

# acts

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

---

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

---

YEAR LXXXIV  
april-june 2003

N. 381

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Pascual CHAVEZ VILLANUEVA "WHETHER I AM NEAR YOU OR FAR AWAY, I AM ALWAYS THINKING OF YOU"	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Fr Antonio DOMENECH <b>The Organic Provincial Plan</b> 2.2 Fr Giovanni MAZZALI and Fr Francis ALENCHERRY <b>Solidarity and financial assistance at the service of our mission</b>	35 43
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(None in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major 4.2 Chronicle of the General Council 4.3 Chronicle of the General Councillors	49 72 78
5. DOCUMENTS	5.1 Message of the Rector Major to the young people of the Salesian Youth Movement 5.2 Erection of the Province that unites the two current Provinces Venice East and Venice West 5.3 New Provincials 5.4 New Salesian Bishops 5.5 Salesian Personnel at 31 December 2002 5.6 Our dead confreres (2002 2 <sup>nd</sup> list and 2003 1 <sup>st</sup> list)	99 102 105 111 114 116

Editrice S.D.B.  
Edizione extra commerciale  
Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco  
Via della Pisana, 1111  
Casella Postale 18333  
00163 Roma

---

Tip.: Istituto Salesiano Pio XI - Via Umbertide, 11 - 00181 Roma  
Tel. 06.78.27.819 - Fax 06.78.48.333 - E-mail: [tipolito@pcn.net](mailto:tipolito@pcn.net)  
*Finito di stampare: marzo 2003*

**“WHETHER I AM NEAR YOU OR FAR AWAY,  
I AM ALWAYS THINKING OF YOU”**

**1. A hymn of praise – 2. The first months of work in the General Council – 3. The activity of doctrinal guidance – 4. Visits to the Provinces – 4.1 Italy – 4.2 France – 4.3 Poland – 4.4 Argentina – 4.5 Philippines and Thailand – Reasons for the journeys – The visit to the Philippines – The visit to Thailand – 5. Conclusion.**

Rome, 25 March 2003

*Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord*

My dear confreres,

“Whether I am near you or far away, I am always thinking of you”.<sup>1</sup> I begin this letter by making my own these words of our dear Father Don Bosco, primarily because I share with him the same sentiments in your regard, and then because of the particular nature of this letter. As you will see, it is less doctrinal and more familiar. It speaks of the life of the Congregation as I have been finding it in my visits to the Provinces, and offers some reflections prompted by the reality of today’s provocations and challenges.

In this way I want also to respond to a request of the GC25 which, in connection with circular Letters of the Rector Major, said: “To make them better used and appreciated in the various communities it is suggested that they be written in a simple and discursive style and that those with a wealth of content on challenging themes alternate with others more familiar and informal about the life of the Congregation” (GC25, 101). I shall try to be faithful to this request so as to

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Rome Constitutions and Regulations, Eng. Edition. p. 255.

foster the development of the sense of Congregation and stimulate reflection on the charism, two points equally necessary to ensure unity in diversity, one of the most important tasks laid upon me. In this way communications from the Rector Major will be at the service of animation and government, starting from what has been (or is being) done in the Congregation, and from the relevant needs and challenges.

After the Letter on Holiness, which was seen and received as a programme and has prompted in many confreres and communities the determination to work more seriously for our fundamental vocation, we have published the "Project of animation and government of the Rector Major and his Council for the six-year period 2002-2008". All the Councillors are now presenting it in the different Provinces, in an effort to harmonize it with the great basic priorities. The moment has come therefore for me to share with you my impressions and assessment of this first year of my service. On my return from various journeys I have already spoken of this in "Good nights" at the Generalate and in my meeting with the confreres of the UPS Vice-province in the first week of December 2002; but I think it worthwhile to collect them together now in a more systematic form and make them known to all the Congregation.

## 1. A hymn of praise

The first thought I must express is that of **heartfelt gratitude to God** for the growth of the charism of Don Bosco at the service of young people in the most widely varying contexts and conditions. We find ourselves in fact in settings of well-being, affluent society and advanced technology, and at the same time in others of extreme poverty, under-de-

velopment, and backward technology; in contexts of established democracy in which nearly everything is possible in the way of missionary work, and in others where totalitarian regimes make only the bare minimum possible; contexts in which the majority of the population is Christian and Catholic, and others in which Catholics are less than one per cent, but where our educative work is very significant from a cultural standpoint, after the manner of leaven fermenting the country's culture. We have works rich in salesian tradition, and others where one feels a greater distance from the Congregation's origins.

My gratitude extends also to the missionary confreres, those of the early years sent by Don Bosco and their successors through the years, sent by his successors. They have always played an indispensable role, that of implanting the salesian charism, which is essentially educative and pastoral for the benefit of the young, and especially those who are poorest, abandoned and psychosocially at risk. From this standpoint we need to recall that we are the heirs and transmitters of a charism and spirit, of a spirituality and a mission; we are not simply diocesan personnel or social workers, even though we may be heavily committed in the building of the local Church and human advancement. Such a statement does not mean that we Salesians form a closed group – far from it! As religious we are men of the Church. As apostles we are deeply inserted in human history. But our kind of apostolate aims at giving to the Church and to society Don Bosco's specific contribution. Evidence that the charism is being successful is provided by the increasing number of our foundations, where possible, as the result of an internal dynamism that leads to expansion, the increase in quality and quantity of vocations, the development of the Salesian Family, social ecclesial and evangelical relevance, and the life of

holiness that can be detected here and there, thanks be to God. Missionaries and the missionary spirit are therefore two essential elements of the charism that must be fostered in every Province.

I am naturally grateful to all of you, dear confreres, for having given your life to the Lord in the house and school of Don Bosco. The greatest riches of the Congregation do not consist in buildings, great and imposing though they may seem, but in its members. It is important that we involve collaborators in the management of our works, that we promote the growth of the Salesian Family, that we look for people ever more identified with our educative and pastoral method; but nevertheless the most precious thing possessed by the Congregation is the life of each individual confrere, be he engaged in animation or government or working in less obvious services, be he young and full of energy, or elderly and even in poor health. We owe a great debt of gratitude to all our confreres. Without them the Congregation could have many friends of Don Bosco, but not Salesians. This makes us give thought to the fostering of vocations, but also to the following up of every professed member. The confrere is not someone who shares house and work with me, but "one who is part of me", "God's gift to me" (NMI 43), with whom to create communion and community. "God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love" (C 50). In this connection the GC25 and this year's Strenna become an incentive and a programme, and I am sure that the Provinces will make good use of them for the renewal of communities.

This hymn of praise takes my thoughts in particular to our central point of reference, Don Bosco, who is always to be studied and imitated as is suggested to us by art. 21 of our Rule of Life. It is a matter of having a deep knowledge of his life and history, of his apostolic project as it appears from the

Constitutions and the development of the Congregation through the General Chapters, especially those of the last thirty years. It is a question of following the same rhythm of life, sharing the same concerns and choices even though in widely differing circumstances. As I have visited the Provinces I have become aware that those which have made the effort to give effect to the General Chapters and the major proposals of the Rector Major and his Council in the fields of formation, youth pastoral work, the Salesian Family, social communication, the missions and the field of economy, feel themselves more deeply inserted in the movement of the Congregation. One need think only of the efforts of some Provinces to translate the more important documents of the Congregation so as to make them accessible to every confrere. There is, unfortunately, an occasional case of resistance to change, as though it were a matter of free choice, with the risk of leaving individual confreres and even the whole Province in a state of isolation. In this regard I consider that one of the tasks that superiors of juridical circumscriptions (Provinces, Vice-provinces, Delegations) cannot delegate to others is that of guaranteeing our identity and creating a sense of Congregation. I am aware that those nearer the centre have greater possibilities, and even greater means, and that it is often those farthest away who experience the greatest difficulties. For this reason I am very appreciative of what is being done in this matter, and I am grateful for it.

## **2. The first months of work of the General Council**

As I was saying earlier, eleven months have already gone by since I was elected Rector Major. You may like to know what I have done in this period. Let me begin by saying that

in these first months the heaviest work has been at the level of the General Council, as is normal, not least because from the outset I have chosen to work in a more collegial manner. This means that with themes that had not usually been examined or studied closely at Council level – because that was considered the best way at the time – I wanted to have each Councillor much more involved.

- An example of this involvement is provided by the reflection on the relationship of the Rector Major and the General Council with the **UPS**. In this connection we made a preliminary study at both institutional and operational levels. We kept always in mind three leading elements: the identity of the UPS and its specific character; the organic project of our University, with a serious commitment to the finding of personnel for the different faculties; and finally the rebuilding programme, already partly realized, with new residences for the student communities, the new library, the renovation of some other areas, and all to be eventually accomplished with new premises for the Faculty of the Sciences of Social Communication, and the provision of the necessary safety measures.

We have also set in motion an institutional verification of the University, beginning from the Faculty of Christian and Classical Literature, and we have fulfilled one of the guidelines suggested at the last Team Visit to combine the offices of Economist of the Vice-province and Treasurer of the University in the same person. Precisely because the UPS is the University of the Congregation, I take this opportunity to thank the University and the Vice-province for the praiseworthy service they have given through all these years, and similarly I want to thank all the professors who have con-

tributed through their intellectual and professional work to the formation of leaders of Provinces and Dioceses and have given to our University the place it now occupies among Pontifical Institutions. I would like our University to be seen and felt as something that belongs to all of us, and so I ask for great generosity in collaboration for the provision of personnel. Until recent years, Rector Majors knew that such personnel could easily be found in the Italian Provinces, which in this specific area (as in others) were always very generous in their solidarity. But the time has now come in which the pluricultural character of the Congregation and of the University itself, quite apart from the lack of personnel in Italy, compels all of us to share the responsibility for continuing our University with competence and quality. Commitment to its renewal demands also the involvement of the Congregation in showing appreciation for this well-deserving institution of ours by sending confreres from all regions of the Congregation for their qualification there.

- In addition to ordinary administration, special attention has been given in the Council in this period to the **appointment of Provincials**, of whom we have appointed nearly thirty new ones. You know that there are 95 Provincials in the Congregation, and so we have appointed practically a third of them. Perhaps the appointment of so large a number in so brief a space of time is due to some extent to the illness of Fr Vecchi at the end of the preceding year. In fact, the consultation for a new Provincial had already taken place in various Provinces, but the former General Council had thought it well to postpone appointments until there was a new Rector Major, being well aware that this was a very specific task of the Rector Major himself. The appointment of a Provincial creates a very particular relationship between

the Rector Major and the Provincial to whom is entrusted a Province or Vice-province.

- Nevertheless the most demanding – and I would say also the most important – enterprise in this period has been the drawing up of the **Project of animation and government** of the Rector Major and his Council. It needed several months of work: it involved in fact the various Departments within the Generalate, and the Regions and Provinces at the level of the Congregation. It was a very profitable experience. I will not repeat here what I have already written in my presentation of the Project on its publication in AGC 380. Rather I invite you to read it again and acquire a sound knowledge of the Congregation's Project for the present six-year period. It is well – and even necessary! – to know where we are going, with what priorities, with what objectives, with what strategies to be applied and what kind of interventions. I congratulate those Provinces that have already drawn up their own programme in the light of the Documents of the GC25 and our own special Project. I hope that the Provinces that have not yet done so will feel moved to follow their example.

- There have been other themes too that have called for our attention and our time. In addition to what I have already said about the UPS, we have launched a study to assess the situation of **Cremisan**. We have considered its present circumstances and immediate future, leaving to a later and more favourable moment the long-term prospects as Fr Vecchi had seen them. We are all well aware of the precarious nature of the political situation in the Holy Land. Our intention is to strengthen the Formation Community and Study Centre of Cremisan, making it ever more international. Cremisan is a formative proposal for all eight Regions of the Congrega-

tion, as is the Community for Theology Students of “Gerini” in Rome. In a pluricultural and globalized world we recognize the importance attaching to international and intercultural experiences from the time of theological studies. It is our intention to introduce in the coming years the use of English.

- We have concluded and approved the documents on the identity of the **IUS**, Salesian University Institutes, and on the policy of the Congregation in their regard. This brings to an end an unusual period, with a personal delegation depending directly on the Rector Major, which had the purpose of gathering together all the data on our Universities and Institutes of Higher Education; the period proved to be very enriching because it enabled us to acquire a better knowledge of a reality existing in the Congregation, and because an exemplary level was reached of coordination and synergy. A new and more institutional phase is now beginning with the insertion of this sector in the Department of Youth Pastoral Work with a well defined project and programme, for the purpose of better ensuring the conditions that make these works significant and of making greater use of their contribution. The Congregation is not expecting every Province to have its own University, but wants to accept responsibility for these institutions where they exist, clearly establishing their identity and defining the criteria that make them possible. These will provide a frame of reference if there should be the request for the erection of any new University.

- We have also studied and defined our **administrative and financial policy**, since this is an important element not only for the sound functioning of the economy but also for its adaptation to salesian criteria and principles. In addition to the budget for 2003, approved by the Rector Major and his

Council, the final balance for the year 2001 was studied. In this connection many Provinces are following the same procedures at both provincial and local level. Others however have still some way to go to overcome the far from unreal risk of a management that is neither professional nor salesian.

- Along the same lines, though the point more frequently refers to the Missions Department, we have defined the criteria for the **distribution of funds**, keeping in mind that year by year the Congregation distributes, through the Mission Offices, a considerable sum of money to enable the Provinces to continue the work being done in various contexts, especially those in greatest need of support and solidarity. The Provincials have received a communication, to be made known to the confreres, regarding both requests for help and for the providing of financial reports. Greater responsibility in the use of money and in the rendering of accounts is a moral duty we have before our benefactors and the directors of the major Mission Offices – Bonn, Madrid, New Rochelle and Turin – who will thus be in a position to pass on information to the benefactors themselves.

- Moreover we have broached the question of the **verification of the General Chapter**, asked for by the GC25 (n. 136). The Chapter assembly felt the need to review the model used for recent General Chapters from the GC23 to the GC25. These continued to use a model that had proved valid for the extraordinary General Chapters 19, 20, 21 and 22, which had as their objective the redefinition of the identity of the Congregation, which was considered concluded with the approval of the present text of the Constitutions. The Chapters that followed have each had a specific theme on which to reflect. The capitulars felt the need to take as the first point

of reference the Report which is presented to each Chapter on the state of the Congregation, so as to identify the main choices to be made and the areas to be given priority, leaving subsequently to the Rector Major and his Council the task of giving them practical effect in a project of animation and government. The reflection will continue in the General Council, so that the results of the verification and eventual proposals can be communicated to the Provinces; such proposals must clearly be made not later than midway through the six-year period.

- **Other study themes** concerned the main *internet website* of the Congregation, in an effort to make it more complete, interactive and more user-friendly; guides for various projects *called for by the GC25*: the organic provincial project, the personal life-plan and the project of community life; the *Don Bosco International* (DBI), an office founded years ago with the role of presenting the civil countenance of the Congregation before the institutions of the European Community for everything concerning young people, and the *Don Bosco Network*, which is the network of the Mission Offices working under the umbrella of the DBI; attention to the *cultural heritage* of the Congregation, on account of which it may be well to promote coordination between several Departments to ensure the proper care of libraries, museums, archives, works of art, products of social communication; an updating of the *Vademecum of the General Council*, which gathers together whatever is codified in the Constitutions and Regulations regarding the various duties of the Rector Major and the Council, together with items suggested by experience; a survey throughout the Congregation on the desirability of a *common logo*; and finally the theme of the *community of the Generalate*.

As you see, we have dedicated a large part of the Council's work to study. And this is an element that must not be undervalued, primarily because it tells us that the animation and government of the Congregation, of a Province or of a Community, has need of reflection, but also because study is indispensable for determining the policies of government and for defining the criteria of identity and verification. It is by no means a waste of time. Quite the opposite! I think, in fact, that it is a task that produces long-term results because, in addition to kindness and concern for individuals, common projects are the main factors that help to create communion and unity.

### 3. The activity of doctrinal guidance

The second large area of my work during this period has been without any doubt that of **doctrinal guidance** – at a spiritual, community and pastoral level – which must be ever more understood as an element of government and not as simple animation.

With regard to this particular aspect I want to take up again an element on which Fr Juan Vecchi laid great emphasis, as indeed did Fr Egidio Viganò before him. When his letters became available, he used to say explicitly that they had not been written merely for use as spiritual reading, but to be studied so that they became part of salesian culture, not from a purely notional aspect but rather from the standpoint of *Gaudium et Spes*, that is the salesian manner of being, of reacting, of confronting reality, and of mutual relationships.

In this period I have written only one circular letter, the one on Holiness; in addition I wrote the presentation of the document of the GC25; I did the written commentary on the

Strenna and its video presentation; I provided the introduction to the project of animation and government of the Rector Major and his Council, that appeared in the preceding number of the Acts of the General Council. And obviously there have been many other contributions: conferences, greetings, messages, including those for the Salesian Bulletin, for the Salesian Family and for the Salesian Youth Movement, interviews for the press, radio and television, all of which require a lot of time and preparation. I now have a better first-hand knowledge of the rhythm of life and programme of work of Don Bosco and of my predecessors, and the insistence of one of them who used to say that the Rector Major must dedicate a large part of his time to study if he is to offer solid doctrine to others, so that the letters he writes may be enlightening and constructive, and not merely formal statements with little resulting impact.

I see, however, that salesian documents do not always reach all the Provinces (or at least all the communities) in good time, thus creating a rather anomalous situation: what is happening in fact is that while one document has not yet been read, the Rector Major is already writing another. The solution is certainly not to stop writing, because a superior who fulfils this service does not write for his own glory, but to guide and accompany the course of human, ecclesial and salesian life. One could certainly pause and not write, but that will not make history stand still, nor will problems be faced, nor will light be shed on life.

I think that in this connection all of us, beginning from headquarters personnel, are called upon to make a special effort to facilitate immediate access to the various communications. We are trying to put the texts on our web-site so that they can be downloaded directly from the *Internet*. Naturally it is up to the Provinces to see to their distribution, study and

also their verification, in an ongoing effort to make them known and assimilated. In this regard, one good confrere of the Generalate community suggested to me not to write another letter until a verification had been made of the manner in which the letter on holiness had been received and made a programme of life. Even though I eventually decided not to accept the suggestion, the concern of the confrere remains valid.

For the moment I can tell you in advance that it is my intention to direct letters and other important communications during the six-year period to the objectives of the Project of animation and government in the light of the GC25. It will be one way of going more deeply into the Project and of throwing light on its practice.

#### **4. Visits to the Provinces**

So far I have been able to visit only a few of the Provinces. I say "so far", because when I look at the list of my future engagements I find it rather frightening. On the one hand I know that presence in the Provinces becomes a special means of animation, especially when the visits have been well prepared; and on the other I am conscious of the fact that I cannot remain for too long away from the Generalate because there are other responsibilities that need my attention. I place myself at your disposal and ask for your understanding if the Rector Major cannot always visit every Province. It must be said too that the Vicar General plays this role in many cases; and in the Council there is concern that all the Provinces have the possibility of a visit from the various Departmental Councillors as well as the Regionals.

*In Europe* I have visited some of the Italian Provinces: the *Milan Province*, very briefly at the beginning of my mandate,

on the occasion of the feast of Blessed Artemides Zatti at Boretto, for which I shall have to return once more; *Piedmont* and the *Valle d'Aosta*, a Province I visit frequently because it includes the Mother House and the places of our origins; the *Genoa Province*; *Sardinia*; the *Roman Province*, where I have taken part in many events; and that of *Venice*. I have visited *France*, *Spain* (in particular for the conferring of the honorary citizenship of Salamanca where I had studied at the University), *Poland* and *Albania*. In *America* I have been in *Mexico*, *Argentina*, and the Brazilian Province of *Recife*. In *Asia* I have visited the *Philippines* and *Thailand*. I have not yet been in any country of Africa or Oceania.

With regard to these visits I want to share with you some experiences, but also some thoughts that have come to me on coming into contact with some of these Provinces and getting to know them. Obviously I cannot speak individually of each one of them.

#### 4.1 – In Italy

I begin with a reflection on my visit to the Italian Provinces. They have the privilege of having been direct heirs of Don Bosco's charism. And indeed they knew how to fully accept it and pass it on. In brief, I could say that the organization and personal and community life in these Provinces always tries to be faithful to the salesian criteria found in the Constitutions.

When one looks at the Congregation as a whole, present as it is in some 130 countries of the world, when one has the opportunity for example to participate in an experience like that of the GC25 in which its worldwide character is truly displayed, one becomes aware of a basic identity within the cultural diversity of our salesian Congregation. To a great extent this must be attributed primarily to the ability to trans-

mit the charism faithfully, to its implantation and taking root, and to its capacity for spreading in the various countries and contexts in which the Congregation has developed. It must be said that governmental policy has been wise in not concentrating all the Italian Salesians in the same country and in not endlessly multiplying the Italian Provinces, but in fostering the missionary mentality in Italy and so also the worldwide nature of the Congregation.

From this standpoint, the far-sighted action of Don Bosco in 1875 when he sent out the first missionary expedition, appears as dynamic, courageous and well chosen. And this same thrust has continued every year, with sometimes two missionary expeditions in the same year. This missionary mentality can explain not only our worldwide diffusion but also the present configuration of the Congregation with its work spread more or less evenly over all five continents. It is true that nowadays vocations are few in Italy, or at least that they are not as numerous as in the past; it is true also that salesian work in countries of the old Christian tradition of Europe needs reshaping, but it is equally true that the Congregation continues to grow not only in India but in the whole of Asia and in Africa; while in Latin America numbers remain more or less constant.

This presence of the Congregation throughout the world is due especially, even though not exclusively, to the Salesians of Italy. From my first "good night" as Rector Major I have been thanking the Italian Salesians for the faithful and dynamic transmission of our charism. In my closing address to the GC25 I pointed out how this task has now passed on to all Salesians, primarily because the Congregation is no longer or not only Italian but truly worldwide and so the responsibility must now pass to all the Provinces in their various contexts.

The missionary mentality underlying salesian work in

Italy, that continues to be very strong, has played an important role also in the inculturation of the charism. You will find Italian missionaries in some of the most successful inculturation experiences of the Congregation, because they have studied the local applications of anthropology: they have tried to become immersed in the culture of the people, they have learned local languages, written grammars and dictionaries, promoted and followed up local projects and processes. It would be very short-sighted not to recognize what Italian salesian work has given to the Congregation: among other things a very strong Congregational sense and practical examples of inculturation.

But what precisely is meant by saying that the duty of passing on the charism must now pass on to all the Provinces? It means that every Province must develop and foster these same elements, and especially a deep knowledge of Don Bosco. Don Bosco must be known! We cannot live only on well known stories and anecdotes, without ever discovering where the criteria and laws of salesian life are to be found. Don Bosco must be studied! Without any doubt a vital transmission is taking place of the charism, of the spirit, of the spirituality and mission. It is a kind of existential hermeneutics of what it means to be a Salesian at the present day. But this experience must be codified and needs a frame of reference. And in view of this work which is so fundamental, here in Italy there has been a consistent investment of personnel in the field of *history*, as regards both biography and critical historiography, in the field of *pedagogy and the educational sciences*, and in that of *spirituality*. These are three elements essential for a deep knowledge of the charism and for its faithful transmission. And so the passing to all the Provinces of the world of the responsibility for the transmission of the charism cannot remain just an empty slogan; it implies certain consequences. And these

consequences need to be explicitly spelled out, precisely because it must be verified that the Provinces are truly capable of bearing the necessary witness.

There is another very important element: *sanctity*, or *holiness*. If the transmission of the charism is to be done faithfully a witness is needed – that of holiness. I think we are all aware that we belong to a family of saints: confreres, educators, members of the Salesian Family, who have reached a high level of spiritual life. It is wonderful to be able to visit Provinces and discover these models, close to us all in their reality, so that we are able to say: see how well these confreres or these youngsters have succeeded; we are surely called to be like them.

## **4.2 – In France**

Let me say first of all that my primary reason for going to France was to learn a bit of French, not to make a formal visit. As things turned out, however, the main purpose became integrated with a programme of visits to the communities of Alsace, Brittany and Normandy. It was a very pleasant experience, both interesting and enriching.

Three elements impressed me in particular. First among them was the great love for Don Bosco. We know that our Founder went to France to seek funds for the building of the Church of the Sacred Heart, and on this point he was quite clear. But the strange thing was that in addition to collecting the help he needed, he became a magnet for the people of France who fell in love with him, so to speak. If you read some of the documents relating to events of his first visit, and the account of what he said in the churches, you can see how he managed to stir up a great wonder and admiration among the French people.

Secondly, I was struck by the high level of the professional training centres and agricultural schools, some of them with big numbers of boarders. I had not thought to find this kind of work in a country which is one of the most highly developed of Europe. The technical and industrial schools, like their agricultural counterparts, as well as following a typically salesian line, enable us to educate and follow up working-class and rural youngsters, even in rich and well-to-do areas; and this is a matter of no little importance despite the imbalance between the available human resources and the tasks to be realized. I think I came across a great sense of responsibility in the field of the salesian mission.

The third interesting initiative that impressed me was the building at Lyons of a centre of salesian formation for lay people, which is due to be inaugurated within the coming year. It is a sign of that salesian identity which is verified in the mission, of the love of Don Bosco of which I spoke earlier, of the ability to believe in his charism and the obligation of sharing it with others in line with Don Bosco's own practice and in fidelity to the guidelines of recent General Chapters – in particular, in the case of the Lyons initiative, the GC24.

### **4.3 – In Poland**

In Poland I visited all the four Provinces of Cracow, Piła, Warsaw and Breslau. In each Province the visit had been carefully prepared and went very well, despite language difficulties.

- ***Contact with the origins***

First, the *visit to Cracow*. Perhaps the experience that struck me most was the visit to Oświęcim, the first salesian work in Poland and a point from which the salesian charism

spread throughout the country, and even to the remainder of Eastern Europe, so successfully that we now have more than 1,000 Salesians in Poland alone. Oświęcim becomes important because of its very location. It is no more than 5 km. from the concentration camp of Auschwitz, the world's biggest cemetery in the years 40-45! It is stimulating to think that close to that enormous graveyard, the most tragic expression of an anticulture of death, there was a work where life, though no more than a seed, was growing at the same time and giving rise to the development of hope.

It is surprising to see the extent to which vocations flourished in the past and still continue to do so, the deep religious sense of the people, their tenacity in preserving their identity. The Salesians are aware that the entry of Poland into the European Community will bring about together with certain welfare benefits, a significant cultural change; they are ready to face it effectively.

- ***Dynamism of the Salesian Family and of the Salesian Youth Movement***

At *Breslau* the main event was a great and solemn celebration in the renowned Sanctuary of Our Lady of Czestochowa. This is the spiritual heart of Poland, and the place where one can sense its religious depth and intensity. For me personally it was a most moving experience. Nevertheless, from the aspect of animation, the most interesting moment was the meeting with all the Salesian Family, at which were also present some young members of the oratory of Poznan. The latter showed the first part of the film they are making about the five young martyrs of their oratory. It was a pleasure to hear their story, and the way in which they feel identified with the Poznan martyrs. They know themselves to be the true heirs of a spiritual treasure they have a duty to pass

on to others. I do not think it will be any exaggeration to say that, after Valdocco, the most renowned oratory the whole world over is that of Poznan, where sanctity flourished not only through martyrdom but through the quality of salesian life. The beatification of the young martyrs has revealed the personality traits they developed at the oratory; and the youngsters who presented the film were aware of this when they said: "We are the custodians of a treasure we must communicate to the young people of the world". As the youngsters presented their message and witness, I thought to myself: what more can I add? We have heard what is needed for the founding of a salesian oratory: the creation of strong personalities that will remain so in a time of crisis; young people who have truly met Christ, who have learned to be of service to others; young people of great hope who can conquer evil by good. History has proved them right. Hardly three years after their sacrifice Nazism was overthrown, as happened many years later also to the communist ideology; and this means that in those oratorians we have an example of mature youthful sanctity.

• ***A "new" field of the salesian mission***

*At Pila.* We had an amazing celebration with so many participants that the large church could not accommodate all of them, but the event that impressed me most was the meeting I had with the whole educative community of the Aleksandrów Kujawski school, because it showed me the new set-up of the Salesians in Poland with regard to schools, which has proved very successful. The Minister of Culture, in fact, came to thank me in the name of the Polish government for the work the Salesians are doing in Poland for the development of the educational field. Hardly ten years have passed since the confreres returned to school work, and those ten years

have witnessed a deep improvement with regard to the future. This is an important fact, because the young Salesians had no experience in the field of formal education, and have discovered it to be a very promising setting in which a great deal can be done for the young.

• ***Formation houses and Study centres***

The visit to *Warsaw* was concentrated into a day spent at Czerwińsk, with the possibility of meeting the greater part of the confreres, but it also gave me the opportunity of forming a more accurate idea of the Polish houses of formation and of appreciating their work: the novitiates of Kopiec (PLO) and of Czerwińsk, and the study centres of Cracow, Łódź, and Łąd (PLN).

This latter house was celebrating the golden jubilee of salesian work. After the solemn religious and academic celebrations, which coincided with the inauguration of the new scholastic year, I had a meeting with a group of the teachers working in our study centres and in the university world. After noting the number and quality of the services they provided, I was able to see for myself that the Provinces have succeeded in preparing personnel in times which have been very difficult, and now have highly qualified confreres, thus adding to the relevance of our salesian and ecclesial work in the university sector.

#### **4.4 – In Argentina**

My journey to Argentina included visits to the five Provinces in the following order: Buenos Aires, Bahía Blanca, La Plata, Córdoba, Rosario.

There were two reasons that led me to accept the invitation made to me during the GC25, even though I had origi-

nally adopted the criterion to give priority as regards visits to those Provinces that had not been visited by either Fr Vecchi or Fr Viganò (in his second period) precisely on account of their illnesses.

The first reason was the homage that the confreres and members of the Salesian Family of Bahia Blanca wanted to render to Fr Vecchi, to whom they had dedicated a school at Viedma and a museum at Fortin Mercedes, and to Bro. Zatti who had become the titular of another school, also at Viedma.

The second reason was my desire to be close to the confreres of Argentina in the difficult economic situation through which the country is passing.

Without going into details about the visit, I found that the Congregation has a very significant presence in the country, not only because of the number of Provinces, even though some of them are numerically small at present, but especially for a fact recognized by all – civil and ecclesial authorities, entrepreneurs and the intellectual world, local people and outsiders – that is, the ability to have created culture in Patagonia. It is the same judgement I heard years ago from the Jesuits when I made a visit to Punta Arenas. It is difficult for anyone who has not visited Patagonia to form an idea of the contribution made by our confreres in the area of civilization and culture; I felt proud of them!

Also in this part of the world the charism has been faithfully implanted and has flourished. This is evident from the vocational development that has taken place in the past and the Argentine missionaries working in several parts of the world. Remember that it was Argentina that gave to the Congregation the first Rector Major born outside Italy. Moreover it has produced fruits of holiness, which is the real proof of the inculturation of a charism: *the holiness of Laura Vicuña*, the girl from Chile who matured and died in this country and

whose mortal remains are preserved at Bahia Blanca, and also the holiness of *Zefferino Namuncurá*, who constitutes a social and religious phenomenon much greater than we can possibly imagine, as is evident from the wall at Fortin Mercedes covered by messages of gratitude for graces received through his intercession; and evidently the sanctity of *Bro. Artemides Zatti*.

## **4.5 – In the Philippines and Thailand**

### **The reasons for the journey**

The primary reason was linked with the golden jubilee of the beginning of salesian work in the Philippines, which occurred two years ago. Fr Vecchi had accepted an invitation to be present for this important occasion, but his illness ruled out the celebration on the exact dates.

It must also be said that the first two confreres to arrive in the country had come from Mexico many years earlier. They were Fr William Piani, who went there as Apostolic Delegate and subsequently returned to Mexico as Apostolic Nuncio, and Fr Luis Laravoire Morrow, a Mexican priest who had been born in Texas but lived in the city of Puebla (Mexico) and who later became Bishop of the Krishnagar Diocese in India. Officially the Salesians entered the Philippines in 1950. My presence however celebrated the actual 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Don Bosco Technological Centre* at Mandaluyong.

In Thailand, on the other hand, they were celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of salesian work. The first missionaries to arrive there were confreres expelled from China. And this is an interesting fact worthy of more historical reflection: China, providentially, is beginning to appear as the mother-province of various other provinces in Asia, since on

being expelled from China the confreres moved to other countries. The exodus from China has led to the implanting of the charism in other countries, thus developing salesian work in Asia. A historical research project being carried out by a confrere in preparation for the centenary of the salesian presence in China will probably provide further elements on these pages of salesian history. The theme certainly merits serious research.

A final reason, last but not least, for my journey to the Far East was an invitation to preach a retreat to the Provincials and Delegates of the two Asian Regions. This is an invitation I consider very important from the point of view of animation, because of the extended effect such a contribution can have.

## **The visit to the Philippines**

The most important item of the days I spent in the *Manila Province* was certainly the visit I was able to make to nearly all the works. I think I met every confrere, Rectors and communities, formation guides and the young Salesians in formation, the sick and the members of the Salesian Family.

In my opinion the most outstanding of our works in this Province are the *Technological Training Centres* run by the confreres in both town and rural areas, aimed by preference at caring for youngsters who have dropped out from systematic and institutional education. There is a firm commitment to give effect to a decision made in the last Provincial Chapter to strengthen the rural professional formation centres, in view of the fact that the Philippines continues to be fundamentally an agricultural country, with 75% of its young people living outside the towns. I found that we are working consistently for street-children, with three significant foundations. In particular I would point to the work at Tondo, a re-

al slum, one of the poorest and most densely populated parts of Manila where the Salesians are a sign of hope and life. I must confess that I was deeply moved at seeing the determination of these people to live, and their ability to believe in their own future, in the knowledge that they are loved and accompanied by the Salesians and the Salesian Sisters.

In the *Cebu Province* I began my visit at Victorias on the island of Negros, the first salesian house to be established in the Philippines; it is very close to the diocese of which the former Provincial, Fr Patrick Buzon, has recently become Bishop. He was consecrated on 19 February of this year.

In this Province too, our work in favour of street-children and abandoned people is very significant.

Visiting the oratory of Pasil, in one of the poorest parts of Cebu, I noticed how fruitful is the work done by our confreres among the youngsters, and how well developed is the religious sense among the people, even though there is still need for much to be done in the way of social advancement. The work is very similar to that at Tondo. Seeing our confreres working in such places and what they do for young people reminds us of our humble origins and ensures the success which is the fruit of fidelity. I can tell you that being among them made me feel proud to be a Salesian!

### ***Some considerations***

On the one hand, you cannot fail to be impressed by the immense popular religious mentality of the Filipino people; in a certain sense it is an inculturated expression of the faith, which nonetheless still has need of evangelization to bring about a greater unity between faith and life. On the other hand it is striking to find among young people a certain

loss of cultural identity. It seemed to me that among the Filipinos there are rich cultural roots, but at the same time they have been conditioned to a great extent by the model of western life.

The massive presence of youngsters in our works and their openness to suggestions of a religious nature is gratifying from one aspect, but it makes you wonder why vocations are so scarce at present. This year there are only five novices between China and the Philippines: Manila has 1, Cebu 2, and China 2. I think this should make us think very deeply. The first consideration that comes spontaneously to mind is that there is perhaps the lack of a more competent and productive follow-up of the numerous groups of young people that we look after in our environments with a true spirit of sacrifice, or that we are not putting proposals to them in a clear, decisive and convincing manner. What is needed is not only presence among youngsters but also credibility and witness, an educative environment that breathes salesianity, a professional approach to management but even more so to the mystique and spirituality of "Da mihi animas"; in other words communities are needed whose members love the young and are signs of Christ's love for them. A vocation implies a calling, a proposal, but it will be the fruit of an attractive presence that is spiritually intense and apostolically committed. All this comes under the heading of what we would call *high quality youth work*, and is applicable obviously to every Province and every community.

We must not forget that the Philippines and East Timor are the only Catholic countries in the whole of Asia. This is a circumstance that gives to the Filipino Church a great responsibility in history, which must be translated not only, and not even mainly, into an effort to convert to Christianity the other countries of the continent, but rather into being an ex-

ample and model of what it means to be a Catholic country, rich in Christian values.

## **The visit to Thailand**

The first two days in the Thai Province were characterized by the large-scale celebrations for the jubilee of salesian work. They were expertly organized at both a civil and religious level and – without any exaggeration – thousands of young people took part in them. Among the religious events was a Mass on the Feast of St Francis de Sales at which Cardinal Michael Michai Kitbunchu presided, and the leading civil function took place in the huge covered stadium of Bangkok with the participation of more than 8,000 children representing 22 schools in the capital managed by various groups of the Salesian Family: Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (founded by Bishop Peter Carretto), and Daughters of the Queenship of Mary (founded by Fr Carlo Della Torre).

I want to emphasize in a special way this testimony to the collaboration and synergy of the whole Salesian Family, in which an outstanding part is played by Past-pupils, both Catholic and Buddhist with the latter in the majority. The former President of the Past-pupils Association is a Buddhist who was with us throughout the visit. He is a person who knows and loves Don Bosco very much and was a pupil not only in Thailand but also in Australia to which country he emigrated and found the Salesians once again.

In his address of greeting, the Deputy Prime Minister, another past-pupil and Buddhist, gave extraordinary praise to Don Bosco – and his words are the more significant as coming from a non-Catholic – and to the contribution made by the Salesians in a broad sense to the development of Thai society.

But it was the last day of the visit that gave me a more effective and complete picture of the story of the Salesians in Thailand, of their influence in the Church and society, and of their significance. It was a day that began early in the morning and ended late at night at the airport when I left for Rome. We went from one house to another, and I was able to get a better understanding of the stature and relevance of two great men, Bishop Cajetan Pasotti and Bishop Peter Carretto, both of them Salesians with remarkable foresight. Immediately after their arrival by river, they became installed in a village called Bangnökkuek, the present site of the Cathedral, and from there salesian work spread to other towns in the country. In effect however, and many years later, Bishop Carretto saw that the place offered little possibilities for expansion, not least because of the limitations of traveling by river, and decided to transfer the centre of the diocese to Ratburi, where he built a big church dedicated to Don Bosco and a school that today has 10,000 pupils. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that diocesan priests have learned from Bishop Carretto to become involved in the field of education. I must admit in all sincerity that if I had not seen with my own eyes the origins of our salesian work in Thailand, and the evolution that has followed the decision to move to cities like Bangkok, Banpong, Sampram and Hua Hin, I would not have known at sufficient depth our work in a country where we have foundations of great significance in the field of education. This time I was unfortunately unable to visit the confreres who are working so zealously in Cambodia.

### *Some considerations*

In Thailand I was greatly impressed by the social and economic development of a country that hardly thirty years ago

was very poor and has now reached an economic level higher than that of many countries of Latin America. It helps us to understand how economic (and also theological) interests have changed from Latin America to Asia.

The great educative foundations with schools like the *Technological Training Centres*, that I saw in the Philippines, together with two works for the blind, one managed by the FMAs and the other by the SDBs, are of great significance. The percentage of Catholics in the country is quite low: they number hardly 400,000; i.e. 0.5% of the population which is largely Buddhist. But what is of great importance is the way in which Catholics in general and the Salesians in particular are inserted in the fabric of society, especially by means of education.

In these circumstances I think that as Salesians we are facing a great threefold challenge which we must accept: in the first place that of our charismatic identity, which we must foster with an ever greater and deeper knowledge of Don Bosco; the care of those who are poorest, as an element that can make us ever more effective in a Buddhist context; and vocations, on which always depends the vitality and future of the Provinces.

This first experience in the salesian world of the East has led me to an understanding of two points in particular. The first is the growing interest in Asia in economic, social, religious and theological matters; and then secondly the urgent question of the inculturation of our charism, which must be ever stronger and effective; it implies on the one hand a strong cultural identity, and on the other an equally strong salesian identity. It is a process in absolute need of enlightened follow-up. I intend in fact to write a circular letter on this theme.

## 5. Conclusion

I end my letter, hoping that I have satisfied your expectations about what is happening in the Congregation. None of these things should leave us indifferent. The Rector Major has a charismatic and institutional task to fulfil, and it is important that the confreres be informed as to how he is setting about it. The visit to the communities represents an approach to the life of the Congregation, which is always richer than even the best report can convey. The reflections I have made are not meant to be a formal judgement, but are intended as a salesian reading of our present reality, to enlighten and encourage not only individual Provinces but the whole of the Congregation.

As the six-year period proceeds, I hope to present in these familiar letters requested by the GC25, each of the eight Regions, because I think it of great importance that all Salesians should have a broad vision of the Congregation.

It is my earnest hope that this sharing may result in a growth of the sense of Congregation and of the responsibility for it that we all share. These communications help, in fact, to strengthen our affective and effective communion, our charismatic membership and family spirit; this is precisely why I think that this kind of communication should be realized at all levels, including provincial and local.

I began this letter with Don Bosco's words "*Whether I am near you or far away, I am always thinking of you*". I want to end it by assuring you of a constant remembrance in my affections and in the daily Eucharist.

Even as I write, the winds of war are blowing strongly, and I cannot fail to tell you of a message sent to me by the young people of Baghdad, who dream of a world of peace where they too can develop all their potentialities and reach the fullness

of life. During this year we are praying the Rosary for peace in the world: Let us ask of Mary, the Madonna of the Annunciation, the grace of bringing us the good news of peace. This is a gift and task which is a permanent commitment – as the Holy Father told us in his Message for this year's World Day of Peace – for creating the best conditions for growth in communion and fraternity. "Let us make of every family and community a house and school of communion".

*Fascual Cháñez V.*