

acts

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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

**«YOU ARE A LETTER FROM CHRIST,
WRITTEN NOT WITH INK,
BUT WITH THE SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD»
(2 Cor 3,3)**

News and reflections on recent journeys

Visit to Albania (IME) – Don Bosco Boys Town, Rome – Retreat at Fatima – Spiritual retreat of the Rector Major and his Council – Visit to the Province of Portugal – Visit to the Holy Land – Intermediate session of the General Council – Encyclical on the Eucharist – Visit to the Province of Great Britain – The work at Treviglio and Chiari (ILE) – Visit to the Sicilian Province – Visit to the Bilbao Province – Visit to the Munich Province – Visit to the Cologne Province – Feast of Mary Help of Christians at Turin – Visit to the Verona Province (IVO) – Six-monthly meeting of the USG – Visit to the Adriatic Province – Conclusion: Don Bosco's birthday.

Rome, 8 September 2003
Feast of the Birth of Our Lady

My dear confreres,

I send to you my affectionate greetings in whatever part of the world you may be working, and especially to those who are isolated or at a greater distance, or in difficult or dangerous situations. We have followed with great concern the course of events in the various countries of Africa: Ivory Coast, the Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Liberia, all of which continue to witness scenes of violence, war and social unrest. Reconciliation and peace are needed, together with stability and calm, as essential conditions for the building of a truly human way of life. If we are horrified by the death of so many innocent people, we are still further moved by the fate of children, adolescents and young men and women who are left without either hope or future. I want you to feel the truth of my words when I tell you that I am close to you in spirit and have the highest regard for your generous dedication; let me encourage you to continue to bear witness to God's love for the young.

In his letter to the community at Corinth, St Paul replied to those who challenged his authority as an apostle and the lawfulness of the gospel he was preaching. The credibility of his actions derived not from the testimony of others nor from esoteric experiences, but from the Spirit who works in men's hearts to change them and make them docile to the word of the gospel. The very existence of the community is his "letter of recommendation". The solid faith and practical charity of the community are his best credentials: "You are my letter". And he immediately makes it more precise: "You are a letter of Christ, written by me not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Cor 3,2-3). If the first metaphor was forceful, the second is quite astonishing: the life-giving presence of the Spirit is at the birth of the community; and the result is the creation of new persons, open and docile to God's saving plan.

I feel sure that our beloved father Don Bosco, proud as he surely is of his sons, of their educational and pastoral activity spread over so many countries in the world, and of their service to poor youngsters through a multiplicity of different works, could say to you – paraphrasing St Paul's words – "You are *my* letter of recommendation. You are a letter of Christ which I have written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God". And for my own part, do I have any better recommendation before God and the world than you yourselves? No, because for me too you are *my letter from Christ*.

My last letter provoked in many confreres, communities and provinces a desire to examine the quality of the consecrated life that we are living, with the aim of being ever more converted to Christ and his Gospel and the determination to live a life still more authentic and meaningful, more prophetic and effective. And so I now come to you again to share with you some more news and reflections on my recent journeys.

My purpose, as you know, is always that of making known and esteemed all that you are and all that you are doing; of col-

lecting together the challenges the salesian mission is facing, offering my own reflections on them and trying always to draw on our rich salesian heritage, so as to respond to them with the mind, spirit and enterprise of Don Bosco.

But this will be the last letter of this kind because, as I have already said, I intend to alternate letters of doctrinal content with the presentation of the eight Regions of the Congregation. Do not be disturbed therefore if I do not speak at length about all the provinces I have visited: it certainly does not indicate any oversight or lack of esteem.

Visit to Albania (IME)

One weekend in early February I visited Albania, where they were celebrating the tenth anniversary of the beginning of salesian work in this part of the Balkans. Initially it had been entrusted by Fr Egidio Viganò to the responsibility of the four Italian provinces IME, IRO, ISI and ISA, but from 1997 it has depended on the Southern Province alone.

On their arrival on 24 September 1992, the first Salesians began two kinds of work: a catechetical sector to help the Churches of the whole country to overcome decades of atheistic propaganda, and a sector for technical training together with an oratory and youth centre to give the youngsters an all-round education with training in trades and preparation for employment, independently of their cultural, religious and social situation.

In 1999, during the war in Kosovo, many refugees sought safety in our refugee camp in Tirana, where they found a welcome and came to know an environment which aroused in them the desire to have a similar work in Kosovo. To this Fr Juan Vecchi gave a positive response and so was launched our work at Pristina, which will see in a few months time the opening of a technical training centre.

From the moment of my arrival at Tirana I was pleasantly surprised at the warmth of the welcome I received from the young people who attend the oratory and the Don Bosco training centre. With the difficult period of the war behind them there are now 500 pupils at the centre which has become the most significant training centre in the country. Our complex activities at Tirana include an expression of youthful entrepreneurial initiative. The *Pony-Express* project provides work for 70 youngsters chosen from orphans from state institutions, street-children and the disabled. In the parish of Mary Help of Christians in the northern part of Tirana, in addition to its usual educational and animating activities the oratory and youth centre works in collaboration with UNICEF for the benefit of gypsy children. In this needy area there is still a great deal to be done to provide a more systematic service.

In the Albanian capital I was able to see for myself the results of our work and its reflection in the great esteem the civil authorities have for us; they were present at the public discussion on: *"The challenges to the education of the young in a globalized world"*, in which I explained the reason for our presence in Albania, that is, the desire of the Congregation and the Salesian Family to work wherever there are young people to be educated. Here is to be found one of the jewels in the crown of VIS, the International Volunteer Service for Development, which is committed to the rebuilding of the country through the Tirana Centre not only with money but also with volunteers who are involved in a very positive experience that creates great enthusiasm.

During the visit an important event took place: the consecration at Scutari of the church dedicated to Don Bosco. It is a beautiful shrine serving all the work, which includes a house of formation for aspirants and novices, the parish with its oratory and youth centre, and especially the characteristic element of the catechetical centre – which at first served the country – and now the diocese. The new church is a sign of gratitude to God for ten

years of salesian work in Albania and an encouragement to the further educational commitment of the Congregation and the Salesian Family in this country. In the present transitional circumstances it is necessary to concentrate all efforts on preparing young Albanians to share the responsibility for change and to bring it about.

It is gratifying also to note the encouragement given by the Salesian Family to the work at both Tirana and Scutari. After ten years we find a flourishing salesian activity in which Don Bosco's family is developing well. Local salesian vocations have begun to appear which will help to consolidate and give growth to this delegation.

A foundation of this kind demonstrates the Congregation's ability to meet new ecclesial and social challenges, its specific contribution through education to a country in process of reconstruction, and innovations in methods of meeting needs; in other words it is a network of collaboration which creates synergy, the involvement of NGOs for funding, the commitment of volunteer movements, an effort to bring about the inculturation of the charism and to foster local vocations. The sight of this work, so recently begun, makes one wonder at salesian charismatic creativity: personnel and resources may be lacking, but never faith and enterprise.

After the visit to Albania, mid-June found me once again in the Southern Province for the celebration of the centenary of the work at *Portici*. As elsewhere, here too I had honorary citizenship conferred on me, which I willingly accepted in the name of the confreres who have worked over the past 100 years for poor and needy youngsters. They are the ones who deserve citizenship; to them is due the gratitude! You may wonder why I should speak of the harmony and appreciation to which salesian work in this town has given rise. It is because all the prominent citizens, with their different shades of political opinion, were so unanimous in

expressing their encouragement that I felt proud to be a Salesian and grateful to the confreres who had worked here. At Portico Don Bosco would have felt well and truly at home!

A very homely event was the meeting with the youngsters of the SYM from all over the province. I am always struck by the openness and sensitivity of young people; what a great deal of good we can do, if we are able to propose to them really high ideals! That was the masterly way in which Don Bosco used to work, and we are called to do the same.

The Don Bosco Boys Town of Rome

The fact that the Generalate is in Rome makes it possible for the Rector Major to be present at frequent meetings, gatherings and celebrations in the Roman province. And although I have made visits to several of our foundations I would like to dwell on that to Don Bosco Boys Town which over the past fifty years has helped young and older boys on the outskirts of Rome and which I visited at the beginning of March when many of the civil authorities were present.

In addition to the involvement of political and social bodies which recognise in Boys Town a very valid work, it is worth noting that today, just as fifty years ago when it was set up at the instigation of the Church and the Congregation to take care of the “shoeshine” boys, one finds that there still exists among the confreres the desire to continue to “dream” with and for young people in difficulty, to whom it offers various kinds of educational programmes: a home for teenage mothers and babies, a training centre for 300 youngsters, the SOS projects “listening to the young”, semi-autonomy, a family approach, involvement in the area and youthful entrepreneurial activity. There is also present an eloquent expression of this social sensitivity which I found quite surprising, that is, the creation of “Operation Argentina” to meet the needs of poor children in that sorely tried country.

I think it unusual to find a social work which lives on the contributions of others being concerned about giving help to those in still greater need. This surely is an example of Christian solidarity!

Boys Town is one of those works which are inherently significant in themselves, on account of their geographic location, those they work for, the variety of the educational opportunities they offer, the identity of their numerous collaborators and at the same time the involvement of political authorities and private institutions, in order to solve a social problem by working together to attain the same goal and offer hope and a future to the young. It should not be overlooked that the Bishop has agreed to the proposal that our church become the first parish church for the young, which gives it less of a territorial aspect and a more pastoral dimension for the service of the young, in line with art. 40 of the Constitutions according to which every salesian house is a "parish that evangelizes" young people. I hope we may deserve to merit this gesture of trust and confidence and provide a model of what a parish for the young could be in the city which is the see of the Vicar of Christ.

Retreat at Fatima

From 16 to 22 March at Fatima I preached a retreat to the SDB and FMA local superiors of the southern provinces of Italy. Though this is not the only example of the two sets of superiors making the spiritual exercises together I want to emphasize its positive aspects. The Salesian Family grows in unity as the result of listening together to God's Word, by shared enlightenment concerning the criteria of salesian life and mission, and of union in prayer. Evidently this is not the only form of doing this, nor will it infallibly achieve its purpose which will depend on the preparation and attitudes of those taking part. But it is certainly a significant sign of communion.

I was able to note the effective preparation of the spiritual experience, which left nothing to chance or improvisation. This is always a great help to ensure that things will turn out well, and that the beauty of the liturgy shines out, not in a formalistic but in a spiritual way that creates an atmosphere that encourages a meeting with God. It is true that in the last analysis everything depends on each individual taking part, but the atmosphere can also be a great help!

I would also like to say a brief word about the place of the retreat: Fatima, next to the Sanctuary and the chapel of the apparitions, with its enormous open space marked by an atmosphere of prayer and recollection; it really is a “sacred” place. I was struck by what has resulted from a simple and humble event with its three young shepherd children at its centre. Today at Fatima you can feel the force of God’s presence. There is no doubt about it: it is the humble that attracts the God of Jesus Christ.

What sets me thinking is the fact that the whole Congregation, which means about 17,000 between confreres and novices, spends a week every year living a powerful experience of the retreat. The same is true of the FMA and nearly every group of the Salesian Family. This is surely the most important official obligation and personal opportunity for spiritual renewal and progress. But it must be said that the personal, communal and institutional benefit depends on the attitude of each individual for acquiring this grace and making progress in the spiritual and pastoral life under the influence of the Holy Spirit, who works wonders in those who are docile to him and let him be their guide.

Art. 91 of the Constitutions, describing the nature and objectives of the monthly day of recollection and the annual retreat, is headed: “*opportune times for renewal*”. The days of recollection and the retreats, together with the frequent effort at vigilance and the use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, are the three basic elements of our penitential pilgrimage. It is a question of a

pedagogy and a discipline – in the best sense of the term, which is that of an ascetical journey to become disciples – which places us at the “school” of Jesus, letting him be the teacher and putting ourselves at his feet to listen to him, as did Mary at Bethany who chose the better part. Let it not happen that we fall into the temptation of Martha, who wanted to teach Jesus what to do, distorting the roles: “Tell my sister...” (cf. Lk 10,38-42). Acceptance and listening are at the service of the realization of the Christian and religious life which – as Karl Rahner says – is a process of ongoing conversion.

Two biblical terms can help us to be more precise about the nature of such a process and consequently live these “opportune times for renewal” with greater awareness.

- In the Old Testament the usual way of speaking of conversion is by use of the verb ‘*shub*’, which means ‘*to return*’, with a clear reference to the original experience of the loving relationship of covenant between Yahweh and Israel. It has an evident personalised connotation: finding the loved one again. The most eloquent text is that of Hosea: “Then she shall say: ‘I will go and *return* to my first husband for it was better with me than now’... Therefore (says Yahweh) I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as in the time when she came out of the land of Egypt” (Hos 2,7.14.15).
- In the New Testament, on the other hand, the term invariably used is ‘*metanoia*’, usually translated as ‘*conversion*’, but which in the context of many texts in which it is found implies rather a ‘mental reversal’, that is a change in the way of seeing, judging and living. It is rather a kind of “fresh assessment” like the so-called ‘conversion of St Paul’ (Acts 9; Gal 1,15; Phil 3,7-14; 1 Tim 1,12-16), in which everything that was formerly considered to be of value is now counted as

loss and something to be despised in the face of the discovery of what is of real value: Christ the Lord.

I do not think that the two terms “return” and “transformation” or “conversion” are mutually exclusive. In fact we who have made an option of faith in Christ and consequently to follow him, that is we who have been ‘converted to him’, are constantly urged to ‘return to him’. To be converted to Christ is therefore to “*start afresh from Christ*”, that is “finding again one’s first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise to the following of him. The primacy of love is his.” (RdC 22).

In the light of these texts it is easier to understand the article of the Constitutions which states that the retreats are “occasions of spiritual renewal”. The expression brings to mind another biblical scene, that of Jesus with the disciples who were returning from their first apostolic experiences, full of enthusiasm about “all they had done and taught”. Jesus responded to their euphoria with the invitation: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile” (Mk 6,30-31). This text forms part of the passage which so well expresses what we call “pastoral charity” (Mk 6,30-44). Indeed how could we succeed in being loving shepherds for those to whom we are sent, without first remaining alone with Jesus? From whom and how could we learn to have compassion for those who go astray, if not from Christ as Don Bosco did? (cf. C 11).

The key to the understanding of the text is provided on the one hand by that “*by yourselves*” and on the other by that “*rest awhile*”. The evangelists, in fact, are unanimous in saying that Jesus used to withdraw to pray. Now this is what Jesus means by ‘resting’, ‘being restored’, an expression with deep anthropological and mystical implications. This is clearly shown by our own human experience which tells us that nothing is so strengthening as entering into deep and intimate communion with God. This was the kind of rest to which Jesus invited his apostles.

Our kind of life, with its multiple activities and few practices of piety in common, runs the risk of making us fall into a frantic activism with its threefold consequences: physical fatigue, mental stress and spiritual superficiality which, far from converting us into “contemplatives in action”, make us at best workaholics or – in the worst cases – mere functionaries rather than missionaries.

The only way to combat such negative consequences of activism and give depth to our life, giving it new meaning and filling it with a dynamism which makes us live not in a *bureaucratic* manner (doing what we are bound to do) but *creatively* (in the image of God our Father and Creator – cf. Jn 5,17-18) and *salvifically* (prolonging the saving activity of the Lord Jesus – cf. Acts 3,1-10), is by becoming first of all “contemplatives in prayer”. An intimate relationship with the Lord will help to remind us that it is he who is the lord of the vineyard and of the harvest, who causes the seed to grow, who charts times and rhythms. Similarly from close union with him we shall learn the secrets of his Kingdom, we shall understand more deeply his plan of salvation and make his pastoral charity our own.

Again according to art. 91 of our Project of Life, days of recollection and retreats offer us three special means for:

- *Listening to God’s Word.* To this art. 87 attributes the ability to be a “source of spiritual life, food for prayer, light to see God’s will in the events of life, and strength to live out our vocation faithfully”, provided that like the Virgin Mary we accept the Word unconditionally, treasure it in our hearts and bring it to fruition.
- *Purifying the heart.* This requires a rectification and maturing of motives and what they imply, in awareness of the value and drawing power inherent nowadays in these implications which give meaning to life; it calls for a purification of feelings, especially if they are disordered by excessive dependence on external expressions of affection, esteem or appreciation, or are caused by resentment, bitterness or frustration.

- *Discerning God's will*. It is this that really matters and on this our happiness ultimately depends. Here too Mary at the Annunciation is our model in searching for God's will in our lives (cf. Lk 1,26-38). Discernment must be more than something just occasional – to which to have recourse in moments of crisis or when an important decision must be made – it must be a permanent attitude of life which leads us to seek always “the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12,2).

The result is twofold and could not be more attractive; in the first place there is an increase in interior unity, precisely at a time when everything seems to foster disintegration and sometimes leads even to pathological situations; and secondly it revives our longing for the Lord who, by delaying his coming, could lead us to abandon our feeling of expectation and try merely to survive. To some extent this is what we are led to by the present age with its proclamation of the “death of utopias”.

The Retreat of the Rector Major and the Council

Because of its connection with the theme I have just been developing, I would like at this point to give my personal testimony to the retreat preached to the General Council in the last week of June by Fr Peter Braido. It was indeed a “spiritual pilgrimage” under the wise guidance of a genuine expert and devotee of Don Bosco, who took us by the hand and led us through the major stages of the interior and exterior life of our beloved Father in a truly heart-warming manner. While reminding us of biographical details the preacher offered us also some criteria for “*Travelling towards the future with Don Bosco, the ‘priest of the young’*”; this in fact was the theme of the retreat.

The starting point was the declaration of the principle that for us Salesians Don Bosco is not only a point of reference but a

life model; this is something that prompts us to get to know and understand him in the totality of his being.

The preacher's perspective, which aimed at helping us to look at Don Bosco in his historical setting, allowed us to gain a better understanding of his personal maturing process, the initiative of God who guided him, and the development of his work. It also offered us a comprehensive vision of the salesian life in its basic components: identity, place in the Church and its social role, the mission among young people and method of education, community of life and activity, style of practice of the evangelical counsels, specific kind of spirituality, the profile of the Salesian to be formed, and the style of animation and government.

By way of a short commentary on the theme, I would like to share with you some points that were offered within the broader reflection and some thoughts they gave rise to in me:

- *Travelling*. For Don Bosco, as indeed for all Salesians, vocation is not something abstract; it means doing something, an experience of life similar to that spoken of in John's gospel: "Come and see" (cf. Jn 1,39). Don Bosco moulded his Salesians by telling stories rather than by formal lectures, and the implication is that the salesian vocation should continue to be understood, presented and lived in the same way. It is an experience with an immediate fascinating effect, one that is convincing and constructive. Maybe this was in Fr Viganò's mind when he wrote that "the birth of the Salesian of the new era began with Don Bosco": he is our "incunabulum", the early work of art from which we began.
- Nowadays, as indeed has always been the case, we need to fulfil our vocational and pastoral work and mould Salesians by "telling stories", with frequent and explicit references to Don Bosco, after the manner of Don Barberis, one of his biographers, who in narrating events of the "old days" of the Valdocco Oratory gave us also the underlying reasons:

these instruct us in matters which are specifically ours, in our methods, in our family spirit, and at the same time they increase our sense of belonging, of membership of the family; they make us protagonists.

- *Towards the future.* It is true that the young are our future, though we must admit that this is not in the sense of a dream or utopia, because they bring with them legacies and experiences. But Don Bosco succeeded in staying young and hence in harmonizing with the future through being always among his boys. The demands of the youngsters, their needs and requirements defined the future for Don Bosco; they still shape and guide the decisions of our Congregation today and must continue to do so.
- *With Don Bosco.* In the Valdocco experience there was clearly a maturing of the mission and hence a transition from the joy of “staying with Don Bosco” to “staying with Don Bosco for the young”; from “staying with Don Bosco for the young in a stable manner” to “staying with Don Bosco for the young in a stable manner with vows”. Remaining with Don Bosco does not exclude *a priori* a study of the times that modelled or conditioned him, but it requires us to live with his commitment, his options, his dedication, his spirit of enterprise and pushing ahead.
- *Priest of the young.* Here “of the young” is to be understood both subjectively and objectively: that is, he is a priest *for* the young, working for them and at their service; and at the same time he is a priest *of* the young, belonging to them and sought out by them. He is completely for the young and always with them. Being with young people and always available for them is a deep mark of our identity as Salesians of Don Bosco. We can never think of ourselves as far from them, detached or indifferent in their regard; remaining close to the young is the first decisive step we all have to take at the present day.

All this makes of Don Bosco a fascinating person, and in our case a father to love, a model to imitate, but also a saint to invoke. In this connection we may do well to recall the letter written by Fr Ricaldone after the canonization of Don Bosco, in which he said: "It would pare down God's intention very much to think that he had sent Don Bosco only for the Salesians or for the Salesian Family. No! God sent him as a gift to the whole Church and to all the world. And we must make him known and promote devotion to him".

At the end of the retreat we were all well satisfied with our experience. If it is important for all Salesians to know Don Bosco and have him as their normative point of reference, this is indispensable for the Rector Major and his Council, called as they are to continue Don Bosco's guidance of the Congregation. We are well aware that the more the time separating us from our Founder increases, the more real is the risk of speaking of Don Bosco only on the basis of well known incidents and anecdotes without any real knowledge of our charism. Hence the need to know him through the medium of reading and study; to love him affectively and effectively as our father and teacher through the spiritual legacy he has left us; to imitate him and try to reproduce him in ourselves, making of the Rule of life our personal life plan. This is what is meant by returning to Don Bosco, to which I have invited the whole Congregation – myself included – from my first "good night", by means of a process of study and love that tries to understand, the better to throw light on our life and present-day challenges. Together with the Gospel, Don Bosco is our criterion of discernment and our goal of identification, and I take this opportunity to encourage you to always keep Don Bosco as your point of reference for the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the provinces.

Visit to the Portuguese Province

Immediately after the retreat at Fatima, I took advantage of the fact that I was already in the country to make a visit of animation to the Portuguese province. In addition to the provincial council and rectors, I was able to meet with the confreres, groups of the Salesian Family, pupils and teachers in our schools, and lay collaborators in the works at Porto, Mogofores, Lisbon, Manique, and Estoril.

If it is true that some of these works are outstanding for the quality of their premises, the level of those for whom they work, and the good name they have in society and before the civil authorities, nonetheless the province has a varied and significant range of works in the fields of marginalization and social advancement.

I will mention three elements that are particularly characteristic of the Portuguese province. A knowledge of its history makes its missionary dimension quite remarkable. We do well to recall that this province, not least for political reasons, was responsible for the beginning and development of salesian work in Goa, East Timor, Macao, Mozambique, Cape Verde and the Azores. It is no longer present in the first three of these places but continues to work in the others.

A second characteristic is the Marian devotion in salesian Portugal, due partly of course to the influence of the Madonna of Fatima as it could not be otherwise, but also to the spreading of devotion to Mary Help of Christians. For us Salesians Marian devotion is a pledge and guarantee of charismatic fidelity.

Finally one can point to the intense religious mentality of the whole country, which provides great possibilities for pastoral and vocational work of high quality among the young. Precisely because secularism is beginning to spread, it is important that the Salesians help young people to face up to it through an education to the faith that leads to contact with Christ and mature options of Christian life. The coming beatification of the Venerable

Alessandrina da Costa must be used as a reason for re-launching salesian youthful holiness; it will be an effective way of giving thanks to God for this gift.

Visit to the Holy Land

At the beginning of April I went to the Holy Land. The occasion was the celebration of the centenary of the Middle East province, founded by Don Rua in 1902, the year in which Don Bosco's first successor erected juridically no fewer than 32 provinces. The celebration had been scheduled for 12 May 2002, but the *intifada* and curfew led to its being twice postponed. Even though the political situation remained the same, and had even got worse with the war in Iraq, I decided to go and be present among the confreres who have lived for so long in this oppressive atmosphere.

The visit had been prepared by the Provincial and his council as a pilgrimage; and so I went to Nazareth, where I celebrated Mass in the Grotto of the Annunciation with the participation of the confreres of the community, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and a small group of Cooperators and past-pupils. It was an occasion for reflecting on our vocation in the light of Mary and of learning from her how to respond positively to God's plan for each one of us. This is possible only to the extent that we develop in ourselves Mary's fundamental attitudes: the continuous seeking for God's will, its welcome acceptance as a plan of life, and docility to the action of the Spirit so that he may guide us.

I also had a meeting with teachers and pupils and a brief celebration with members of the Salesian Family, the educative community and the ecclesiastical and civil authorities. The atmosphere continues to be one of hostility and terrorism, which has deprived the holy places of tourists and pilgrims, bringing the recently developed Palestinian economy to its knees and creating a very oppressive social climate.

The next stop on my visit was at the community of Beitgemal, a beautiful place of great value, set in a Jewish context where our mission is limited to witness and welcoming reception of all comers. There we celebrated the Eucharist in the church of Saint Stephen with the participation also of the communities of the Sisters of Bethlehem and of the Assumption and Saint Bruno, with three priests of the same congregation. These are two contemplative religious communities we have welcomed onto our property to enable them to establish their convent there.

From Beitgemal we went on to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre where we spent a brief period of intense prayer at the site of Calvary and in the Holy Sepulchre itself. Here the power of death and the final triumph of life find their best icon. The sanctuary overflows with the presence of Christ; all of Christ is there, for he has taken on himself all our guilt and our death and he is the firstborn of those who rise from the dead. I cannot conceal the deep emotion I felt, like that of Jesus at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, at feeling the force of death which takes away the sense of life, and at the same time the dynamism of love that overcomes death. Sad it was that time did not allow us to stay longer; I felt the need to do so.

We were then taken to Cremisan to meet the confreres of the studentate, those in formation and their superiors. It was a wonderful moment, as indeed was the family environment I found there.

Finally we went to Bethlehem where we visited the Grotto of the Nativity. Here I was able to pray for a longer period, and I can assure you that I prayed for all of you, having in mind the concerns of all the world, the needs of the Congregation and the Salesian Family, the expectations and needs of the young. The God incarnate, who experienced everything human except sin, is a compassionate priest who intercedes for us before the Father.

At Bethlehem there was a meeting with the young people of the oratory and the technical training centre, and with the community of the House of Bread which is true to its name, for despite the present straitened circumstances with the economy down to zero, it continues to distribute bread every day free of charge.

The culminating point of the visit was the celebration of the centenary on Sunday 6 April. The emphasis was on gratitude to God rather than on festivities, not least because it would not have been right to have the latter in the midst of so much suffering. A large number of priests, Salesians and other religious took part in the Eucharistic celebration. In my opening greeting I said that the visit of the Rector Major was not meant to mark a mere commemoration but was rather intended to signify the renewed commitment of the Congregation for the benefit of the young people of the Holy Land, with whom we want to continue to be fellow pilgrims like those of Emmaus.

At the commemoration that followed in the theatre of the salesian school were present representatives of the civil and ecclesial authorities. It would be worth our while to know something of the history of salesian work in the Holy Land which was presented, because it has been a troubled one usually marked by external conflicts which nevertheless affected us deeply. Equally we should know something of the work done before us by Fr Antonio Belloni, who handed over to Don Bosco in the person of Don Rua his works at Bethlehem, Cremisan e Beitgemal, and his "Work of the Holy Family" foundation. We are heirs of a great man who was known to all, and rightly so, as "*Abulyatama*": the father of orphans.

In my final address at the end of the visit, I gave the confreres the following guidelines for their future work.

- Don Bosco and Fr Belloni were both priests sensitive to the needs of youngsters who were poor and in difficulty. The practice of their ministry had made them priests for the

young and educators of the young to help them to mature and develop in every way, to discover the meaning in life, to be citizens of the world, open to God and their fellow men. You could not ask for a better patrimony than this: young people and education.

- One of Fr Belloni's special characteristics was his gift for inculturation; it led him to learn the language of those for whom he was working, to absorb their culture and make himself one of them. For us Salesians this is a practical demonstration of the preventive system, which insists on the need for the boys not only to be loved but to know and feel that they are loved. Love is expressed in kindness in dealing with others, in approaching them, sharing their interests, thinking like them and conversing with them. Inculturation is therefore an essential part of evangelization and salesian education.
- The secret of the success of the educational and pastoral work of Don Bosco and Fr Belloni is to be found in the fact that their total dedication to the mission among young people resulted naturally in the fostering of vocations. These are the result of several different factors, of which the most decisive is the environment created around the youngsters which is such as to give rise in them the desire to share as consecrated apostles our educative passion for the young. Vocations must therefore be one of our priorities in this part of the world.
- Both Don Bosco and Fr Belloni were aware of the demands inherent in working for the benefit of poor youngsters and adolescents; they were so farseeing and open to civil society that they were able to involve the latter in their works and projects to meet all the needs of their young people. The same road lies open before us too, and should lead us to continue the same commitment, working in greater collaboration.

- Finally, this troubled story – so significant for its location, mission and those to whom the work is directed – has been sealed by a confrere on the way to beatification, the Venerable Brother Simon Srugi, who even in his lifetime had made a great impression on Don Rua. Holiness is one of the signs that the charism has been well and truly established and continues to be the most precious gift we can offer to the young.

Intermediate session of the General Council

In April we had the first intermediate meeting of the General Council of this six-year period. The idea of having every year two intermediate Council sessions is due to Fr Vecchi, who felt the need for greater reflection by the Rector Major and his Council on themes of primary importance for the life of the Congregation. At the same time the intermediate session ensures that there will be a sufficient number of Councillors present at the Generalate to be able to meet requests for authorizations and approvals, which require the presence of at least six Councillors.

Although during the previous six years I had twice taken part in this kind of meeting and had seen its objectives and method of functioning, I have now become more aware of the great value of the idea, because its effect is to give us the opportunity for a period of study to prepare for a subsequent wider reflection at the level of the whole Council. This time in fact we examined several themes.

- *Promotion of the vocation of the Salesian Brother.*

We wanted to study more deeply and make further practical decisions in connection with Fr Vecchi's appeal, following the beatification of Bro. Artemides Zatti, to undertake a new, extraordinary and specific commitment for the vocation of the

Salesian Brother. It was a question of passing from the aspect of celebration that characterized the beatification year to practical consequences with precise proposals and suggestions. I take this opportunity to remind Provincials, Rectors and the confreres in general to study the guidelines of the Councillor for Formation in the Acts of the General Council (cf. AGC 382, pp. 29-43).

– *Manner of carrying out the General Chapter.*

We have begun to study possible ways of conducting the General Chapter, so as to respond to the directive of the GC25 (n.136) which asked the Rector Major and his Council to “carry out an assessment of the celebration of the recent General Chapters with a view to evaluating and proposing a manner of operation that is more streamlined, and aimed at carrying out an examination of the situation of the Congregation and drawing up fundamental guidelines for the policy to be implemented during the following six year period”. We are aware of the need to set up a General Chapter in such a way that instead of devoting itself to the study of a particular theme – as was the case with the GC23, GC24 and GC25 – it will start from the state of the Congregation with its trends, challenges and opportunities, to determine together a common future projection. We have already devoted a great deal of reflection to this and we are reaching a conclusion to be sent to the provinces.

– *Vocational frailty of young confreres.*

We have examined this from three forms it takes: one psychological, in the face of any problem, difficulty or frustration; another moral, which shows up in the difficulty of organizing one’s whole life around great options; and an extreme form, as in the loss of all meaning in life. Although we have already given it some thought, the theme deserves deeper study, keeping in mind that what it entails is greater consistency and tenacity, the result of growing in “humility, determination and strength”.

– *Topics for the coming provincial chapters.*

We have already decided on some themes for the provincial chapters which on the one hand must deal with local problems and on the other need to respond to the requests of the GC25. Among the themes indicated I mention: the drawing up of the Organic Provincial Plan; the updating of the formation section of the provincial directory to bring it into line with the new edition of the *Ratio*, and of the section on poverty and administration; and the matter of promoting the vocation of the Salesian Brother.

– *The “Don Bosco International” (DBI).*

This association is the civil face of the Salesian Congregation; it promotes various kinds of networks of NGOs, like that of the Mission Offices, and of associations for the implementation of the different aspects of the salesian charism. The DBI has been in existence since the previous six-year period with headquarters in Brussels: it needs to function always more efficiently, so that we can be present in an effective way as Salesians in those places where decisions concerning young people and education are taken, and at the same time can access sources of funding for new and urgent works.

– *The Salesian Bulletin.*

The process of renewal needs to continue, as we try to develop all its potential possibilities, and foster further coordination.

– *The Ratisbon Institute of Jerusalem.*

This was originally created to foster dialogue between Christians and Jews, but now the Holy See has transferred this task elsewhere and has offered us the premises for use as a Theological Institute or an important study centre. Acceptance would have considerable advantages as a presence in Jerusalem but would imply certain consequences, such as the future of Cremisan. At the moment we are in the discussion phase in which the Middle East province (through its Provincial and

provincial council) and the community of Cremisan have been involved from the beginning.

All these themes were taken up again at a wider and deeper level during the plenary session of the Council in June and July; and to them others have been added, such as the Strenna for the Salesian Family for the year 2004, the salesian pastoral plan for the same year, the revision of the Statute of the ADMA, an evaluation of the Fusagasugá project, the “logo” of the Salesian Headquarters, and consideration of the accounts for 2003.

Encyclical on the Eucharist

On Holy Thursday of this year the Holy Father, on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of his pontificate, instead of his customary letter to priests, presented the new encyclical “*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*”, a meditation on the Eucharistic mystery which emphasizes the close and inseparable relationship between the Church and the Eucharist.

Some parts of the text are very personal and prompt meditation; there are also references to pastoral situations and theological considerations. But it is mainly a declaration addressed to the Catholic Church, asking that in its consideration of the Eucharist the sense of mystery, the linkage with the cross and with Jesus’ offering of his life, the aspects of respect and solemnity be strengthened. This will lead to the avoidance of inappropriate innovations, ambiguities and exploitations in the celebration.

Some have described the encyclical as a little catechism of the Church’s faith in the Eucharist, but more important perhaps is the reminder of the central position the Eucharist must be given in each one’s personal life of faith, and in the liturgical practice of communities.

For us the document must be a valuable means of renewal for the celebration of the Eucharist and also for our pedagogical

activity, as the Eucharist was for Don Bosco. We are invited to be moved to amazement at the extreme nature of the manifestation of God's love for us (n.11), and this is accompanied by references to those indications that show a loss of appreciation for this Sacrament; they range from the abandoning of Eucharistic adoration to the reduction of its celebration to a mere friendly meal; from carelessness in the celebration to a loss of the sense of mystery. It should never be forgotten that we are called to be "mystagogues", true initiators of the young to a meeting with God.

The encyclical reasserts in the first place that the Eucharist is Christ's gift *par excellence* – he offers himself for us and for our salvation; secondly the Eucharist truly builds the Church, not only because the Church is born of the Eucharist but because it is nourished by it and grows in it; and thirdly, precisely because it is a mystery of communion, the Eucharist is necessarily linked with reconciliation, in the sense (as St Paul says) that nothing can separate us from Jesus – not even death – except sin, which is a negation and breaking of this communion. It will do us a lot of good to study this encyclical and continue the incentive of Fr Vecchi, who had himself written a letter on the Eucharist and had expressed some of these same ideas.

I invite the confreres of our three European Regions to begin a deeper analysis of the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Ecclesia in Europa*", on the communication of the gospel of hope in the continent; it will be the object of our particular attention in the meeting we shall have with the Provincials of these Regions between 1 and 5 December 2004.

Visit to the Province of Great Britain

During the last weekend of April I was in the Province of Great Britain to visit some of the communities, meet the confreres, and take part in two gatherings of the Salesian Family at

Bolton and Chertsey, where I spoke about the vocation of the Salesian at the present day, beginning with the story of my own vocation and my experience in inviting others to become Salesians; I was also able to dwell at some length on the identity of the Salesian Family today, and on its role and mission.

I was struck by the friendly fraternal welcome I received from the confreres and from all the members of the Salesian Family, an expression not only of the well known British courtesy and kindness, but also of love and attachment to Don Bosco. The programme had been carefully prepared by a group made up of various members of the Salesian Family and drew a large crowd everywhere. I am convinced that in the future we must always work more as a network, as Don Bosco's Family, with the full harmony, synergy and fraternal solidarity that I have witnessed here.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that, even though the province has two houses for aging or sick confreres, there is also a good number of young priests on whom it can rely for ever more effective work and more flourishing pastoral results. I would like at this point, in line with what John Paul II has written in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, to express my esteem, gratitude, closeness and encouragement to all young Salesians, priests and brothers; they are a real gift from God, the sign of his love and hope for the future (cf. EIE 36-37), and I urge everyone, as a response to this gift, to stay with the young and be a sign of hope for them.

Treviglio and Chiari (ILE)

At the end of April I visited the two communities of the Milan Province at Treviglio and Chiari. Both had prepared a very concentrated programme. At Treviglio I met the students and teachers of the middle and high schools, the city's mayor, and went to the "Cassa Rurale" Bank, which offered the Rector Major the

finance needed for the drilling of some wells to provide water in Ethiopia; this was followed by a Holy Mass in the Sanctuary of the Weeping Madonna.

At Chiari the day began with a Mass for the school children, after which there was a meeting with the young people and the inauguration of the new premises for the high school and for the oratory and youth centre. I spent the afternoon meeting the Cooperators and Volunteers and in getting to know details of "*Auxilium*", a work with strong social and missionary objectives; I was amazed to see what this work by so many lay and professional people had been able to achieve in hearts and personal lives, quite apart from its social activity; those involved have become true modern Samaritans in providing help for immigrants and the missions. The day closed in the gym with a performance of "The Giant's Garden", which led me to think of the need we have to revive and improve the quality of our education in the performing arts as a typically salesian means of education and evangelization.

We must thank the Lord for the pastoral zeal of the confreres and for all their initiatives in education and social work with such great concern for the poorest people of the local area and of the world.

Visit to the Sicilian Province

During the year I have made two visits to this province. At the beginning of May I was at Caltanissetta, for the golden jubilee there of salesian work. On the same occasion I also had meetings at Zafferana and Palermo, where I met representatives of all the Salesian Family of Sicily. In this way I was able to meet most of the confreres.

Later I returned to the province at the end of August for the meeting of the Salesian Youth Movement, which provided a further opportunity for meeting the confreres.

Between them the two visits enabled me to get to know the situation in the province, and to appreciate how much the confreres are doing in the fields of salesian formation, the school and technical training, parish work, and in problems of marginalization and human development.

Widely known is the commitment by some of our confreres to the defence of children who were being bullied, harassed and abused in the "Santa Chiara" quarter of Palermo; it led to the public denunciation and closing of the Oratory, which was later reopened with greater recognition and appreciation on the part of the civil authorities and society. Visiting Santa Chiara, I said that it is a place where the Salesians must be present with a more constructive kind of work involving the whole of the Salesian Family. It is my hope and prayer that this dream may gradually attain reality for the benefit of all the children, adolescents and young people in an area which is socially deprived, both for the families that already live there and for the growing number of immigrants.

Visit to the Bilbao Province

The 75th anniversary of the house at Pamplona was the reason for a visit during the second week of May to the Bilbao province where I got to know nearly all the houses in Bilbao, Santander, Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos, Vitoria, Urnieta, and Azkoitia. The programme of events included visits to a well planned exhibition of salesian life and interests, several radio and television interviews, meetings with Bishops, civil authorities, confreres and young people, teachers, collaborators, members of the Salesian Family and others interested in our work.

The events that made the greatest impression on me were the meetings with the young, like the one at Deusto where numerous members of the SYM had gathered from all over the province. Their joy, the artistic quality of the performance they

gave of the musical "*Namaskar*", the way they welcomed the message of the Rector Major, their obvious determination to be involved in social work and to live their Christian life in an intense and responsible manner, all remind us of the immense power young people represent for the Church and society, as Don Bosco who always believed in them discovered.

And then there were also the meetings with the Salesian Family, with the communities of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with the committed Cooperators and Past-pupils in their well organized centres, with the flourishing ADMA groups, all united by the Eucharist and devotion to Mary Help of Christians, and very much in harmony with the original foundations of Don Bosco.

I cannot omit a word about one of the most famous Salesians of this province, Fr José Luis Carreño Echandía, the great missionary of India and the Philippines after the example of St Francis Xavier, whose tomb I went to visit, with veneration, admiration and gratitude, in the Missionary House which he himself built at Alzuza. He was a Salesian rich in human qualities, a musician and poet, of sharp and lively intelligence, a dreamer but one who could also make dreams real, with a spirit of enterprise like that of Don Bosco himself, of whom he felt himself a worthy son.

A sign of the esteem of the civil authorities was the awarding of the Gold Medal of Navarre to the Salesians of Pamplona; the same authorities are now preparing to collaborate in the construction of a new technical training centre in recognition of what the Congregation has done in the past and is doing still for the technological development of the Navarre area through the technical training of young people. Perhaps it is worth recalling that this is a province which has done a great deal, as indeed have nearly all the Spanish provinces, to develop such training centres. The relationship with the authorities and their involve-

ment, where possible, is a matter of no little importance, because education is something in which the State too is involved, and we must work with the greatest possible collaboration, while at the same time maintaining the autonomy and freedom proper to the Congregation. This too is an important salesian criterion.

Finally a last memory of these days was the visit to Loyola, to the house and museum of Saint Ignatius, with a pause for prayer in the “chapel of the conversion”. What struck me most was his spiritual experience and what took place in his interior life journey. He returned home with a war wound and with thoughts in his mind of the woman he loved – and he left it in love only with God. What had happened in the meantime? The infinite grace of a meeting with God! Proud of himself as he was, and thinking about conquering the world, he had asked for some books about knightly deeds so as to draw inspiration from the great heroes. Providentially the only books available were a history of the saints and a life of Christ. Even though he found them boring he began to read them. The more he got to know about the great saints, the more he began to wonder: “If St Francis of Assisi was so radical, why could I not be the same? If St Dominic Guzman did such things, why could I not do them?”. The more he read of the life of Jesus, the more he felt deeply moved, wanting to begin a new life, become his disciple, be among his followers. He wanted to do nothing else but God’s will and to seek only his glory. In this way he learned the art of spiritual discernment, the criteria for distinguishing what comes from God and leads us back to him from what, even though it might appear good, does not come from him and lead back to him. Once he was cured he left the house a man completely transformed. What can St Ignatius suggest to us Salesians in our commitment to leading young people to a meeting with God and his Son Jesus? If we want to be fully capable of this task, I think we need to search always for God, and to become expert guides in leading young people to Christ.

Visit to the Munich Province

In mid-May, after the visit to the Bilbao province I was in the province of Munich, where I was able to visit some communities and get to know certain of our works, like the Don Bosco publishing house which is engaged in an interesting series of publications in collaboration with similar enterprises in the North West European Region, and the house of Waldwinkel, a very significant work of high educational quality in collaboration with the State for handicapped children; the variety of opportunities offered make it a work of great value.

The main purpose of my visit was to take part in the meeting of the *Curatorium* of Benediktbeuern and to meet the Salesian Family of the province. At Benediktbeuern I was able to admire the beauty and nobility of the ancient monastery which is a real jewel, but more especially the variety of the departments and formative programmes offered, and in particular the Faculties of Theology and Pedagogy which have made this study centre famous throughout the salesian world. In my address, in addition to expressing my gratitude for the service carried out in the formation of numerous confreres, I urged that Benediktbeuern become a centre of theology for the whole Region. This would be something to pursue when the Congregation, at the present time, is encouraging interprovincial formation communities and study centres, as a service to provinces unable to offer all the phases of formation, in a spirit of shared responsibility and the desire to work together for the same end.

The meeting with the Salesian Family brought together about a thousand persons; it was a real festive occasion, beginning with the Eucharist which was followed by lunch and an enjoyable musical concert in the theatre. We could not fail to thank the Lord for the gift of the Salesian Family which is everywhere growing in numbers and becoming stronger and open to new challenges. And having received this gift, how could we fail to make great efforts to pass it on faithfully?

Visit to the Cologne Province

On 23 April I went to Bonn to take part in the festivities in honour of Fr Karl Oerder, who was celebrating his 75th birthday, 50 years of religious profession and 25 years as Director of the Salesian Missions Office. It is not customary for the Rector Major to participate in personal events of this kind – it would be impossible for him to join every confrere in his particular moments of celebration – but my presence on this occasion served to express the gratitude of all the Congregation for the tireless, generous and effective work carried out as a service to the Congregation for the benefit of the missionaries of Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. The presence of civil and ecclesial authorities, of representatives of important organizations of the German government and Church, and of many confreres and friends, was a clear manifestation of the great esteem for Fr Oerder and appreciation for what he has done over the years. He has made of the Bonn Office a true window on the world through which the German people could observe the Salesian Congregation and vice versa..

At the suggestion of the Provincial I took the opportunity to have a meeting with the Rectors of the province who gave me an account of the situation of their works and communities, and this was followed by a questions and answers session. In a society which is feeling, perhaps for the first time after the second world war, the limitations of its economic and social progress, the process of deep secularization is posing new challenges to evangelization and to our work among the young. At present the two German provinces are working on a plan for unification which will be completed by the year 2005.

The Feast of Mary Help of Christians at Turin

As usual, I went to Turin on 24 May for the celebration of the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. 17 May had already seen the

celebrations for the centenary of the crowning of the image which would have as its culmination the Fourth International Congress on Mary Help of Christians, held in Turin during the first days of August with the presence of more than 800 participants from 30 countries.

Once again I witnessed the love of the city of Turin for Don Bosco's Madonna, fruit of the great devotion which our beloved Father cultivated and spread so zealously. The Basilica was always filled to capacity and the procession, at which Card. Severino Poletto presided with his auxiliary Bishops, saw the Madonna carried through the streets and blessing the families.

An event which took place on the same day in Don Bosco's Rooms was the inauguration of *the new web site of the Salesian Headquarters*, which is a very important way of making contact with all those who are interested in knowing who we are, what we do, where we work, what are our ideas in the fields of education, evangelization, marginalization, culture, missionary activity, communication and formation, together with our methods and objectives and how we are organized. All this is in line with the mind of Don Bosco that it is not enough simply to do good but that it is important the good we do is known. The new site has greater possibilities than its predecessor with a variety of services, research facilities, and especially broader interaction possibilities. The new site is a way of access through which the Salesians want to enter into dialogue with the world, especially the world of youth, and with all who may want to browse our web pages. I hope that this effort to make use of the Internet to renew our commitment on behalf of the young, to their education and evangelization, with the creation of a culture of anticipating their needs, may prove fruitful.

I made another visit to the Province of Piedmont-Valle d'Aosta for the centenary of the birth of St Callistus Caravario at Cuornè, his native town. The coincidence of this celebration

with the Feast of Pentecost gave me an opportunity to point to the efficacious action of the Holy Spirit when he finds a soul so well disposed as was this young Salesian. The civic commemoration amply demonstrated, in addition to the recognition of such a fellow citizen, the great esteem for what the Congregation has done for Cuorgnè through the work we have there. Three days earlier the 130th anniversary of the birth of St Louis Versiglia had been commemorated at Oliva Gessi.

Visit to the Verona Province (IVO)

At the end of May I went to Verona so as to visit the province before its imminent unification with that of Venice. By the time this letter is published the new province of North-East Italy will have begun to exist.

I was there for only one day, but the programme was a very full one. It included a visit to the sick confreres in the house of Negrar, a meeting with 800 pupils and teachers in the "St Zeno" technical training centre with the neighbouring salesian parish of St Dominic Savio, the blessing of the new Chapel of the "St Zeno" Institute, a visit to the Don Bosco Institute where I had a meeting with the pupils of the middle school, an assembly of the confreres and a Mass to commemorate various jubilees.

Sometimes it may be asked whether such brief visits do any real good: I think it is up to you to reply to that one. For my own part I must say that I have found them to be moments of great communion of a loving, spiritual, pastoral and vocational kind, because there is nothing so constructive as personal contact. From the echoes that follow visits of the Rector Major I have come to realize that the confreres, youngsters, collaborators and members of the Salesian Family are motivated as though refilled with salesian spirit; and this is precisely because the Rector Major is the Successor of Don Bosco. I remember how Fr Vecchi, when he was already sick and unable to move about to any great extent, in-

sisted on the need to take part in events of the provinces and the Congregation since, he said, the Rector Major is important not because of what he does, but because of the one he represents.

The Six-monthly Meeting of the USG

From 28 to 31 May the *Salesianum* was the venue for the six-monthly meeting of the Union of Superiors General (USG), with the theme: *The Religious, a man of dialogue at the service of the Church and with the Church*". There were three conferences illustrating the theme, followed by group work, first on a language basis and then by office: Superiors General and their Vicars.

The topic had been chosen in response to an easily observable situation, that is the difficulty of dialogue at all levels: within a religious community and a religious Institute, between consecrated life and the ecclesial community, between the Church and the world.

The theme showed very clearly that dialogue is difficult but urgently needed, precisely in a cultural and ecclesial context like our own. It is something absolutely necessary for the development of the human person who is a relational being, for the life of the community, for the mission which is essentially a matter of communication and witness, and for insertion in the world. It is a taxing process, not least because it implies the ability to change one's own point of view, one's own convictions and ways of working; but it is indispensable if we want to make our witness as Jesus' disciples credible and effective, if we want to be known and recognized because we love each other, because we are one, because we have a single heart and soul.

Starting from the Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964), in which Paul VI said that "dialogue is the new name of charity" and spoke of its four fundamental characteristics: clarity, moderation, confidence and prudence, the speakers showed how dialogue

between cultures, between men and women, between ourselves and the poor, is possible only by listening attentively to each other, trying to see the other in the best possible light, dealing with each other with extraordinary respect, and in general looking at others with the eyes of God.

The degree of health of a local or provincial community is directly proportional to the manner in which the members are able to share with each other their respective points of view and respective spiritual and personal strengths.

Along this line, the first topic of the GC25 aimed at encouraging confreres and communities to foster a deep personal relationship and hence to share their own experiences of life and of God, so as to form a much more solid and robust community. This too is the objective of the local community project which tries to foster communion among confreres through a process of sharing and discernment, beginning from the call of God, going on to a clearer understanding of the situation and challenges with which we live and work, and concluding with the making of the great options and objectives to be achieved. True communion, in fact, is the fruit of love expressed in a common project, against every temptation to individualism and selfishness.

Don Bosco met this need by trying to make of his community a home, inculcating in it a family spirit permeating all relationships. In this way the life of the community came to embrace its joys and hopes, its trials and fears, its internal dynamism and spiritual progress, as well as the burning question of the quality of its educative and pastoral work, its ability to meet challenges, and the involvement and formation of lay collaborators.

Dialogue with the Church, with the Bishops and other religious, though not always easy has nowadays become more indispensable and demanding than ever before, because it means overcoming fears and distrust and facing together the great problems such as evangelization, human advancement, social justice and culture.

There is no doubt that dialogue is a value that must be learned and developed during the years of formation. It is an expression of the spirituality of communion, indispensable for us who are called to be its architects.

Visit to the Adriatic Province

At the end of May I spent a weekend in the Adriatic province. It began with a meeting at Aquila, where on Friday 30, the Mayor conferred honorary citizenship on all the salesian community to mark 70 years of its work and influence on the city and its environs. The following morning there was a meeting with the provincial community, and in the afternoon and evening the Feast of Mary Help of Christians was celebrated with the Salesian Family with a procession and other festivities. We then moved on to Vasto where I was once again given honorary citizenship before inaugurating the new gymnasium, presiding at the Mass of the Ascension, and taking part in the festivities organized by youngsters from the different salesian works of the province.

I found a lively province, full of vitality, where even the elderly confreres seem to maintain the enthusiasm of their early days rooted in the experience of salesian traditions. I noted the presence of a group of young confreres which brought to mind the possibility of a fruitful pastoral work for vocations, especially if the communities continue to be open, welcoming and present among the young, and if the SYM becomes consolidated and is able to bring to maturity plans of life. Let us hope that this will be the case.

Conclusion: Don Bosco's birthday

On 15 and 16 August I was at Colle Don Bosco for the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption, the entrustment of chil-

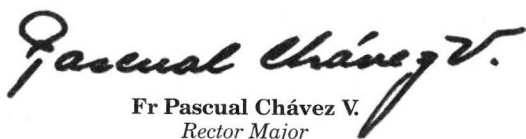
dren to Our Lady – as Mamma Margaret did with her son John – the procession of Our Lady of the Castle at Castelnuovo, and for the 188th anniversary of Don Bosco's birth. It was the first time that this had been given a special celebration but nonetheless there was a significant participation by confreres from the communities of the province, with the presence also of the civil authorities for the birthday of their most celebrated fellow citizen.

There were also groups of young people from Belgium, Slovenia, Croatia and Poland, led by salesian confreres. It is astonishing to see the extent to which Colle is becoming a pilgrimage centre for confreres, youngsters and members of the Salesian Family, who come to see the cradle of the father, teacher and friend of the young: the meadow of the dream which sealed his whole life, entrusting him with a mission, showing him a field of work, giving him a Mistress; the place of our origins and of our spiritual and apostolic communion. It is true that it was at Valdocco that Don Bosco brought to maturity his apostolic project, and it was there that took place the founding of the Salesian Congregation, of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, of the Cooperators and of ADMA; but it is also true that his life, the beginning of every gift, began at the Becchi where he took those first steps that were to mark for ever Don Bosco's life.

The initiative of the Colle community in celebrating the birthday of our Founder was, I think, a well chosen decision and in line with our present project of giving importance to our "salesian holy places". We are still twelve years from the bicentenary of his birth and we want to begin a process of preparation that must be translated into a better knowledge of him and especially into giving practical effect to his charism and mission in today's context, so different in many respects from his own. This was the point of the message of 16 August last. In many parts of the Congregation the month of August is kept, in fact, as Don Bosco's month, and so this reminder is very appropriate.

188 years have now gone by since the birth of Don Bosco, man of God and man of the young. The prodigious expansion of his charism to 126 countries in the world, thanks to a multitude of consecrated men and women who have made his plan of life their own, and to the serried ranks of lay collaborators reaching thousand and thousands of young people, makes it possible for Don Bosco to say with St Paul: *"You are a letter from Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God"* (2 Cor 3,3).

May the Virgin Mary, on the feast of her own birthday, teach us to be open without limit to God's plan, so as to welcome it with joy and generosity, and collaborate with him for the benefit of the young.


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