

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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**“YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES...
EVEN TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH” (Acts 1, 8b)**

Presentation of the Italy–Middle East Region

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Rome, 25 March 2004

Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord

My dear confreres,

I send you as always my affectionate greetings, because you are ever close to my heart. Three months have gone by since my last letter, in which I urged you to contemplate Jesus with the eyes of Don Bosco, and since the publication of the Strenna for 2004 in which I appealed to the whole Salesian Family to “propose wholeheartedly to all young people joy in the call to holiness as the high standard of ordinary Christian living.”

Family News

Recent months have seen some events of great importance for our Congregation. The first was the appointment by the Holy Father of Fr Luc Van Looy as Bishop of the Diocese of Ghent in Belgium. We have seen it as a further expression of the

esteem felt by the Holy See for the Salesian Congregation, but at the same time it has deprived us of the person of Fr Luc who carried the responsibilities of the Rector Major's Vicar General. I want to renew through these pages my personal gratitude, and that of all of you, for the great service he gave to the Congregation, first as a missionary and Provincial Delegate in Korea, then as General Councillor for the Missions, then as General Councillor for Youth Ministry, and finally for eight years as Vicar General.

Following his appointment I consulted the members of the Council to obtain help in the discernment process, after which I appointed Fr Adriano Bregolin as the new Vicar General, and subsequently I went on to appoint Fr Pier Fausto Frisoli as the new Councillor for Italy and the Middle East. To them too go my thanks for accepting these offices, and the expression of my confidence in them for fruitful and effective salesian work. In this way, as the winter session ends, the General Council is once again complete as a sign of unity and full collaboration.

Another important fact which I want you to know about is the agreement concluded between the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Salesian Congregation for the direction of the "Ratisbon Institute" in Jerusalem. The premises of this Institute have housed for many years the "Centre for Jewish and Christian Studies." It has been entrusted to our Congregation for a period of fifty years which can be renewed. From next year it will become the new seat of the studentate of theology now at Cremisan. The proposal was put to us directly by the Holy See, and we have welcomed the possibility to upgrade our formation work for the benefit of student confreres from every salesian region in the world. The language of teaching will gradually pass from Italian to English, and its siting in Jerusalem should foster contact with other Centres of theological and biblical studies, while at the same time the house could become a significant point of reference for initiatives of further formation for confreres of various Provinces, even by means of short courses.

The significance of this letter

With this letter I want to begin the presentation of the eight Regions of the salesian world that I announced some months ago. I intend to continue the practice of alternating these letters on the Regions with others of deeper reflection on our spirituality. In this way you will all be able to have an up-to-date overview of the situation of our Congregation in the different continents and contexts, it will help you to grow in the sense of belonging and will make you ever more grateful for our vocation and share our common responsibility.

The first Region I want to present to you is that of **Italy and the Middle East**. I think it right to begin with this Region which includes the home land of Don Bosco and of the salesian charism. The quotation at the head of this letter is an eloquent one. It is an affirmation in the context of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus, who did not return to the Father without first announcing the coming of the Spirit, a gift which was to be a 'prolongation' of Christ himself, and without giving to his disciples the mission to be his witnesses throughout the world, beginning from Jerusalem and continuing "to the ends of the earth."

In an analogous manner Don Bosco's first disciples received his "spirit" and, prompted by a driving force learned from our beloved founder and father, without feelings of nostalgia and with the same educative ardour and enthusiasm, spread out all over the earth continuing in history his mission for the benefit of the young, especially "the poorest of them, those in need and those at risk." In this way the story of the father continues to live on in the life of his sons in every continent forming a single whole; and at the same time it has provided places and events which have become points of reference and criteria for authenticity. In this way the variety of contexts enriches the charism with ever new forms of expression which find unity in the charismatic identity.

Two important events

As I begin this letter I nevertheless feel obliged to refer to two items which I consider of great significance for all our Salesian Family.

The first is the **pilgrimage of the Relics of St Dominic Savio** through the various parts of Italy. Even as I write, the casket of the young Saint has already passed through the territories of Liguria and Tuscany in a great and deeply felt welcoming atmosphere. In these first stages thousands of people have attended the celebrations or have prayed beside the remains of this young but “great” Saint or, as Pius XII called him, this “little giant of the spirit”. The pilgrimage is now proceeding through the areas of the Marche and Abruzzo. It will then go on to Venice and in the coming weeks will pass through other regions, reaching Rome for Palm Sunday, which for many years now has been a significant focus for committed young people. This event is proving to be a real grace for the whole of Italy and a renewed message of holiness. From the information that reaches me I know that youngsters are impressed and encouraged by the figure of this boy of the Valdocco Oratory who, under Don Bosco’s guidance, while still a youth attained a “high degree of ordinary Christian life”. For many Salesians the celebration of this jubilee is becoming almost a rediscovery of the effectiveness of our system of education and evangelization.

The other important event is the **coming beatification of three members of the Salesian Family** : the Salesian – *Fr August Czartoryski*, the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians – *Sister Eusebia Palomino*, and the Salesian Cooperator – *Alexandrina M. da Costa*. Never before have beatifications put the Salesian Family before the faithful so effectively as to be considered – particularly by us and by all who have some knowledge of the salesian world – as a “Family of holiness.” We shall have a further confirmation of this in the coming autumn with the beatification of *Alberto Marvelli*, a salesian past-pupil. When

I speak to you of these events I am filled with joy and hope, and I would like to think that you all feel the same way.

In my closing address to the GC25, speaking of the beatification of Fr Luigi Variara, Bro. Artemides Zatti and Sister Maria Romero, I said: "These *Beati*, who are joined to the numerous array of holiness in our charismatic Family, are united by the joyful giving of themselves and their generous dedication to the very poor. There is nothing that attracts like the witness of total dedication without reserve, without limit, without condition; there is nothing so fascinating as service to the poorest, to the most humble, to those most in need. The lepers of Fr Variara, the sick of Brother Zatti, the abandoned girls of Sister Romero immediately recall the totally free offering of the lives of these three persons, who are proposed to us as models. Care for the poorest and the total gift of self link together the three new *Beati*, and in this way bear witness to their heroic charity."

These new beatifications, so close in time to the others, keep our attention fixed on the different expressions of salesian holiness. Three more *Beati* are now put before us; we could call them a **trilogy**, because they provide examples for us and for the young of the three fundamental ways of accepting and living the salesian vocation. It is important therefore to recognize the fundamental traits in the features of these persons, so as to see what is peculiar to each and common to all within the one experience of the salesian charism. In preparation for the beatification celebrations due to take place on 25 April, various useful materials are being prepared to give us a better knowledge of the exterior and interior lives of these members of our Family.

These two events taken together allow us to make a first observation regarding the contents of this letter. Holiness is a gift of God which has always been capable of coming to life in generous hearts open to God, like that of Don Bosco, and of shining out. Dominic Savio is the finest fruit of Don Bosco's educational and apostolic activity, but this message of holiness has become ever more insistent to the extent that we can rightly say that to-

day it has spread “even to the ends of the earth.” From the humble household of the Becchi to the City of Turin, from Turin to the whole of Italy, and from Italy to the whole world. One need only think of the album of holy salesian youngsters featured in the Salesian Bulletin Calendar for 2004, the majority of whom were striving to model their lives on that of Dominic Savio.

The second consideration is that every gift of God such as the beatification of members of the Salesian Family, is for us a “new call” to live our own salesian vocation deeply and joyfully. These signs of spiritual fruitfulness encourage us on our spiritual pilgrimage and give further force to our mission. The fact that the three belong to different branches of the Salesian Family, and indeed to those founded directly by Don Bosco himself, and represent the fundamental vocations within the Family, strengthen the conviction that we belong to a “holy Family”, and that in it consecrated and lay persons, men or women, adults or youngsters, can become holy by following the spiritual, educative and pastoral path of Don Bosco.

A mark of gratitude

In the light of what I have said, I want now to present to you the state of the Salesian Congregation in Italy as a token of gratitude to God for having raised up in this part of the world our Father Don Bosco, numerous other Saints of the Salesian Family and hosts of other generous confreres who through their faithful interpretation of the charism have spread salesian work to so many parts of the world.

You will surely recall something I have been saying from the time of my first “Good Night” as Rector Major. On that occasion I said: “I am the first non-Italian Rector Major (Fr. Vecchi was Argentinian but of Italian parentage)... I take this occasion to thank all of Salesian Italy which to the present day has known how to exercise its responsibility to faithfully hand on the

charism of Don Bosco. Thank you my dear Italian Salesians..." (cf. GC25, n. 179).

I think spontaneously at this point of how this miracle of expansion has been realized so rapidly, thanks to the availability of generous Salesians sent out first by Don Bosco and then by his successors as Rector Major. First there was France and Argentina (1875), then Uruguay (1876), Patagonia (1879), Spain (1881), England (1887)... and it has continued at an increasing rate! A succession of impressive foundations! Great faith, great enthusiasm and an extraordinary generosity evidenced by the sequence of ever larger missionary expeditions. By way of example: 72 missionaries went out in 1891 only three years after Don Bosco's death; the number grew to 92 in 1895, 126 in 1898 – from one country to another, from one continent to another.

It is right to recall here that the new foundations were to a very great extent the work of confreres coming from Italy. They were Salesians who had received a robust and genuine formation from Don Bosco himself, or at least from Salesians of the first generation, those who had personally known our Father and Founder. They had received a 100 percent genuine salesian spirit, passed on with great fidelity and, as the years went by, with ever greater attention to the new cultures to which they had gone to plant it.

This is how it has been at the beginning of every great enterprise undertaken by pioneers of the salesian spirit; from Cagliero, Costamagna, Fagnano in Latin America to Fr Branda and then Frs Rinaldi and Ricaldone in Spain, Fr Rabagliati in Colombia, Frs Piperni and Picconi in Mexico, Fr George Tomatis in India, Fr Versiglia in China, Fr Cimatti in Japan and so on. A formidable host of confreres who started up works, but above all who passed on to other young people the salesian vocation in a genuine and living form.

This missionary vocation of Italy and Italian confreres still continues today. Numbers may be different but the high quality

remains. And so, also in recent years, various foundations in Africa and Latin America have been made and are still maintained by a system of twinning, a new form of missionary outreach by the Italian Provinces which have often provided means and personnel to enable Don Bosco's charism to reach young people in foreign lands.

It seems to me that all this has been a real miracle of fruitfulness, but I think it also important to remember that in Italy itself the gift of the salesian vocation has always been cared for with attentive fidelity, providing to all the provinces of the world – to some extent – a significant point of reference regarding commitment and witness. I consider it a duty also to remember all the personnel dependent on the Rector Major, both in past years and at the present day. In this connection I cannot fail to mention the confreres dedicated to research in the fields of history, pedagogy and salesian spirituality, who have given a most valuable service to all the Congregation.

Thank you then, dear confreres of Italy, working in the various provinces and communities of the homeland, or missionaries in the world. Know that the Congregation and the Rector Major himself are grateful to you. The historical responsibility entrusted to you has been faithfully carried out and passed on to all, and we all feel called to incarnate Don Bosco in ourselves, wherever we may be or obedience may call us. (cf. GC25, n. 179).

The situation in Italy

To enable you to have a better idea of salesian work in Italy I think it best to give, especially to those who live a long way away from Italy and Europe, a brief overview of the general situation in the country. Today Italy has just under 60 million inhabitants. The birth rate, especially in northern parts of the country, is very low. Families choosing to have only one or two children are becoming ever more numerous, and in consequence

there is a widespread increase in the average age of the population. The 'work force' has fallen in numbers, especially in the more simple and humble categories, and – what is more – the prospect of a more decent life has attracted many immigrants from other countries, especially from the Maghreb and Balkan areas, from Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, from the Middle East, the Philippines and Latin America. This large scale immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, and brings with it today the need for a process of adaptation and integration which is making only slow progress.

From an economic standpoint Italy is one of the more developed nations, but within the country itself there is disparity of various kinds between the strongly industrialized and socially organized north and the south with its high rates of unemployment and notable social problems. The result is that while absorbing thousands of immigrants from abroad, modern Italy still has the problem of its citizens emigrating internally or to other countries to find employment. For these and other reasons the political panorama is frequently disturbed by excessive conflict between political parties and between the industrial sector and trade unions.

On the religious level Italy is a traditionally Catholic country but, like everywhere else in western Europe, it has been assailed by a strong movement of secularization, and in any case the religious aspect is often lived in a rather superficial manner without any strong involvement at the level of Christian commitment. Some rather disturbing signs are appearing, such as the increase in civil marriages, a falling off in priestly and religious vocations, reduced participation in the church community, and the alienation of young people.

But despite all this, there is still in Italy "a hard core" a proportion of the population which lives the religious dimension in an intense manner and assiduously cultivates deep Christian values. One may note the very many groups of volunteer workers in the social, civil and religious fields, who demonstrate a

thousand and one different forms of solidarity. Worth mentioning also is the typically Christian sensitivity of so many individuals and families who contribute generously in various ways to the support of church institutions, missionary works, and welfare projects for the poor.

The situation in the Middle East

In the Middle East the situation is much more complex. We are all well aware of the sad realities of the present conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. To this must be added the state of war, still not resolved by peace treaties, between Israel and some Arab countries. The recent war against Iraq has further exacerbated relationships with the western world. The lack of a settlement in some difficulties linked with ethnic minorities, like the Kurds, poses further obstacles to these peoples living peacefully together.

From the economic aspect, the unstable political situation and the continual threat of war make real development of local economies impossible. The great source of riches provided by oil reserves is controlled by governments which, however, are unable to use them in any meaningful way to improve the social and economic condition of the people. There is a clamorous situation of poverty among Arab peoples. The young are clearly often discouraged by the lack of effective future prospects.

From a religious point of view, Christians represent a small minority of the population, and are themselves divided among various rites: Latin, Byzantine, Chaldean and Coptic. Christian communities, especially in Syria, live their faith as a group with intensity, and they manage to give rise to significant results in terms of vocations. The strong Islamic presence, which often dominates legislation and social behaviour, makes life difficult for Christians. In some countries there is neither respect nor tolerance for non-Muslims.

The Region from a salesian standpoint

The Region at present includes nine Provinces in Italy and one in the Middle East.

1. *Personnel*

There are now some 2,800 confreres in Italy, and a further 118 in the Middle East. The average age in the provinces is notably high, lying between 59 and 65 years of age. The number of novices has continued to fall; their average number has gone down from 30 to 20 (242 in the last seven years), with a bigger diminution this year (19 novices). However, there is a good level of perseverance, even in the period of temporary vows.

A notable factor in the decrease in overall numbers of confreres is the number of deaths; (in the six-year period 1998–2003 there were 488 in the Italian Provinces and 10 in the Middle East). In the last six years too, some 50 confreres have left for the missions, and it is evident that the present number of newly professed cannot compensate for such objective losses.

2. *Salesian foundations*

As far as the opening and closing of houses is concerned, there have been instances of both in the Region. From 1998 to 2003 there were 11 openings and 32 closures. Recent years have seen an upsurge in closures, due in part to procedures of closure begun earlier, not only through lack of personnel but as part of decisions for reshaping.

3. *Nature of our works*

The number of salesian communities has undergone a progressive change over the past six years. In Italy there were 276 communities in 1990, 260 in 1996, 243 in 2000. In 2003 there were 235, of which 228 were canonically erected.

For the **schools sector** it can be said that, despite the inevitable weakening due to the lack of economic equality, in Italy this remains one of the most effective and widely diffused services.

In Italy there are 53 Middle Schools, with some 8,000 pupils and more than 600 lay teachers. The Middle East has 3 Middle Schools with about 600 pupils. In Italy there are 51 High Schools, with some 12,000 pupils and 1,000 lay teachers. The Middle East Province has 6 High Schools.

In recent years, the reform of the scholastic system has led us to take on responsibility for some elementary schools as well.

The sector of **centres for professional training** is in a state of substantial development; it consists of 46 centres, with 13,400 pupils and about 1,000 lay teachers. Corresponding figures for the Middle East Province are 3 centres, with 2,550 pupils and 23 teachers. It should be noted that in addition to the courses at first level, designed for adolescents who have always been the group for which we work by preference, in all the provinces there are now higher level courses aimed at various kinds of adults, with widely differing contents.

The Region's parishes are at present 137 (of which 3 are in the Middle East), with some 1,020,000 parishioners. There are 177 oratories or youth centres (13 of them in the Middle East) with tens of thousands of members.

University hostels number 32 in Italy, with 1,340 resident students.

There are 18 **family homes** for juveniles in difficulties, with about 300 residents. There are also 15 foundations for youngsters on the fringe of society (immigrants, drug-addicts, the homeless, etc.) with 2,000 temporary residents reached in various ways. They represent an effective presence in the field of marginalization.

The missionary dimension has proved vital in recent years. Between 1978 and 2003 about 250 confreres left Italy for

the missions (50 of them in the last six years). The number is considerable in the light of the scarcity of personnel from which the entire Region is suffering.

4. *Some points to be kept in mind*

To give you statistics, dear confreres, may be interesting, but statistics alone do not tell the whole story about the riches Italy has been able to give and continues to give to the entire Salesian Congregation. I therefore want to add some further points which I think need to be understood if our information and gratitude is to be complete.

I have in mind in the first place the **great service rendered to the formation** of so many Salesians by houses and study centres that have for years been points of reference at international level. I refer in the first place to the International Institute of the Crocetta in Turin, which for so many years was the headquarters of our Athenaeum. From this experience there gradually developed what is now our University in Rome. I want to recall also the Roman Houses of San Tarcisio and Testaccio, which have hosted and continue to host students of theology coming from abroad. For a similar service I must also mention the student community of Gerini, and the now international novitiates of Pinerolo and Genzano.

In the same context I cannot fail to thank the numerous Italian confreres who have contributed so competently and with such foresight to the birth and growth of our Pontifical Salesian University. This too has been a great enterprise for the benefit, the specific salesian formation, the cultural and pastoral growth of large numbers of confreres who today animate the formation communities of the world.

A second point concerns the **Works of technical formation**, with special reference to the work at Colle Don Bosco, Rebaudengo and Cumiana. In these environments very many of

our Brothers were professionally trained for a specially competent service to the young apprentices in our Technical Schools. In former times large salesian works were always structured in a symmetrical fashion. At the centre was the church with the students' section on one side of it and the artisans' section on the other. It was almost a declaration that the salesian mission had no limits and excluded no one. Any boy could be accepted and his natural talents developed either through classical studies or through a course that would train him as an artisan, a shopkeeper or simply a specialized workman. All the youngsters, both students and artisans, followed a course of educational and Christian development in a context of intense activity which accompanied their formation: the band and theatre, sodalities and group activities, prayer, retreats and spiritual exercises. It was a real experience of the fullness of life, and was a great school for life. The church, situated at the centre of it all, was a constant reminder to everyone of the true source of salesian animation and of the centre on which everything converged.

Truly great has been the good done by our great works, and they are doing it still. I have in mind the great Centres of Valdocco, of Sesto San Giovanni, of Verona San Zeno, of Mestre, of Genoa Quarto, of Bologna, of Rome, of Aquila, of Ortona, of Bari, of Catania, Palermo, Selargius and Lanusei. I also have joyful memories of my recent visit to the house of Este, where something like a miracle has been realized in its internal restructuring. This great and well known college was originally destined for young students, but times have changed and there was the risk of it having to close as a High School. But now it is flourishing again, thanks to the ingenuity and dedication of the confreres, and especially of the Brothers, who have been able to convert it into a technical school.

We do well therefore to recall this original and charismatic dimension of our youth apostolate. And it is right to repeat our thanks to so many of our Brother confreres who have worked with such commitment and dedication not only in Italy but

throughout the world, in founding everywhere schools for young apprentices.

A third point I want to make concerns the sector of ***Social Communication***. Here I want to refer in the first place to that extraordinary instrument for the animation and spreading of salesian spirituality that we know as the *Salesian Bulletin*. It originated in a brilliant idea of Don Bosco and now it has become a fine publication that reaches more than 300,000 families. Through it Italy is given news of the salesian world, becomes involved in the spiritual movement of our Salesian Family and participates actively in it through generous forms of charity. In its present form it is pleasing to the eye, easy to handle, attractive to young people and has become a point of reference for many editions of the Bulletin in other countries in no less than 32 languages.

I must mention also the LDC Publishing House, founded in the time of Fr Ricaldone, which for decades now has been engaged in a lively and creative activity, supported by the help of experts from the Catechetical Centre, which provides the Italian Church with sound reading matter in the field of catechetics and the youth apostolate. A similar meritorious service also continues to be provided by the *Società Editrice Internazionale*, especially in the production of scholastic textbooks.

And there are still two further points that deserve to be mentioned. The first concerns the work of the salesian community in the Vatican. The "Poliglotta", as it is called, has always provided a kind of window through which the Holy See sees and shows its esteem for the Congregation, and at the same time it provides a simple and natural means of access to the Holy Father and the Roman Congregations.

The second point refers to the generous welcome given to Italian missionaries who in old age or failing health return to their provinces of origin after spending their best energies and talents in the service of the mission in different provinces all over the world. The welcome they receive is an exquisite gesture of love and charity to these confreres.

5. Salesian communities – quantity and quality

As I have said already, the number of salesian communities has fallen progressively in the recent six year periods but the number of houses does not reflect the real situation, because within those communities the number of confreres and their quality have been significantly affected by the broader transformations taking place.

As far as religious life is concerned, it is right to take note of the spirit of fidelity of the confreres, of whom the vast majority live with loyalty and conviction – and also with proper gospel serenity – their religious vocation, their commitment to pastoral and educative service, fraternal life, fidelity to the vows, prayer life and ongoing formation.

As is only natural, the number of confreres present in the houses has fallen, and their average age has risen appreciably.

On the other hand greater attention is now given to formation: the ‘community day’, the programming of days of recollection, and of other significant occasions have provided a notable stimulus, especially when linked with the suggestions made by the GC25.

6. The Salesian Family

In Italy the Congregation is at present engaged in a project for the rediscovery of the Salesian Family and a better understanding of its value. For example, Provincial Councils of the Association of Salesian Cooperators and of the Confederation of Past-pupils are becoming much more mature. The local councils seem to be reflecting to some extent the frailty of the communities which find it difficult to assign a specific delegate to them. The Salesian Youth movement too seems to be assuming greater responsibility in the salesian apostolate. Never in the past has the Region felt such a need for the support of lay people who are prepared and motivated in the salesian sense.

7. Participation and formation of the laity: resources and problems

The practical requirements of our works and also the rediscovery of an ecclesiology of communion centred on the People of God, with emphasis on their shared responsibility, have prompted our communities towards an ever greater collaboration with lay people who have found a place to some extent at all levels and share more and more consciously in the salesian mission and spirituality.

Progress has been made, especially among those responsible for houses and provinces, in the awareness that the formation of such collaborators cannot be other than as indicated by the GC24, that is, a common salesian formation that is structured, continuous and aimed at the needs of the young and of the local area. It is a real 'in-service formation', accompanied by attitudes that lead to further growth.

Within the Regional framework there have been some interesting formative initiatives especially for teachers in schools. Everywhere to some degree courses for Oratory leaders have sprung up, and there have also been initiatives for the formation of lay people in managerial or administrative positions.

It is clear that the formation process must also be concerned about certain professional skills, but the key point is still the absorbing of the salesian spirit. Only in this way can the works of the Region keep their true identity.

The Region's big challenges

Being realistic requires us also to be aware of the present challenges that the Region has to face. I point out some of them that I consider to be fundamental.

1. *The vocational situation*

The situation in the Region regarding vocations, and more particularly in Italy itself, has remained more or less stationary. It must be kept in mind that whereas in 1985 the country had a million young men aged 19, in 2005 the number will have shrunk to 560,000. This means that the overall number of young adults has decreased by almost 50 per cent – a fact that is bound to have an influence in the field of vocations. Long ago this was pointed out by Fr Viganò: “if there are no children for families and society, neither will there be any for the Church and religious congregations”.

For the Middle East Province I have already spoken of the difficult situation of Christians, which makes many young people dream of emigration; and there is also the difficulty of providing any lengthy and personalized follow-up because of the scarcity of available personnel.

It would not be true to say that Italy is sterile as is the case in some other western countries, but there does seem to be a certain feeling of weariness. All the confreres are having to work harder to some extent, and vocational animation risks becoming less spoken of, especially at the level of local communities, or simply being left to the responsibility of the provincial animator.

We must never forget the Christian quality of our pastoral work. The atmosphere of secularization and consumerism, the vast array of options available, the limitation on the number of children in the family, the flimsy nature of fundamental pastoral work because of the falling numbers of diocesan clergy, etc. – all these are elements that require the reorganization of the pastoral plan for vocations, with special attention being given to an evangelization that is deep enough to lead to a real encounter with the Lord Jesus, and to foster a firm desire “to risk one’s life” for him.

2. Reshaping and relocating

The reduction in the number of salesian personnel must lead us to a wise revision of our works in the Region, and particularly in Italy. As my predecessor Fr Vecchi said in one of his letters: "Many of our works are good, but they do not all speak with the same eloquence, realism and truth. Many of the works can be useful in some way, but they do not all express the gospel and the love of God sown in the hearts of believers with the same immediate appeal and depth. Many activities seem acceptable and functional in our present-day society; some of them are strongly evangelizing and prophetic... After more than a hundred years of salesian life in Italy, fidelity to Don Bosco requires us to face up to an effort at reshaping and re-siting – albeit gradually and with due regard to the resources available" (cf. *Letter to the Provincials of Italy and the Middle East, 1997*).

Such a task of reshaping and relocating is obviously one to be taken up within each individual province, but must also be understood in terms of a new and more organic distribution of the various provinces within the country, which will permit the strengthening of weaker situations and a better overall animation. Some unifications, even though brought about through complex and laborious processes, have already led to good results.

In processes of this kind, whether at the level of individual provinces or the whole of the country, it is essential to maintain a positive attitude and be full of hope. To become stubbornly or nostalgically entrenched in last ditch efforts to defend works or circumscriptions is an attitude which cannot lead to true renewal but risks being wanting in realism, with the danger of being forced by circumstances to make decisions we would have preferred to approach more wisely. Here I want to exhort the Provincials of Italy to abandon a strict and sometimes too closed consideration of the problems of their own province and adopt a broader and more collaborative view, so as to seek what is best for the salesian work in Italy as a whole. For this purpose, even

a revision of the way the Italian Provincial Conference is structured and its activities organized may be very desirable just now, so as to adopt guidelines at national level with greater security and bring a unified coordination to the solution of problems that emerge. We must never forget that for Don Bosco what must decide the details of our works are the needs of the young, and structures have importance only to the extent that they contribute to that end.

3. Continuing formation

The complex nature of the present period of history makes the business of formation one of our biggest challenges, because of its extreme importance in enabling us to live and witness to our vocation and salesian mission in the most effective way.

This concerns not so much the structures relating to initial formation, which are in fact already present in the Region with rich possibilities already well consolidated by experience. It concerns all the Salesians already involved in the mission. It is ongoing formation that enables us to discern accurately the signs of the present times and to be faithful interpreters of Don Bosco's spirit in a modern context that needs great intellectual and pastoral flexibility if it is to make suggestions and offer methods and solutions, and especially an educative and Christian approach and follow-up more in tune with present circumstances. This obligation of continuing formation must involve all confreres from salesian, pastoral, educative and professional standpoints.

Another point we must keep in mind, as I have said already, will be the formation of lay people. They are present in large and ever increasing numbers in the works of the Region. The care we give these collaborators of ours to ensure that they be good interpreters of the salesian style and of our educative and pastoral methods is an essential condition for our works to preserve their true charismatic identity.

4. Salesian work in the Middle East

The Salesian Province of the Middle East, which recently celebrated its centenary, has undergone a serious weakening in recent decades. As regards personnel it has always been closely linked to Italy but for some time now the flow of missionaries has decreased. At present it has 120 confreres working in 16 communities scattered over 7 countries: Egypt has 3 communities, Palestine 2, Israel 3, Lebanon 2, Syria 4, Turkey 1 and Iran 1. 71 confreres are from Italy, 39 from nations of the Middle East, and the rest from a further 11 countries. For a few years now some confreres have been carrying on a summer activity for young people in Iraq, in the hope of eventually obtaining permission for a stable work there.

It is a wonderful mosaic, even though this very fact makes it difficult to assign the most suitable personnel to the different places. It is not difficult to imagine what language difficulties there are: Arabic, Hebrew, English, Persian and Turkish; and the problems involved in transfer from one country to another when necessary in distributing personnel. It must be remembered that between Israel – where the Provincial House is situated – and the countries of Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Iraq there are no diplomatic relations.

Our works are highly esteemed by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, even though the Province has to maintain relations with at least 6 Patriarchates, the same number of Apostolic Nuncios or Delegates, and another 18 Archbishops. Here, as in the case of Ethiopia–Eritrea, the various rites are not a matter of indifference.

In circumstances like these, pastoral coordination and provincial planning are clearly very difficult, because everything has to be done within a high degree of decentralization. Nevertheless the confreres succeed in working in a typically salesian manner, trying to inculturate the charism and carry out the mission among Muslims and Christians of the various communities

and rites by practising ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue as much as is possible. At Cairo in Egypt we are taking care of refugees from Sudan. At Istanbul in Turkey we are doing the same for boys from both Iraq and the Kurd area. In Lebanon and Syria the main activities are oratories and youth centres. Last year we were able to inaugurate a Technical Training Centre at Al Fidar in Lebanon, and it is my hope that we may be able to establish similar centres in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt.

The biggest problem continues to be the state of war and the consequent emergency situation which has dragged on for 35 years, with the wars between Israel and Palestine, the Islamic Revolution, the Gulf War, civil war in Lebanon, the Intifada and finally the recent war in Iraq. As you can see, the Middle East Province is in a critical and tormented area where new conflicts begin before earlier ones have come to an end.

We do not know how long this situation will continue, but it is evident that the effects will be felt for many years and some of them will be irreversible, such as the Islamization of Lebanon and Palestine through the flight of Catholics.

How could we fail to be involved in such a situation? And how could we fail to be proud of our confreres who are already involved in it? It is my earnest hope that by reading this letter and by having a better knowledge of our confreres in the Middle East, the Provinces and individual confreres will be prompted to solidarity with them and to make themselves available for strengthening and ensuring the continuation of our work in this area. We have works that are of great significance because of their location, and we must safeguard them.

Future intentions

In the face of these challenges it is very important to adopt lines of action that will define our commitment in the near future.

With this in mind, I put forward some fundamental suggestions, addressed especially to members of the Region so that they can study them at greater depth.

1. Rethinking our pastoral and educational system

The purpose of this is to make the system more effective. It is a matter of overcoming the threshold of apostolic timidity with the risk of remaining enclosed in a pastoral approach of our usual activities and entertainments, and offer a pastoral approach that is truly missionary, able to involve young people, to make them grow into the fullness of life and direct them through an experience of faith to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This is our fundamental work, on which we have to build all that concerns vocational direction and guidance. It is a process that presupposes the involvement of Salesians as a direct presence among the young. Our preference for those for whom we work must direct us more decisively towards the rejects and the very poor. In Italy, to be practical, young immigrants must be the object of our special care, above all at the present time when attitudes and policies of exclusion and marginalization are common, sometimes prompted by racism. Italy has always been outstanding as a country with a great and generous heart, with a rich humanist culture, and a history of Roman law. Italy, moreover, has been a nation of great and numerous migratory movements; it cannot be unmindful of this experience it has had, as Deuteronomy reminds Israel: "Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10, 19).

What I am saying is to be considered as applying to every context in which Salesians of the Region are working, but I have in mind in particular our Schools, which must become true mediators of a culture that takes its inspiration from the great values of Christian humanism, and places of intense youthful activity where children and youngsters can find guidance and a

breadth of education that contains a wealth of incentives for their human and spiritual growth.

I am thinking too of our Technical Training Centres, which are often where the most vulnerable youngsters are to be found. Here they can start a new life through an educational experience in which manual work gives them a new dignity and security, and where at the same time they can find guidance in their Christian pilgrimage.

I am thinking also of our oratories and youth centres and of our parishes, which must manifest the “original gift” of Don Bosco’s educational charism, and not be content to settle for the routine provision of an approach which does not bear the precious and distinctive hall mark of the preventive system.

I have in mind finally the numerous kinds of work with university students, that allow the confreres of the Region to befriend and guide young adults who are on the threshold of the fullness of life’s experiences, and are very open to authentic recommendations on a cultural and Christian level.

There is every reason therefore, dear confreres, to undertake a serious revision, and rediscover the most genuine elements of our spirituality and mission, renewing our service to the young.

This process of re-aligning our educative and pastoral project, together with the initiatives I have specified, will certainly have a powerful impact from a vocational point of view.

2. Courageous redefinition of salesian work in Italy

Everything that can be done in this direction will certainly prove to be a good investment for the salesian mission in Italy and the Middle East for coming years.

In the process of reshaping and relocating I would point to the following criteria which must provide us with inspiration within the wise and well-considered discernment now taking place in the various Provincial Chapters:

- ❑ Attention to the human setting of the Region, and to the areas which are poorest from an ecclesial and civil aspect. If we are going to withdraw from some work (e.g. some parish) it would be well to begin with one in a richer social setting.
- ❑ The development of works and initiatives aimed at promoting a new faith proposal in areas of new evangelization.
- ❑ The maintenance of works and structures which better enable us to express the salesian charism, from the standpoint of both education and evangelization: works, therefore, which facilitate a more effective contact with young people, such as oratories, schools, technical training centres, university hostels, places for voluntary and social work. We must be careful not to let our charism become absorbed by routine parish work.
- ❑ Defence of the presence of those 'quality initiatives' presented by our study centres, publishing houses, catechetical centres, teams for ongoing formation, pedagogical or cultural centres, formation houses, etc. They represent opportunities for the expansion and spreading of our salesian spirituality and educational method.
- ❑ For works which have a rich hundred years of history behind them the ruling criterion remains that of providing a service to the young. Sometimes a reordering of the service (reshaping internal structures) can prove to be a fresh start. If even this is not possible, it is clear that God is calling us elsewhere.

Also at the level of the provinces a discernment process is necessary to bring to maturity options which will give to salesian Italy a juridical structure more in keeping with the present situation. It is well that all confreres be aware of the decisions that have to be made to keep our work strong and lively in this country. This should be a matter of interest to everyone. As I have said on other occasions, it is a matter of prophecy and not merely of survival!. The simple truth is that to go blindly ahead with-

out making decisions about this is to court a natural death. Change, even accompanied at times by a certain loss of 'security', is a sign of vitality and of the will to be guided by the Spirit, who "renews the face of the earth."

A final important aspect is the link between the different Provinces, which must take its inspiration from criteria of solidarity and collaboration. The idea must grow therefore of an overall view by improving everything that can promote unified and linked initiatives, with a generous exchange of personnel and resources.

3. Making more effective the formation process for our lay collaborators.

I have already mentioned above the importance we must give to the formation of our collaborators. They are very numerous in all the contexts of our salesian educative service. Their qualification is indispensable for preserving the identity of our works. Many relevant initiatives are already in progress, but perhaps greater attention should be given to what is specific to our salesian activity, essentially linked with a knowledge and deeper understanding of our preventive system.

In addition to theoretical knowledge, this deeper understanding is associated with a true sharing of life and ideals that we must foster with these "external Salesians". To this end specific initiatives must go hand in hand with the welcoming and sharing attitude we adopt towards our lay collaborators, frequently involving them in specific aspects of our life such as prayer and discussion.

4. Support for the Middle East Province

At the beginning of the present six-year period I asked specifically that this point be included in our planning for the Region

of Italy and the Middle East. It was my intention to suggest to Italy to promote a programme to help the MOR Province to overcome the difficulties linked with the social and political conditions they are now facing, and by helping also in the matter of personnel. Naturally, this is an invitation which today I address to all confreres and not just to those of Italy.

In practical terms, I have in mind that each Italian province gives at least one young confrere to the Middle East Province. I am sure that this will bring blessings on the vocational front in Italy itself.

Courage then, young confreres of Italy. I turn to you because these works need young men who can learn the local languages well and become inculturated in that environment, and give their own life to the salesian charism. With Don Bosco I continue to dream of new foundations in which the Salesians become the friends and educators of the young. I dream specifically of setting up soon a new foundation in Baghdad. The political and social situation in Iraq calls us to give some sign of our commitment to the poor and weak. And perhaps the Lord, by giving us the hoped for first novices from that country, will provide a clear sign that he is calling us to realize such a dream.

5. Development of our historic salesian places

There is a final important point that I want to put to you, dear confreres of Italy. It is the full exploitation of what we think of as the “salesian holy places” of our spirituality and charism. I am speaking directly of Colle Don Bosco, of the Valdocco complex, of the native places of Dominic Savio and our other salesian saints, but also of those other places which still provide a vital link with the memory of Don Bosco, such as Genoa Sampierdarena or the Sacred Heart in Rome.

These places must be carefully and lovingly preserved, not only from a material point of view, but also as centres of pil-

grimage, animation and formation. They are in fact a “school of spirituality and a centre of prayer”.

This is a legacy entrusted to Italy but of concern to the Congregation worldwide. It is a rich spiritual heritage which we have not yet fully appreciated. And it is linked with the movement of spiritual and pastoral renewal that we are pursuing more directly at the present time.

I remain close to all of you

As I conclude this letter, in which I know that I am speaking to all the confreres of the world, allow me to express my closeness particularly to the confreres of this Region of Italy and the Middle East. I have frequently repeated that the greatest treasure of the Congregation consists in the confreres, and I repeat it today with greater conviction than ever, after visiting more than fifty provinces across the salesian world.

At this time, I want to express in the first place my closeness to the confreres who are sick or ageing. They have given their lives for the benefit of the young and for the growth of salesian work; and now they provide quite extraordinary support through prayer and the daily offering of their situation of sickness and old age.

I send a particular greeting to our youngest members. I remember you every day and commend you to the Lord so that he may give you courage and enthusiasm, with a capacity for communion and apostolic endeavours, accompanied by perseverance. Preceding generations have entrusted to you a salesian Italy, rich in works and projects and more, especially rich in great fidelity to Don Bosco and to his spirit. Be their worthy successors, facing the challenges of the present day with calm and responsibility, but especially with your hearts filled with a great “passion for God” and “compassion for mankind” – for today’s youngsters to

whom God is sending you. If this pastoral charity burns within you, you will be true Salesians after the heart of Don Bosco and your life will certainly give rise to other vocations.

An affectionate greeting also to you, Salesians of mature age, who bear the daily burden of our works. Thank you for your fidelity, for the hard work you do, for your unfailing hope, for the faith that animates your lives, for the love you devote to the mission for the young. I want to tell you that in Don Bosco, I am close to you with my esteem and affection.

And I invite all of you, dear confreres, of whatever Region or Province, to join with me in praising God for the good he has done through the salesian charism in this Region of Italy and the Middle East. We can truly say that “the Lord has done great things and holy is his name”. So it has been in Italy, and so it has also already been in many other countries “even to the ends of the earth”.

In conclusion

I entrust each of you to the motherly care of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco’s Madonna, who was his mother and teacher and will continue to be the same for all of us, the one who was his guide in every enterprise for the benefit of the youngsters entrusted to him by God; she will continue to guide us as well.

The feast of the Annunciation, the date I have given to this letter, reminds us of the attitude we must cultivate of being able to listen to God and respond to him, who never ceases to speak to and lead us along the path of history. It is an attitude we can sum up under three main headings:

- *Seeking God’s plan for our own life*, in the knowledge that he has a plan for each of us, and he reveals it to us to the extent

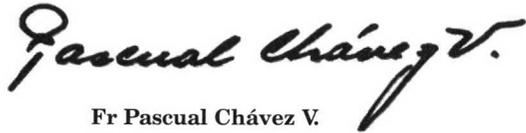
that we ask him what he wants us to do for others. God's word, his 'annunciation' to us, will reach us through events, other people and sacred Scripture. Hence the need for us to be converted to attentive listeners to the Word and believing readers of history. In this sense it seems to me very eloquent to see Mary represented in many pictures of the Annunciation with the Scriptures in hand, or on her knees meditating on them, as though wanting to take them to her heart. Mary teaches us in the first place to be attentive: "She considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be", says the Gospel (Lk 1, 29).

- *Acceptance of God's will as our plan of life*, recognizing that his plan will always be better than ours. Opening ourselves to God means acknowledging our situation as creatures, with limitations and a propensity to make idols and gods to our own dimensions. To admit God into our lives implies the recognition of his sovereignty; it means refusing to be dependent on anyone else, to have no other priorities in our lives, to identify ourselves with his will in such a way as to make it our own. We cannot be true believers if we try to control God, wanting him to do what we want, to carry out our will. Secondly Mary teaches us to believe in God, to trust him, to make room for him in our lives as the One who is loved because he first loved us and thought of us. "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you have said" (cf. Lk 1, 38).
- *Docility to the Holy Spirit*, which makes possible in us what would otherwise be impossible. The gospel tells us that through the power of God's Holy Spirit Mary was able to be the Mother of God. It is docility to the Spirit that makes the Virgin Mary so fruitful. This is shown by the fact that when visiting Elizabeth the latter responded to Mary's greeting with the words: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1, 42). The deep lived experi-

ence of this divine energy allows Mary to feel free to offer herself and become a slave of her God. This is the deep meaning of May's 'virginity' which, rather than being a statement about a physical condition, is her total availability to her God: "Nothing is impossible with God" (Lk 1, 36).

May Mary teach us to welcome God's designs and collaborate with him in fulfilling his work of salvation.

I wish you all a fruitful Lent and many blessings at Easter!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Pascual Chávez V." in a cursive script.

Fr Pascual Chávez V.
Rector Major