

# acts

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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anno LXXXIV  
july-september 2003    **N. 382**

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Editrice S.D.B.  
Edizione extra commerciale  
Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco  
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*Finito di stampare: luglio 2003*

## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### **«YOU ARE MY GOD. MY HAPPINESS LIES IN YOU ALONE»**

(Ps 16,2)

1. «I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you » (*Rm* 1,8) - 2. «I have promised God that to my last breath ...» (MB XVIII, 258) - 3. The malaise of consecrated life - 4. Objective excellence of consecrated life - 5. A model in crisis - 6. GC25, an invitation to adopt this line of thought - In conclusion

8 June 2003

*Solemnity of Pentecost*

My dear confreres,

At the beginning of the summer session of the General Council I come back to you once again, following the three-monthly rhythm of the letters I try to send to the whole Congregation. I am doing this on the feast of Pentecost which celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus, gathered with Mary in the Cenacle. According to what we are told in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. *Acts* 2,1-11), this was an event that deeply disturbed the heart of each of them, “rushing upon them like a mighty wind”. The Holy Spirit, who is the power by which God intervenes in history, enveloped them and penetrated them deeply “like fire”. Their fear gave way to courage, their indifference was replaced by compassion, warmth supplanted their inward closure on themselves, and selfishness gave way to love. This is the way in which the Church began its journey through history. It is my hope and prayer that the fire and rushing wind of the Holy Spirit may renew the experience of Pentecost in the Church and in our Congregation, so that we may become ever more convinced, courageous and credible witnesses of Jesus and his Gospel.

My previous letter contained a report on my activities during my first year of service to the whole Congregation; in consequence you now know me a bit better and are aware of what the Rector Major is doing and thinking. Time surely does not stand still; in the last three months I have been very busy: there was the day at Boys Town in Rome, the Retreat at Fatima, the visit to the Portuguese

Province, the journey to the Holy Land, the inter-sessional meeting of the General Council, the visit to Great Britain, the days at Treviglio and Chiari, the visits to the Sicilian Province, to Bilbao and Munich, the day at Bonn and Cologne, the visit to the Verona Province, the meeting of the Union of Superiors General, and the visit to the Adriatic Province.

I can tell you that I have acquired an ever better knowledge of the reality of the Congregation, of its resources and problems, of its challenges and potentialities. And I become more and more aware of the tasks I must fulfil as Rector Major. It is a wonderful mission but a demanding one, and in facing it I feel inadequate with regard to its needs and expectations. It makes me feel the need for your understanding and especially for your prayers that I may become, as I would wish, a Successor of Don Bosco who is fatherly and farseeing, faithful and dynamic.

### **1. "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you" (*Rom 1,8*)**

Before sharing with you some reflections concerning the religious life – in the hope that you may find them spiritually, pastorally and vocationally stimulating – I would like to thank each and everyone of you for the gift of your lives to God in the steps of Don Bosco.

I feel it my obligation to thank you and I do so willingly by means of this letter, just as I do so personally when I meet you on visits to the Provinces and communities. On the one hand every confrere is a treasure for the Congregation; I shall never tire of repeating it and trying to make you feel it. And on the other, the salesian vocation, whether lay or priestly, is an extraordinary gift for each of you. That is my experience and I imagine it is yours as well. I like praying some of the psalms in this light, as for instance Psalm 16 (15), where we read: I say to the Lord: "You are my God. My happiness lies in you alone... The lot marked out for me is my delight: welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me" (vv. 2.6). And



I am not referring to my role as Rector Major, which is a ministry to be carried out only for a certain period, but to the inestimable gift of the vocation as a life-project centred on Jesus who calls us by name, chooses us to be with him and to share his passion for God and men (cf. *Mk* 3,13-15). To have a vocation means that we have discovered that life has meaning: there is a wonderful “dream” to be realised, a mission to be carried out that God has given us, a goal to be reached in the persons who have been entrusted to us. And this fills with strength and joy the whole of a life which becomes one with that of Don Bosco (cf. C 21). This is the salesian vocation.

It is a gift from God, so precious that it must be carefully cultivated and clearly proposed to young people, because we want them to share our happiness. I become ever more convinced that the greatest and most widespread problems among the young are not those that hit the headlines like drugs and alcohol, and not even confusion in the area of sexuality, even though so many young people are unfortunately involved in them – and this is a problem to which we cannot remain indifferent. The real problem is the lack of direction, of horizons, of meaning, of a project of life. This leads them to live at a superficial level, trying out things and experiences but without any element that unifies their life and gives it vitality. I thank you therefore for the response to your vocation, which will always be far richer than even the best biography. How in fact, at the end of life, could one gather into a book or an obituary letter a story of fidelity to God for the young, shot through with joys and sadness, dreams and disappointments, hopes and frustrations, sweat, smiles and tears?

And so, allow me to make Paul’s words my own in thanking God for what you are – consecrated by God for young people, and for what God is for you – the one and only Supreme Being. I too like the Apostle, “thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that

somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine". (*Rom 1,8-12*).

## 2. "I have promised God that to my last breath ..." (MB XVIII, 258)

You may remember that already in my first letter I expressed the desire to make holiness a programme of life, a choice of government, a plan of education. From this standpoint I ventured to say that that first letter was not just one among others but was meant to be a programme for my six years of office.

And when I refer to holiness I am not thinking of it in general terms or as an ideal to be proposed alike to everyone; I am thinking of us Salesians. When I speak of holiness, I have in mind a life of holiness which is specifically ours: *salesian* holiness, lived with our beloved father Don Bosco as its model. I am thinking of the kind of holiness that can only be achieved and lived by those *consecrated by God* in the salesian mission: "We live as disciples of the Lord *by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us* through the gift of his Spirit and sends us out to be apostles of the young" (C 3).

Ours therefore is a *consecrated holiness*, a specific gift we receive from God for the young people to whom we are sent. And all this has its consequences. I would like to dwell with you on this aspect of salesian holiness which I consider very significant, because we Salesians of Don Bosco intend "to carry out the Founder's apostolic plan *in a specific form of religious life*" and because "by carrying out this mission we find *our own way to holiness*" (C 2).

Not infrequently, in visiting the Congregation, I have come across confreres brimful of apostolic energy and courage who are working in amazing works for the benefit of youngsters, but who do not seem motivated and animated by an similar zeal for God. If on the one hand one cannot but admire their dedication, on the other one cannot help wondering what is the real motive force behind

such great activity. We know that the salesian mission and the Congregation, which came into being at its service, were born of God and in God are reborn: the Salesian in fact is sent by God to the young (C 15); the Society to which we belong “came into being not as a merely human venture but by the initiative of God” (C 1); moreover the most characteristic trait of our vocation, the one most dear to us – predilection for the young – is a “special gift of God” (C 14). God is at the origin of our salesian mission; he is its source and foundation, and so he must remain. This objective reality is lived by each confrere and is made clear by the way he lives his life.

This was precisely the personal experience of Don Bosco. A priest and shepherd of the young by vocation, he became for them and with them a solicitous educator; and as the educator and shepherd of the young he founded religious Institutes; “a religious himself, and one who formed consecrated men and later of consecrated women, the youth problem, in fact, seemed to him to be too complex and demanding for one to think it could be solved by the occasional and voluntary involvement of transitory collaborators”.<sup>1</sup> Experience showed that voluntary personnel could not guarantee the stability, continuity and homogeneous nature of the work, especially as the world of youth was becoming ever more complex, and forms of abandonment and poverty ever more widespread and diversified. A natural consequence was a radical rethinking of the problems of the working people, their spiritual and juridical status, and their organization. Don Bosco eventually decided on the form of a religious Society, flanked by other associated forces.<sup>2</sup>

And so, in the awareness that the mission among young people, and especially those who were very poor, abandoned or at risk, required a “vast movement of persons” (C 5), Don Bosco had to look for his best collaborators among his own youngsters, those who shared with him the same spiritual and apostolic experience of Val-

<sup>1</sup> P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I. Roma, LAS, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I. Roma, LAS, 2003, p. 360.

docco and who responded to his invitation to “stay with him” and became the first Salesians. “He began from boys who had no idea of religious life... From being in Don Bosco’s house he gradually inculcated in them the desire to live and work permanently with him in community, leading them eventually to the decision to share his mission and bind themselves to it by religious vows, thus becoming members of a true and proper Society of consecrated persons”.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that, at least for us Salesians, it was the mission that required the creation of a group of consecrated persons: the youngsters led us to God, and this not as a hobby or a pastime but as a goal and motivation. To guarantee his work among young people Don Bosco found that he needed people fully dedicated to God; he needed collaborators totally consecrated to his boys, Don Bosco became a founder. I do not know whether this was a pragmatic choice on the part of our beloved father when he became aware that ordinary collaborators were not enough to ensure the daily effort of apostolic work, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, or rather a logical conclusion from his own experience, stamped with the dream at the age of nine years, which led him to think that God has a “dream” for each one of us, a special calling which results in a consecration by God for a specific mission. In this way, starting from his own spiritual and pastoral experience, Don Bosco became aware of the powerful possibilities of a religious life born for the service of the salesian mission.

### **3. The modern malaise of consecrated life**

It is evident that at the present day there is a certain unease concerning consecrated life, and it is also felt in our own Congregation. Signs of this are the decline in numbers and increasing average age of the confreres, at least in some Regions, as well as the

<sup>3</sup> P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. II. Roma, LAS, 2003, p. 56.

fact of a vocational frailty which is a phenomenon common to all Orders, Congregations and Institutes. This malaise is all the more difficult to understand and accept when we maintain that the Congregation has been faithful to the requests of the Church, to the demands of the world and of culture, and to the ever new needs of the young, and has tried to meet them with fidelity and creativity.

It must be admitted that a certain unease stems naturally from consecrated life at the present day, because its primary task is “the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life”, whereas it has to live nowadays in a world “where it often seems that the signs of God’s presence have been lost from sight” (VC 85). Moreover the experience of God, who exceeds all probability and description, is always something arduous; consequently it can become heroic, even though not impossible, to bear witness to God where his presence is no longer felt or he has been put to silence – something that happens quite frequently. But the malaise from which religious life is suffering at the present day is not born only of external causes, from its natural lack of compatibility with the world,<sup>4</sup> but stems also from within, because among other things it has found itself suddenly deprived of those roles in society which for so long gave it security and social relevance.<sup>5</sup>

The way we speak today of “re-newal”, “re-creation”, “re-foundation” of religious life is neither comfortable nor pleasing, but it compels us to look and see whether the expected renewal launched by Vatican II has remained something merely formal, without having reached the minds and hearts of members at any depth.

It is commonly said that in the days preceding Vatican II it was easy to “identify” religious, their form of life and their place in the Church. Religious life was a form of life characterized by the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obe-

<sup>4</sup> C. J. B. METZ - T. R. PETERS, *Gottespassion. Zur Ordensexistenz heute* (Friburgo-Basilea-Vienna: Herder, 1991) p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. D. O’ MURCHU, *Rehacer la vida religiosa. Una mirada abierta al futuro* (Madrid: Ediciones Claretianas, 2001) p. 14-15.

dience, according to the constitutions of an Institute approved by the Church's authority. Religious lived in religious houses, monasteries or convents, and were distinguished, inside and outside their Institutes, by their habit and customs. Their life-style and the clear visibility of their members provided a real separation from the 'world' and made them different from 'lay' people within the Church itself.

Vatican II brought about a change of radical proportions, which involved all Institutes and modified them so that they could be relocated *within the Church in the world* (GS), with a *new ecclesiology of communion* (LG), according to which all the baptized form a single people of God with a diversity of vocations, roles and charisms.

The truth is that after all the process of renewal, religious life has been transformed to such an extent that nowadays it is difficult to 'identify' it and define its specific place in the Church, something that on the other hand can be done for the laity and secular clergy (bishops, priests and deacons). Clearly the difficulty does not stem from external elements, e.g. from the fact that the habit has been left aside and a secular manner of dress adopted; rather is it the result of an interpretation of the universal call to holiness and of a series of internal and external factors which have destroyed, or at least blurred, the characteristic traits of its true countenance. This explains why there is so much emphasis today on its "objective superiority" (VC 32), its "visibility" (VC 25), and hence its significance, credibility and primary attraction.

We can say therefore that religious life has been placed in crisis, externally by secularization and internally by its lack of identity.

- *External crisis*

The most serious phenomenon of our time is no longer atheism (GS 19),<sup>6</sup> but the *secularization* of society that has reached extre-

<sup>6</sup> PAUL VI, "*Ecclesiam Suam*": AAS (1964), p. 650-651.

me levels and has managed to create a culture of non-believing, a culture without religion, which is in practice atheist. We are living in a culture of indifference and relativism. The existence of God is not denied, but he is given no space for survival; the reasonableness of faith is not denied, but in practice life is lived more or less without it; nowadays lack of faith requires no justification, but faith does; God is no longer a problem, because his presence is no longer evident.<sup>7</sup> Religious practice becomes less visible; the gospel is no longer heard in a society worn down by new messages; if God and the sacred still persist among us, it is because they have been interiorized. The profane has gained ground; it has taken over the social area and is winning control of the private area as well; the individual conscience and personal privacy are fields where God may no longer enter.

This diagnosis may seem exaggerated; I quote in its support a passage written by Fr Viganò in similar terms at the end of 1991; his remarks remain eloquent and valid:

"In the past many social and cultural expressions were permeated by a religious dimension. But now whatever is religious is becoming increasingly more irrelevant in society, a situation which renders more difficult and prolongs the process by which faith matures, both as regards its content and still more as a living practice. (And this is true for both young people in our works and for young Salesians in formation).

To be Christians, i.e. to live out the baptismal option, in a pluralist society become just one way among many others to which every citizen has a right. The result can be the development of a climate of relativism, of the obscuring of traditional ideals, of a loss of the sense of life: many young people seem to be afloat in a ship without a compass. They lose the perspective of what is transcendent, which is the firmament of faith, and cocoon themselves in short answers about the sense of life which are

<sup>7</sup> J. GÓMEZ CAFFARENA, *Raíces culturales de la increencia* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1988).

quite insufficient for meeting the great yearnings of the human heart. Even the responses offered them by science end up meaningless, because they have no connection with the ultimate end of life and the global sense of history”.<sup>8</sup>

This secularization can appear in three ways in consecrated life. It may be manifested as:

- *A loss of transcendence*, which becomes evident when faith is weakened or lost as the horizon of life and vocation, which thus becomes a purely human project; the motivation of living as a person consecrated to God and centred on the mission entrusted by him is made more difficult and may disappear altogether.
- *Anthropocentrism*, which places not God but Man at the centre of life as the ultimate point of reference, so that life is shaped according to the demands and development of the dynamisms of nature, leaving no space for the values of the Kingdom.
- *Social and economic praxis*, which leads to the strong conviction that man develops himself in creative work, in domination of the world and in accompanying others in their personal maturing and social success; the apostolic mission is reduced to social work, or is identified with commitment to change.

In my opinion, great influence has been exerted in this secularized perspective of religious life by a narrow theological reading of the principle of the incarnation, which insists so much on the first term – the “quod non assumptum” of Irenaeus – as to reduce to second place or overlook altogether the innovation that comes to us from God through the incarnation. Blinded by God’s decision to become man, we may forget the fundamental fact that the God-Man never ceased to be God, and consequently it was not man that became divine but God who became man and, though truly man, he remains nevertheless truly God.

<sup>8</sup> E. VIGANÒ, “*There is still good ground where the seed can fall*”: AGC (1991) 339, p. 12-13.



- *Internal crisis*

Naturally the crisis of religious life does not arise either exclusively or prevalently from external factors, though we must admit that the latter have had a powerful conditioning effect; it arises rather from within and appears especially through various symptoms:

- *A weakening of the ecclesial identity of religious life.* We were accustomed to defining religious life as a state of perfection; Vatican II has declared that the vocation to holiness is given to all the baptized. How are we to define the significance and role of religious life within the universal vocation to holiness?

Still more radical is the debilitation of the aspect of the mission. We have grown up in a climate in which it was held that the twofold task of proclaiming the Gospel and the service of charity belonged exclusively to priests and consecrated persons. Vatican II reminded us that the mission is the responsibility of all the baptized, each according to his own vocation; the growth of the laity at every level is a sign that confirms this. What then can be the significance of the presence of religious life?

We have even become aware that not even the charism, with its associated spirituality and mission, can be possessed in an exclusive manner as the Institute's property. It is addressed to all who come in contact with it, and attains its goal when it is lived also by them. What task do consecrated persons have with respect to the charism?

These questions, even when not expressed in explicit terms, weaken the clarity and strength of the understanding of the particular identity and function in the Church.

- *A vision of religious life centred on its function*, i.e. on what it does rather than what it is in itself. Religious life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined and, more importantly, was lived as a means for the mission. The time and duties it required were evangelically significant. But the evolution of our modern society has brought it about that the State or social groups now assume many of the services created and formerly carried out by religious life. Today

in the very works of religious communities, lay people play an ever greater part in the management and responsibility for the direction of such works.

In general the works of religious function well and much better than their public counterparts; but there is also a point that is very disturbing: not only do vocations still fail to appear, but it is becoming clear that while people accept the services we provide, when it comes to motives for living they look for them elsewhere. And then a question begins to be asked with growing intensity: what meaning does our presence have in such a situation?

- The *surmounting of outmoded structures*. Consecrated life has run the risk of enclosing its members in a network of precepts and norms, which have not always helped the members to mature and live in the freedom of the children of God. Moreover the forms of religious life, even after renewal, do not always correspond to the new situations in which we must live our life and mission at the present day: we need think only of the schemes of community life or forms of prayer. On the other hand traditional forms and structures can no longer express the new values, such as personal autonomy and the sense of dialogue and sharing.

There is a feeling that we are well aware of the direction in which we should move, but in practice we have still not found a model of life and activity to facilitate and support such movement. We find ourselves in a very difficult situation: we have abandoned the inadequate and outmoded structures of the past, but we have not yet succeeded in defining new ones.<sup>9</sup> The Superiors General (USG) have expressed this idea in a statement which is rather strong but none the less true; they say that we have a model of religious life that has become exhausted, and can no longer motivate even the members themselves. Fr Mac-cise adds that today we cannot say what tomorrow's model of religious life will be like.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. ANGELO ARRIGHINI, "Carisma e Istituzione. Intervista a Rino Cozza": *Testimoni* 10 (2003) p. 9-11.

These symptoms had already been identified by Fr Viganò<sup>10</sup> and by Fr Vecchi,<sup>11</sup> who had tried to point to a solution through the development of the meaning of the apostolic consecration, of the grace of unity, and of the specific nature of salesian spirituality. Perhaps we are in a better position today to diagnose the deeper causes and so find solutions.

#### 4. Objective excellence of consecrated life

What we have said above, i.e. that consecrated life is passing through a delicate and taxing period, is confirmed by the words of John Paul II, who writes: "The Church has gone through a difficult and trying period. It has been a period full of hopes, new experiments and proposals aimed at giving fresh vigour to the profession of the evangelical counsels. But it has also been a time of tension and struggle, in which well-meaning endeavours have not always met with positive results" (VC 13). These difficulties however cannot obscure "the special value of consecrated life" in the Church; indeed they make more urgent a clarification of its theological identity, not least in comparison with other states of life (cf. VC 31-32).

In this connection, at the recent meeting of the Italian Episcopal Conference held in May on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Mutuae Relationes*, one of the Bishops wrote: "In the light of what has been said, the charism of consecrated life *needs to be better understood and lived with greater theological and pastoral clarity*, with respect to both other vocational expressions in the Church and to the Church's mission in the world. *The interpretation that is most widespread*, even within the Christian community, *evokes a functionalist vision of consecrated life rather than an on-*

<sup>10</sup> E. VIGANÒ, *An invitation to bear greater witness to our "consecration"*, AGC 342; *USG Congress "Consecrated life at the present day"*, AGC 347; *The Synod of Consecrated Life*, AGC 351; *Reading the Founder's charism again at the present day*, AGC 352.

<sup>11</sup> J. VECCHI, *The Father consecrates us and sends us*, AGC 365.

*theological one...* Consecration is not a means for guaranteeing the functionality of services provided by works, but the fundamental content of the mission of the consecrated persons: it is a statement, to men concerned too much about penultimate things, of the primacy of God, the value of ultimate realities, and of the world's forgetfulness of God".<sup>12</sup>

As Fr Tillard remarked, "at the root of all authentic religious life we find as the primary and all-explaining motivation not a "for the purpose of" but a "because of". And the object of this "because of" is none other than Jesus Christ. One does not become a religious "for the purpose of" doing something but "because of" someone, of Jesus Christ and the attraction he exerts".<sup>13</sup> There are no two ways about it. Generally it is taken for granted, but if there is one thing that should not be taken for granted it is precisely this. The real challenge of consecrated life today is that of restoring Christ to religious life and religious life to Christ, without assuming that it has been done already.

I think that the problem began in part when an incomplete understanding of *Lumen Gentium* led to the abolition of the specific identity of religious life, removing or at least lessening the *objective excellence* of the "sequela Christi" that it represents. A rethinking of the theological status of religious life "is one of the greatest challenges that men and women religious have to confront at the present day".<sup>14</sup>

Without prejudice to the personal holiness of so many priests and laity, we must insist that the "sequela Christi" and the "imitatio Christi" find in religious life their most fertile field of growth; it is precisely a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren" (VC 22). "The evangelical counsels, by which Christ

<sup>12</sup> "A 25 anni dalla Promulgazione del Documento *Mutuae Relationes*", p. 4 (cyclo-stiled, with author's emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> J.M.R. TILLARD, *Carisma e sequela* [Bologna: EDB 1987] p. 54

<sup>14</sup> O' MURCHU, *Rehacer la vida religiosa...* p. 67.

invites some people to share his experience as the chaste, poor and obedient One, call for and make manifest in those who accept them an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him... His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority of the consecrated life" (VC 18). "Within this harmonious constellation of gifts, each of the fundamental states of life is entrusted with the task of expressing, in its own way, one or other aspect of the one mystery of Christ. While the *lay life has a particular mission* of ensuring that the Gospel message is proclaimed in the temporal sphere, *in the sphere of ecclesial communion an indispensable ministry is carried out by those in Holy Orders*, and in a special way by Bishops... As a way of showing forth the Church's holiness, *it is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ's own way of life, has an objective superiority*. Precisely for this reason, it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church's purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity. (VC 32)

There is no doubt that the mission of religious life is *to be a sign or a metaphor*:

- *A sign of the living memory of Jesus*, who prolongs his revealing presence through the life of those who bear in their own body the "marks" of the Lord's passion (Gal 6,17). To consecrated life corresponds the living and public expression of the "*conformity of one's whole existence to Christ*" (VC 16), which leads to configuration with the Risen Lord. "This implies a particular communion of love for Christ who has become the centre of their life and the continual source of every initiative" (RdC 22).

Consecrated life, in fact, is in itself "a progressive taking on of the attitude of Christ" (RdC 15; cf. VC 65). "Therefore it is necessary to adhere ever more closely to Christ, the centre of con-

secrated life, and once again take up the path of conversion and renewal which, like the initial experience of the apostles, before and after the resurrection, was a *starting afresh from Christ*. Yes, one must start afresh from Christ" (RdC 21).

- *A sign of the presence and primacy of God* in the world, of the God of Jesus, source of life and humanity, manifested in the folly and weakness of the Cross (cf. 1 Cor 1,22-31), which denounces sin and opens up to the life-giving action of the Spirit in the Resurrection. We need therefore to really give to God the primacy due to him as an absolute value in our personal and community life, both privately and publicly.

To **experience God** is not for us a merely sporadic or secondary task, but our whole *raison d'être* in the Church and our first mission: "It is precisely in the simple day-to-day living that consecrated life progressively matures to become the proclamation of an alternative way of living to that of the world and the dominant culture. Given this style of life and the search for the Absolute, it suggests, as it were, a spiritual therapy for the evils of our time" (RdC 6).

- *A sign of the originality of the Kingdom of God* which is in this world but not of it (cf. Jn 18,36), which takes up human values but transcends and redeems them, introducing into them a true and absolute innovation. "Consecrated life itself, guided by the action of the Holy Spirit, becomes a mission. The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in history for the salvation of all" (RdC 9).

This implies the joyful and radical living of the Beatitudes as a programme of life and a leaven capable of transforming the world. A particular **mission** of consecrated life is, in fact, "to remind the baptized of the fundamental values of the Gospel, by bearing splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes" (VC 33).

- *A sign of ecclesial communion*, lived by those who by profession live to the full the commandment of Jesus in a ***life of communion***, in which it should be evident in some way that, “more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord (cf. *Mt* 18:20)” (VC 42). The specific contribution of consecrated persons, both men and women, to evangelization “is first of all the witness of a life given totally to God and to their brothers and sisters, in imitation of the Saviour” (VC 76; cf. *RdC* 34).

This takes place thanks to the mutual love of those who make up the community, which is part of the divine plan before becoming a human project (cf. *VFC* 7). “The life of communion is the first message of consecrated life, since it is an efficacious *sign* and persuasive *force* which leads to belief in Christ. Thus communion itself is mission, indeed *communion begets communion* and is essentially a *missionary communion*” (*RdC* 33; cf. *ChL* 31-32): “those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him” (*NMI* 40).

“Consecrated life today needs a spiritual rebirth which will help to concretely bring about the spiritual and evangelical meaning of baptismal consecration and of its *new and special consecration*. The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the programme of Families of consecrated life, in such a way that every Institute and community will be a school of true evangelical spirituality” (*RdC* 20; cf. VC 93). Called as we are to be signs of the prophetic originality of the Gospel, which must be a source of enlightenment and a point of reference for everyone who is baptized, we have a great responsibility in the Church: if all are called to holiness we must make of sanctity a style of life, our true “profession”, so as to become a clarion call among Christians. To live as persons consecrated to God is our first apostolic mission.

And this is the more urgently necessary for us as educators of young people, who are in need of and are seeking incentives and

proposals for life, persons who by their own lifestyle can give them motives for life and hope and accompany them in their human and Christian development.

## 5. A model in crisis

With this identity as our starting point, we can better define the roots of the present crisis in religious life, of which the lack of vocations, poor image and weak significance are no more than symptoms.

A reductive – and I would say *liberal* – concept of religious life maintained that its renewal must consist in its adaptation to modern times by incorporating what is best in enlightenment, emancipation and human rights. In this way the person came to take centre stage with his awareness, dignity and personal project. This contributed to a healthy liberation consisting in a richer and more human maturing, more respectful of the person, but it also introduced some negative elements:

- The denial to consecrated life of any particular *mark of distinction*; all signs of belonging to a particular social group, such as the habit, structures, customs, language, and characteristic ways of presentation to the public were being given up; all ways of appearing as different were to be avoided. *Lack of visibility* was considered important, and the treasure was to be kept hidden (cf. *Mt 13,44*).

But if consecrated life itself cannot be a visible sign of something, what meaning can it have? This is why so much is said nowadays of it recovering a place in the world and in the Church by means of its *visibility*, as a means of making perceptible the “characteristic features of Jesus” (VC 1).

- The ardent desire to become *normal*, like the rest of the world, with nothing to distinguish us from others and without having to bear our characteristic trait of being won over by Christ and



being *in love* with him, i.e. committed “to live in imitation of Christ with a passionate love” (RdC 8)

But if consecrated life stands for no *more* than this, if it does not give rise to deeper sentiments and less common resources, why become a religious? If there is nothing extraordinary, or unusual, or a bit of “madness” about the vows, could it not be because we have reduced them to our own terms of measurement. If consecrated life is no more than the normal way of living it means it has lost its prophetic force;<sup>15</sup> if it does a bit of everything but nothing in particular, if it aims at nothing better, neither proclaiming nor denouncing anything at all, what purpose does it serve?

- To this is added the reaffirmation of *professionalization*. First perhaps there was the desire that the grace of profession could substitute for our professional incompetence; We often heard it said that “obedience works miracles”. Nowadays, on the other hand, the necessary professional preparation often becomes a pretext for being unavailable for the mission. We are losing the freshness of evangelical availability, the spontaneity of the apostle, to become simply professional educators. I wonder whether all Salesians would be willing to leave their particular line of work for a service to the Congregation? My experience is that many do this, and willingly; but unfortunately not everyone is willing to do so.

But if consecrated life relies only on professional health workers or educators or professional workers in the field of marginalization, we must admit that a tragic mistake has been made: the means have become the end. *Doing* has taken precedence over *being*; but is it right to give priority to the work of our own hands rather than to God’s will for each of us?

- So came into being a great deal of *individualism*, that made obedience well-nigh impossible. The situation is all the more serious

<sup>15</sup> F. J. MOLONEY, *Disciples and Prophets: A Biblical Model for Religious Life* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980) p. 155-170.

the less one is conscious of it; or when one becomes aware of it one sets out to justify it. In the face of personal rights and projects or the fulfilment of one's personal vocation, there is nothing to be done: these things are never questioned nor even assessed.

But if consecrated life is interpreted from the standpoint of *self fulfilment*, it has wandered from the gospel path. Let us recall those very clear words of Jesus: Whoever would save his life will lose it (cf. *Mk* 8,35; *Jn* 12,25). Self-realization gives central place to one's own self and personal interests. The Gospel, on the contrary, decentralizes ourselves and puts at the centre God and our neighbour. The culture of self-realization distorts *community discernment*; the latter becomes not so much a process of detachment and purification to harmonize one's will with that of God, but rather a strategy for imposing one's own personal decision, often already made. Where therefore is the *sequela Christi*, where is the making of the will of God one's food as Jesus did (*Jn* 4,34)?

Behaviour of this kind leads to a loss of the sense of the *community mission*, because primacy of self rules out the common mission. But if consecrated life leaves space for this individualistic view of vocation and mission, it is headed for self-destruction. The risk is by no means imaginary; it is in fact so real that nowadays it has become a problem for formation and for government.

- The *cutting back of prayer* is another element of this "liberal" model of consecrated life. The practices of piety are reduced "ad usum privatum", they lose their frequency, visibility and obligatory nature; they are performed when there is time and there is nothing more urgent to be done; or when the need is felt because there is something to be asked for. It is true that formerly a certain routine and formality could creep in, and spontaneity and authenticity could be lost; but it is equally true that without a practice of prayer requiring discipline and method, with daily

fideliety and regularity of life, an interior emptiness develops together with a deep fragmentation of the believer.

But it is absurd when consecrated life separates someone from God because he has no time for him. In fact “consecrated persons extend a persuasive invitation to reflect upon the primacy of grace and to respond to it through a generous spiritual commitment” (*RdC* 8; cf. *NMI* 38). How can it be that a Salesian has more important concerns than God? This is the kind of thing that led the Latins to say: *Corruptio optimi pessima*; there is nothing worse than religious with a worldly way of life. Of what use is salt if it becomes tasteless (*Mt* 5.13)?

- The kind of *community* promoted in this model is envisaged as a space of tranquillity, of mutual respect, of personal wellbeing, where one can be comfortable without feeling out of place. For its achievement the value of homogeneous communities is recognized, made up of similar people; and if this is not possible, recourse must be had to pluralism and tolerance as the ideal to be attained. The most important element would be the absence of conflicts and clashes or simply different points of view. And so things go happily along with everyone content since nothing is demanded beyond what everyone is ready to give and by not insisting on gospel requirements. And so the number of cars increases, as also do rooms with television, the financial independence of the confreres, autonomy as regards journeys and holidays, and openness to relations with the opposite sex; poverty becomes lax; the superior is no longer a father and animator but only a facilitator, and the house becomes transformed into a boarding house.

But if consecrated life does not form robust personalities, men of communion who see their brother as “one who is a part of me” (*NMI* 43), it has no reason to exist, because communion, lived and witnessed to, is one of the elements that give it significance and make it enlightening and evangelical. Nowadays in fact “the Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particu-

lar task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence" (VC 51).

- Perhaps the weakest and most painful element of this model is the obstacle it places in the way of *new vocations*. It makes us ponder over the fact that it is precisely the new movements and recently founded institutes that have most success in this field. There is something missing, without any doubt. I wonder whether the explanation lies in the "liberal" model of consecrated life which has grown up here and there with undeniable anti-vocational traits! In fact the groups with more success from a vocational standpoint present three fundamental elements: a robust, visible and shared spirituality; a life of community that is intense, joyful and attractive; and a strong, sure and clear commitment in favour of the poor, leading the members to live *with* them and *like* them.

In my opinion the biggest problem of the "liberal" model is that of attempting to evangelize modern culture, while taking it on board to the detriment of evangelical options and values. In consequence we come under the transforming influence of worldly logic instead of becoming evangelizers of this culture. We should be like salt, which is able to be immersed to the point of being completely dissolved but without ever losing its identity and efficacy so that it can return to its pristine state.

This is the model of consecrated life that is in crisis. We Salesians are right to remain faithful to our vocation and mission: to be signs and bearers of God. Re-founding religious life means nothing else than returning to the essential, the absolute nature of God, the Gospel values, the beatitudes and evangelical counsels, to the strength of community, to being present among young people, as Don Bosco exhorted us in his letter from Rome of May 1884.

## 6. GC25, an invitation to adopt this line of thought

Reading over again the documents of the GC25, I have become aware that the Congregation was trying to respond to these challenges when it addressed the reality of the Salesian Community Today, presenting an overall view of the whole of our consecrated life. The theme was the community, but the contents covered the experience and witness of God, the fraternal community and our presence among the young. In this way mission, fraternity and evangelical life were seen in the perspective of the kind of community the Congregation feels itself called upon to promote, in an effort to bring about a deep renewal.

The community, in fact, was not seen as a kind of social club or working team, even though it be very important – because of the salesian spirit – that there is a cordial and welcoming atmosphere from a human standpoint and a professional efficiency from an educative and pastoral point of view. It was presented primarily as a consecrated community, one of apostles, with a clear charismatic identity and heir to a spiritual patrimony on which it could draw to be able to provide a competent response to the new challenges.

The second section, entitled *Evangelical Witness*, dealt explicitly with this theme, drawing its inspiration from the *Dream of the ten diamonds*, which described the model of the true Salesian. We can declare with Fr Viganò that Don Bosco himself “was all through his life the living incarnation of this symbolic personage”.<sup>16</sup> Seen from the front, the personage portrays salesian life especially in its outward activities (the diamonds on the front of the garment); seen from the rear, it shows salesian life in its interior spirituality (the diamonds on the back). *In front*, if you like, you have the social features, the “da mihi animas” figure; *at the back* the secret of the tenacity and asceticism, the foundation and nervous system, the “cetera tolle”.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> E. VIGANÒ, *The Salesian according to Don Bosco's dream of the ten diamonds*, ACS 300 (1981) p 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ib*, pag. 14.

Applying these fundamental characteristics to the salesian community, the GC25 declares: "Every community is made up of men, living in society, who express the gospel ardour of "da mihi animas cetera tolle" with the optimism of faith, the dynamic creativity of hope and the kindness and total self-giving of charity. This commitment is sustained by a strong and essential spiritual support characterized in particular by the ascetical practice of the evangelical counsels and by a hard-working and temperate life-style" (GC25, 20).

It is clear that the modern cultural environment, marked by secularism, individualism and hedonism, does not encourage esteem for consecrated life, nor anyone taking it on nor its development; and so the challenges to be faced become clearer. But understandable too is the prophetic force religious life can have when lived to the full, as an alternative way of life that reveals new kinds of humanism in line with the Gospel.

"The evangelical counsels should not be considered as a denial of the values inherent in sexuality, in the legitimate desire to possess material goods or to make decisions for oneself. Insofar as these inclinations are based on nature, they are good in themselves. Human beings, however, weakened as they are by original sin, run the risk of acting on them in a way which transgresses the moral norms. The profession of chastity, poverty and obedience is a warning not to underestimate the wound of original sin and, while affirming the value of created goods, it *relativizes* them by pointing to God as the absolute good. Thus, while those who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they propose, so to speak, a spiritual "therapy" for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God. The consecrated life, especially in difficult times, is a blessing for human life and for the life of the Church" (VC 87; cf. GC25, 33)

No wonder therefore that we speak of the *primacy of God*, "who has entered our life, won us over and placed us at the service of his Kingdom, as signs and bearers of his love" (GC25, 22); of the hu-

manizing and prophetic value of the *sequela Christi* as a response to the idolatry of power, possession and pleasure; of the *grace of unity*, “which is a gift of the Holy Spirit and a vital synthesis of union with God and dedication to one’s neighbour, of an interior evangelical life and apostolic activity, of a praying heart and working hands, of personal needs and community commitments. In this way is achieved, in the covenant with God, a harmonious integration of the apostolic mission, the fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels” (GC25, 24).

All this should be applied to the central position of the Word of God in personal and community life, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the quality of prayer-life even to the community becoming a “school of prayer”, in the ‘revision of life’, in spiritual direction, in the personal and community life-plan. Once again, the appeal is addressed to the local community and its fraternal life present in the life of the young.

## In conclusion

I cannot end this letter without mentioning the Virgin Mary, the model of consecration and the following of Christ. If “to look upon the face of Christ, to recognize its mystery amid the daily events and the sufferings of his human life, and then to grasp the divine splendour definitively revealed in the Risen Lord, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, is the task of every follower of Christ” (RMV 9), we Salesians want to make this contemplation of the face of Christ with Mary and as she did. She is the “incomparable model”; “no one has ever devoted himself to the contemplation of the face of Christ as faithfully as Mary” (RMV 10), no one knows Christ better than Mary; no one can introduce us to a profound knowledge of his mystery better than his Mother” (RMV 14).

“Let us then look upon Mary, Mother and Teacher of all. She, the first consecrated person, lived the fullness of charity. Fervent in the Spirit, she served the Lord, joyful in hope, strong in trial,

persevering in prayer, she intercedes for us (cf. *Rom* 12:11-13). She reflects all the aspects of the Gospel; all the charisms of consecrated life are mirrored and renewed in her” (*RdC* 46). I wonder whether it is not precisely here that her beauty, her charm, her originality, her splendour are to be found!

I want to finish with a quotation from *Vita Consecrata*, because it can be an incentive to us to acquire a better knowledge of this important document; and I also strongly urge you to study more deeply the Instruction “Starting again from Christ”.<sup>18</sup>

“Mary’s presence is of fundamental importance both for the spiritual life of each consecrated person and for the solidity, unity and progress of the whole community. Mary in fact is the *sublime example of perfect consecration*, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him. Chosen by the Lord, who wished to accomplish in her the mystery of the Incarnation, she reminds consecrated persons of the *primacy of God’s initiative*. At the same time, having given her assent to the divine Word, made flesh in her, Mary is the *model of then acceptance of grace by human creatures*... Consecrated life looks to her as the sublime model of consecration to the Father, union with the Son and openness to the Spirit, in the knowledge that acceptance of the ‘virginal and humble life’ of Christ also means imitation of Mary’s way of life” (VC 28).

Let us ask her to teach us to be open to the transforming and sanctifying action of the Spirit. Let us entrust to her our salesian vocation so that she may make of us “signs and bearers of God’s love for the young”.

  
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<sup>18</sup> CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ. A renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium*, Rome 2002.