems an arbitrary and unjust imposition).<sup>17</sup>

When a view of this kind is predominant, or even if it simply underlies the prevailing culture, it easily becomes absorbed by the elderly, and produces (at least in those who are weaker) an undervaluation of their own potential or worth. And so the desire grows for voluntary marginalization, and consequently the "active" years become fewer and the resources of old age are not developed in the best way.

Our religious and salesian experience keeps this kind of mentality at bay, but we are inevitably affected by it to some extent. Increase in the average age of communities gives rise to concern, and each added year causes comments about the future. This is fair enough, because the Congregation is committed in areas which call for youthful energies, while very often the replacements fall short of the commitments. But it becomes misleading when the whole question is approached only or mainly from the perspective of the work to be carried out. Our pastoral commitment for the salvation of the young is distorted if it be thought of only in terms of activity, even though this be indispensable and its most visible feature.

It is our consecrated life, in all its totality, which becomes the gift of the Father to young people, the source of words and actions which help them to mature as men and opens them to God's mystery. Baptism and religious profession place the whole of life under the particular sign of love. The Spirit communicates the same fruitfulness to youthful energy, to adult maturity, and in the phase of old age.

Growth in the life of the Spirit does not come to an end with advancing years or sickness. Indeed, to the extent that the external man progressively declines the interior man grows,<sup>18</sup> as he gathers the fruits of his whole life while awaiting the great encounter.

<sup>17</sup> S. Burgalassi, *L'età inutile: considerazioni sociologiche sull'emarginazione anziana*, Pacini, Pisa 1975

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 4, 16

And so the condition of old age always becomes a revelation of life and must be assessed only from the process followed from birth to maturity and fulfilment.

Its riches are not merely mysterious or invisible. They are expressions to be judged in living with others: spiritual maturity, ability for friendship, a taste for prayer and contemplation, the sense of poverty of life and abandonment into the hands of God. For us therefore, the condition of old age will also be the object of affectionate care and attention, but it is nevertheless a human and pastoral resource from which to draw profit in the community and in the salesian mission.

### **Old age and the mission to the young**

As we look at our Congregation we can see that the Lord is blessing us with long life. Many of our confreres reach a ripe old age. Some of them, blessed with special physical and mental energy, continue to be fully active in the work entrusted to them by obedience. Others live the condition of old age keeping themselves usefully occupied after years of full commitment in apostolic tasks and community responsibilities.

Their presence enriches the educative environment and pastoral work with unique contributions.

The salesian mission in fact allows for, and even requires, the contribution of all the ages of human life. Today, as in times gone by, we see aging confreres involved according to their strength in the assistance of youngsters, in the ministry of reconciliation and spiritual direction, in preaching, in careful attention to some important sector of the house (library, archives, secretary's and administration offices, museum, workshop, church), in receiving guests, in the care of the sick, in a reduced but valuable teaching activity, and in many other forms difficult to classify.

In this connection, I think with pleasure and affection of the many aging Salesians who, precisely because they are free



and available, have been able to meet in the playground boys and young men seeking vocational guidance, follow them up in their human and Christian formation, and be available to them in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation; they practise the ministry of the word and counsel of which we all stand in need in a confusing and noisy world which leaves no room for personal contact.

And with gratitude and thanksgiving I turn my thoughts to the aging Salesians who preserve affectionate links with the numerous past-pupils to whom they have devoted their best energies and with whom they share, albeit in a reduced form, plans and initiatives of solidarity, of voluntary work, and of presence and animation in the local area.

Their rich contribution has important repercussions on the whole community. It is their witness to a life which is approaching its close; it displays a wisdom which assigns a proper dimension to each aspect of life in the light of the definitive landfall; it is an example of the experience of problems and persons acquired by one who has lived through the various stages of life. Old age is also a memorial of the past which manifests the interdependence between generations and is linked with the source of the charisma or of a particular work. This makes it something almost indispensable in communities of initial formation.

Advancing years are frequently accompanied by precarious health or a terminal illness. Activity is reduced and can even cease altogether. One has to depend on others. Confreres in this condition share in the salesian mission by their prayer, suffering, and the offering of their life. In this way they become a channel of grace and a source of blessings for the community and for our young people.

"They enrich the family spirit of the community and deepen its unity", says art. 53 of the Constitutions. Pain, in fact, not only purifies the sufferer, but restores to the confrere energy for sharing and service. The community finds itself united

around the suffering member in vocational solidarity and brotherly affection.

Because of all this, long life is spoken of as a “charism”, a gift, which sanctifies the one who receives it and becomes also a source of sanctification for others, provided it be lived as a grace by the recipient and by those who participate.

### **Understanding the condition of the elderly**

Anyone entering the third or fourth age needs particular support. Confreres and communities are invited to provide this in the normal course of fraternal life.

The first support consists in the *giving of due value by the community to the person concerned*. It is important nowadays to proclaim the mission of persons of a certain age in the life of the community, and in consequence it will be important to promote their role.

This means helping aging confreres to be fully aware of the new phase on which they are entering, of the new resources at their disposal, of the new objectives ahead of them and also of the detachment and adaptation that their age demands. It is one of the significant stages of ongoing formation which the document on Formation in Religious Institutes emphasizes and recommends: “a time of progressive withdrawal from activity, when religious feel more profoundly within themselves the experience which Paul described in the context of moving toward the resurrection: ‘We are not discouraged; and even if, in us, the outward man is being corrupted, the inner man is being renewed day by day’ (2 Cor 4,16).[...] Religious can live these moments as a unique opportunity for allowing themselves to be penetrated by the paschal experience of the Lord Jesus, to the point of wishing to die “to be with Christ,” in keeping with their initial choice: “that I may know Christ, the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death, in order to come, if possible, to the

resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3,10-11).<sup>19</sup>

In some places provision has been made by preparing for confreres of the third age a specific period in which specialized skills are available; the results have been satisfactory. In other cases the confreres themselves have felt the need, and have joined in initiatives of ongoing formation which provide the opportunity and means of attaining the same objectives.

Thought must be given also to *kinds of community work* in which members can be engaged for as long as possible. Clearly this is not just a matter of keeping confreres occupied, but of discovering useful contributions they can make to the salesian mission according to each one's strength and ability. Inserted as it is in a vast movement of persons with openings to all kinds of services, the community can incorporate in its own project even quite unique skills and qualities.

This will lead to a greater involvement not only in times of prayer and community life, but also in shared responsibility in the community by creating broad circles of relationships, exchanges and collaboration. As always, the secret of success is the "togetherness", enriched by the vitality of many persons among whom there is a place for all the elderly as doorkeepers, sacristans, helpers for the sick, assistants in the playground, librarians, etc..

Particular attention should be given to services which allow the aging confrere to live out his life in a secure context, rich in possibilities for the best use of his resources and as far as possible without obstacles. I have in mind specifically the necessary information about condition of health, the indispensable periodic and systematic medical check-ups, involvement in pension schemes, the possibility for the use of free time in educative activity, and the removal of architectural problems so that the elderly can reach all the community environments.

*With regard to medical assistance and health care*, the Provinces have developed criteria and set up initiatives which

<sup>19</sup> *Directives on formation in Religious Institutes*



should be made more widely known, because they already seem suitable and effective.

As I said earlier when speaking of sickness, confreres stay in active communities as long as they are self-sufficient or, if they are sick, as long as the local community can take care of them. Family spirit and educative witness lead us to this solution. We apply to the community what John Paul II said to family counselors: "To take an aging person away from his house is often to do him unjust violence. By its affection the family can make the precious period of senility willingly acceptable as well as serene and active. Old people have resources which must be given their true value and used by the family which would only be impoverished by forgetting or neglecting them". This is the way medical science itself tends to work: preference is given to treating the elderly at home with new kinds of initiatives to ensure an adequate health service.

For those, on the other hand who need continuous and specialized care the Provinces have prepared houses in which medical services, the environment and the care provided create the best possible conditions. Experience is suggesting ways for making it easier for the elderly to take this step which is certainly a difficult one. On the part of the confrere the possibility of such a change should be foreseen calmly and accepted as a sign of the love of the Congregation, as a suitable measure from the health point of view and a way of collaborating in the community's mission. Consent and acceptance make the change easier.

Elderly Salesians also are happier when these houses are close to others where normal salesian activities are the order of the day, and offer the possibility of some small collaboration, of the occasional sharing in community events and even the simple enjoyment of being able to see the activity of young people and adults. Praiseworthy too is the diligence shown by communities in which these confreres have worked in going to visit them and keep them informed about what is happening.

The ability of the confreres in charge of animating individuals, homogeneous groups and the entire community in these houses is of fundamental importance. They try to organize prayer in suitable ways, encourage whatever work is possible, give life to relationships, provide information, and accompany each one in visits to specialists.

Our sincere gratitude is due to those confreres who willingly accept an obedience to take charge of such houses. They express to the elderly the gratitude and affection of the Congregation. We need to think about providing them with special training so that they can accompany the aging confreres with pastoral and spiritual competence.

### **The right way to grow old is learned in youth**

Old age, like any other period of life, meets crises and presents risks. We know this from experience. Beside the active elderly confrere there is one who takes "early retirement". One who exudes tranquility and trust is accompanied by another who is beset by anxiety and pessimism. There are those who willingly change their occupation to roles more in keeping with their diminishing strength, and there are others who hold on at all costs to a specific office or work, making a necessary substitution impossible.

It is not for us to pass judgement on such situations, because the state of mind and the causes of liveliness or depression are frequently not under the individual's control. But the increase in life expectancy now evident all over the world prompts us to think in good time how we are going to live this period of life for God and for the young, with all its possibilities.

In fact the quality of each one's old age is not a matter of chance nor is it entirely unforeseeable. It depends on the response he is able to give, and this is something that cannot be improvised. It is prepared in earlier years. Normally old age is

a time for gathering the fruits of what has been learned and practised. In this way growing old is an exercise for the whole of life, which consists in facing up positively to the challenges of the maturing process, in fidelity to one's particular vocation.

The period of old age will be positive if it follows a style of life that was a good one even before the third age. In this connection it has been said that "style of life is closely connected with personality, and so it cannot easily be changed in old age: it is the result of genetic factors and of a series of points learned during life's development". That is clearly not to be understood in a deterministic sense, since "it is always possible, even in old age, to make use of education to consciously modify certain stances and attitudes which have become crystallized because they are strictly connected with personality traits".<sup>20</sup>

Some aspects or attitudes are of particular importance. The first is a *tendency towards an uninterrupted growth* in response to God's call. This requires attention to the spiritual experience which gradually develops in us and leads us to the ever deeper discovery of God's work in our life. Linked with this in a religious educator is an openness to culture which enables him to interpret new signs and be ready to make the necessary changes without getting upset.

A second aspect to think about is our *work*: the manner in which we prepare for it, how we carry it out, how we use in a flexible manner the expertise we have acquired. It is an accepted fact that, physical and mental conditions being equal, those who have acquired a serious professional competence and have consolidated it in some area of work, retain it in an eminent manner even when their strength begins to weaken. Long practice, a wealth of experience, special skills that have been picked up, make their contributions valuable even though they be somewhat reduced. On the other hand, an activity

<sup>20</sup> M. Barucci, *Psicogeragogia. Mente, vecchiaia, educazione*, UTET, Florence 1989, p. 226



begun without competence, carried out haphazardly and with frequent changes, does not lead to maturity but rather to a feeling of inadequacy and early withdrawal.

Attention to this point is required of the individual confrere, but also of those who organize activities and plan the development of a Province or a work. We are reminded of this by two articles of the Regulations. One concerns the skill to be acquired: "Let every confrere study with his superiors the field of further qualifications best suited to his abilities and to the needs of the province, giving preference to whatever concerns our mission. He should preserve that availability which is characteristic of our spirit, and be ready for periodic re-qualification".<sup>21</sup> Art. 43, on the other hand, warns against disorderly work, and suggests a balanced distribution of duties with opportune periods for rest and relaxation, and for formation.

Both articles imply that nowadays it is essential to give more importance to persons than to works, and that initial or ongoing formation or quality of life and activity must not be sacrificed to the urgency of sustaining structures and initiatives.

In this way is realized what the Psalm desires:

*"The just will flourish in the courts of our God,  
still bearing fruit when they are old  
still full of sap, still green,  
to proclaim that the Lord is just"* (Ps 91, 15-16).

It is essential, in any case, that even from youth each one should prepare himself for growing old, so as to develop a positive attitude which will enable old age to be lived well.

Among the talents which must be developed for a serene living of old age is *adaptability*, understood not only as toleration of daily life, or as resignation or submission to its events, but especially as the capacity for changing one's habits, adapting to new physical or social conditions, and attaining desired objectives in ways different from those used previ-

<sup>21</sup> R 100

ously. The elderly confrere can confront problems he meets in two ways: either emphasize and make a song and dance about the loss of a social role, or use to advantage the time he has available for realizing other initiatives and projects. In this sense adaptability should be learned, prepared and made stronger.

Another talent to be developed, and one that is decisive for the style of life of the elderly, is *creativity* which – if fostered from an early age – becomes a unique capacity for integrating one's own abilities and knowledge into much broader visions and quite stimulating initiatives.

But still more important is the constant and growing awareness that one's life, despite age and progressive ailments and impediments, always preserves its *dignity* and its *meaning*. While the consumerist mentality stresses productive value as fundamental, it must be emphasized that the aging confrere can and must play a particularly active role so that in him can be attained affective security, willingness to listen, and an attitude which prompts further thought and the reshaping of problems. It has very fortunately been pointed out that "in general a grave social loss is incurred when elderly directors of business companies retire and are no longer available. When finally such people are no longer capable of their former activity, they can usefully pass their time in collecting together scattered fragments from their lives and so continue to study or engage in philosophic or religious thought".<sup>22</sup>

### **Ongoing formation, in the local and provincial community**

What we have said about preparing the various ages or periods of life can be reduced to the general principle of ongoing formation.

With the revision of the *Ratio*, this is the central criterion for the whole of formation. Its aim is not so much to mould per-

<sup>22</sup> G.W. Allport, *Psicologia della personalità*, LAS, Roma 1977, p. 252-253

sons exteriorly, but to create in them the dynamic desire for intellectual, spiritual, pastoral and relational growth. It also provides useful guidelines about methods and resources for life. Initial formation is important, but it is only the beginning. If, after that, formation came to a stop it would be of little service for life which goes ahead psychologically and socially as well as professionally and religiously.

We have to keep up a dynamism and continuous desire for growth, as one discovering new panoramas. This ensures a qualification and preparation that can cope with every further development of the person and for all life's stages and circumstances. This is particularly the case as regards the experience of God, the inexhaustible source of truth and wisdom, and meditation on his word.

As we approach the GC25, the accent is on the communities as the primary factors and environments in ongoing formation. They are the organizers of times and work, the expediency and style of meetings; they make use of the various forms of deeper analysis and evaluation: discernment, planning, revision of life. They are the places, especially, where the confreres easily communicate their spiritual experience, where they deepen and broaden their relationships, and share their reflections.

To what the local community does in daily life, which is always enriching and never mere routine, are added opportunities offered by the provincial community. It is fitting that these opportunities be gathered together, made available to all, and combine pastoral and spiritual aspects with those of theology and ascetics.

Nowadays each Province has its own formation commission. Its task is to help the Provincial and his council in plans for assisting growth. But the decisive subject will always be the individual confrere himself, attached to his vocation, attentive to his professional approach, and enthusiastic about his field of apostolate.



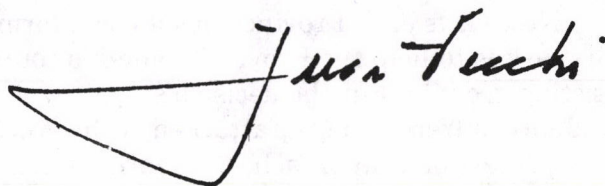
Dear confreres, I have shared with you these reflections on the condition of sickness and/or old age in our communities, and I have done it – as I said – from the particular viewpoint of the present situation in which God has placed me.

In conclusion my thought goes to Mary and her constant presence at every moment and circumstance of our life, as it was with Don Bosco. There are two Marian images, outlined in the Gospel, which seem to me to shed a great deal of light on these conditions of life I have spoken of: that of the Visitation, and that of the Virgin at the foot of the Cross.

In the first of these, as we contemplate Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth, carrying the Lord in her womb and filled by the Spirit, we are aware of her close motherly presence to all who are in need: a closeness which infuses hope and especially one which communicates the gift and strength of the Spirit.

On Calvary, where Mary is standing at the foot of the Cross, we contemplate the Mother who in participating in the pains of her divine Son, shares also in the sufferings of all his spiritual brothers and sisters who in widely differing circumstances are united to the Cross of Christ. From Calvary she teaches us “fidelity at the hour of the Cross”,<sup>23</sup> and points out to us the victory of the Resurrection.

Dear confreres, while I thank you once again for being close to me and for your prayers, I entrust your communities and each of you individually to Mary’s protection, praying that your educative and pastoral work may be fruitful in the perspective of the coming General Chapter which I recommend again to your prayerful and solicitous attention.

A handwritten signature in black 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 triangular shape.

**NOTE CONCERNING THE LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR**

*Dear Confreres,*

In his present state of illness, the Rector Major shows particular concern for other sick confreres. He wrote a letter to them at Easter; he has visited some of the houses where sick confreres reside, and he wanted to visit still others. Now he has decided to speak of his experience in a circular letter, knowing that sooner or later it will be useful for everyone.

You can easily understand that, because of his present condition of health, this letter did not come from Fr Vecchi's hand in its present form. During the time of his illness, his secretary and the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts have gathered together many of his expressions, reflections and comments, and have recorded them. With this material we have put the letter together. The thoughts are those of Fr Vecchi, and some parts he wrote himself when this was still possible. Finally he confirmed the entire letter.

This letter of our sick Rector Major is therefore a reflection made by him at various times from his sick-room and his bed of solitude and suffering. It is precious because it comes from the depth of his soul with the desire to communicate to the confreres the serenity and trust in God that he is living.

Let us continue to pray for him, asking the intercession of Artemide Zatti.

With fraternal greetings,

Luc Van Looy, SDB  
Vicar of the Rector Major