

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	1.1 Fr Pascual CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA "I GIVE THANKS TO GOD EACH TIME I REMEMBER YOU" (Phil 1,3) <i>Presentation of the Western European Region</i>	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Fr Giovanni MAZZALI GUIDELINES FOR CORRECT ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE PROVINCES	47
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(none in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major 4.2 Chronicle of the General Council	53 58
5. DOCUMENTS	5.1 Message of the Rector Major to the World Advisory Body for Social Communications 5.2 New Provincials 5.3 Decree by which the "San Francesco di Sales" salesian house in the Vatican becomes directly dependent upon the Rector Major 5.4 Our dead confreres	65 72 76 78

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**"I GIVE THANKS TO GOD
EACH TIME I REMEMBER YOU" (Phil 1,3)**

Presentation of the Western European Region

Don Bosco in France, Spain, Portugal and Southern Belgium. – The beginnings, a successful planting of the charism. – Spectacular development. – Today's cultural, social and religious situation. – Salesian situation in the Region. – A word about the different Works. – Youth ministry. – Social communication. – Missionary dimension. – The Salesian Family. – Initial and subsequent formation. – Ongoing formation. – Challenges facing the Region. – Lines of action. – 1. Develop a specific kind of vocational animation that bears witness to community life and the fruitfulness of the mission. – 1.1. *Ensure the conditions for each community to live a true spiritual experience and be a witness to the faith that can be perceived by the young.* – 1.2. *Create a new kind of truly meaningful salesian presence, attractive and inviting for young people with evangelisation as its first objective.* – 2. Implement the consequent changes needed in the life and organisation of the Provinces and of the Region.

Rome, 8 September 2004
Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary

My dear confreres,

As I write this letter I greet you all affectionately, and *I give thanks to God each time I remember you* (Phil 1,3). This is the heading I decided to give to this letter about the Western European Region. Even though it is true of all Regions, as expressing the deep communion there is between us, and gratitude for the work done for the expansion of the Congregation and the spreading of Don Bosco's charism, it certainly applies in a special way to this Region. Spain has witnessed a remarkable growth, the greatest and most consistent after that of Italy and prior to that of India. France has been outstanding in its love for Don Bosco, his spirituality and pedagogy. Portugal has had a wonderful missionary outreach in all the old Portuguese-speaking countries. Southern Belgium has always collaborated in missionary work with great generosity.

In the three months that have passed since my letter on the Word of God and Salesian Life, I have spent most of the time at the Generalate in a busy session of the General Council, during which we have examined and approved at least two thirds of all the documents drawn up by the Provincial Chapters. There are however some news items that deserve particular mention.

In the first place there was the *Retreat* we made together with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Santa Fosca di Cadore at the beginning of July. Besides this being the first time such an event had taken place in the history of our Institutes, with all that means for our charism, we wanted to explore together what the Spirit seems to be saying to the Church and the world at this time, so that we might gain a better knowledge of what God is asking of us, what are his expectations in our regard, what is his will. From this standpoint all the different elements, the spectacular natural scenery, the pleasant climate, the experience of living as a family, the spiritual sharing and the reflections offered and celebrated, were both enlightening and productive. Unfortunately Mother Antonia Colombo and two Councillors were unable to take part because of illness.

Special features of the month of August were "*Campobosco*" for the young people of Spain and the *European "Confronto"*, which brought together hundreds of youngsters on the occasion of the jubilee of the canonisation of St Dominic Savio and the centenary of the death of Laura Vicuña. Both meetings had been carefully prepared and were held with great commitment from everyone, beginning with the young people themselves who were the true leaders in both events. Such gatherings are naturally more productive when they are seen as a goal and a new starting point within a process of human and Christian maturing, and of salesian spirituality.

In this context of fraternal communication I cannot fail to say a word about the recent campaign mounted against us by some elements of the American mass media, and aimed particu-

larly at the Province of Australia, accusing the Congregation of operating a policy of transferring from one country to another confreres accused of abuse against juveniles. The Provincials of the United States in the first place, followed by the Provincial of Australia, issued press releases denying that such a policy existed, asking forgiveness for any possible misdeeds and for reactions that may not always have been adequate; they expressed solidarity with the victims, emphasised the guidelines given by the Rector Major and his Council, and made it clear that each Province is responsible for the handling of these cases. While accepting this trial as a moment of purification for what may in the past have fallen short of the high ideals expected of us, we renew our commitment to make young people the objective of our vocation and mission, and to be for them “signs and bearers of the love of God”.

Don Bosco in France, Spain, Portugal and Southern Belgium

With the letter **“You will be my witnesses, even to the ends of the earth”** (AGC 385) I began a presentation of the situation of the Congregation in each of its geographical Regions and I said that the next Region would be that of Western Europe. With this present letter, **“I give thanks to God each time I remember you”**, I shall try to make you better acquainted with the history of this Region which is a glorious one, with the rich qualities of its present situation, and at the same time enable you to share in the efforts that are being made to respond creatively to the great and urgent challenges being faced by the salesian charism in the West.

The Western European Region was set up by the GC24. Geographically it is the smallest in the Congregation. It is made up of Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal, with some works in other countries which for historical or political reasons or through apostolic generosity, have remained united to one or

other of these countries. Portugal maintains its presence in the Cape Verde Islands, France has a community in Morocco and another in Switzerland, the Province of Barcelona runs a school in the Republic of Andorra. The Delegation of Mozambique, though dependent on the Province of Portugal, has been part of the African Region since the GC24. Following the unification of the French Provinces in 1999, the Region now has 10 Provinces, and in all these Provinces some houses have already celebrated the centenary of their foundation.

Without any doubt salesian work in the Region has felt the impact of the deep and rapid process of European transformation, beginning with the unification of the currency. In the last decades, in fact, there has been a decisive advance in the definition of the face of Europe in the various aspects of its life. As elsewhere, so here too, economic aspects have prevailed while in other fields there are difficulties. Deplorable have been the experiences of the wars in the Balkans, the war in Iraq and its aftermath of reconstruction, and the present discussions for the adoption of a European Constitution are painful and laborious. All this reveals the many different interests and sensitivities that exist. Europe is far from uniform in its culture, its history, its theology and the expression of its religious beliefs and practices. And the same is also true of the salesian situation always linked so closely with the local context in this Region of the Congregation. In recent years the Region set out to make itself a place of openness and discussion, of mutual dialogue and the sharing of ideas. Some progress has certainly been made, but the vicissitudes of history and culture in each of these countries through the centuries have also left their mark on the various expressions of salesian life. The process of unification is strong and irresistible and there are factors in the Region leading in the same direction, but history has its own weight and this explains the diversity even in the salesian context.

The beginnings, a successful planting of the charism

In December 1874, almost a year before the launch of his American enterprise, Don Bosco was received at **Nice (France)** "as though he were a god".¹ A year later, on 20 November 1875, he returned to take over a small "*patronage*". He was accompanied by Don Ronchail (a French surname), who was to be its director, Brother Philip Cappellaro and the novice Jean-Baptiste Perret. Don Bosco wanted to repeat in Nice the experience of thirty years earlier in the Pinardi House. The new house "has all the basic elements of that of Turin", he wrote to Don Rua.² In the year 1876-1877 the first workshops were set up for shoe-making, tailoring and carpentry. On 12 March 1877 the new site of the work was solemnly inaugurated. "In memory of the event, Don Bosco had a pamphlet printed in two languages in which for the first time his short treatise of the preventive system appeared".³ Foundations soon multiplied in France: the Oratory of San León at Marseilles, others at Cannes and Challonges which did not last very long; one at La Navarre, the house Don Bosco dreamed about, where for the first time the Salesians took charge of an agricultural school where young orphans were trained for work in the fields. During this period Don Bosco made several visits to the south of France. In 1883 he went as far as Paris, and from then on between Don Bosco and France relationships were established of admiration, appreciation and friendship on the one hand, and of generous help on the other, which to someone looking back a hundred years later seem truly remarkable. In 1884 the Salesians arrived in Paris, led by Fr Charles Bellamy, a diocesan priest who had become a Salesian a year earlier.

Shortly after the launching of the work in France, on 24 January 1880 a picturesque train journey, wonderfully described in

¹ FRANCIS DESRAMAUT. "Don Bosco en son temps", 943.

² Epistolario IV, lett. 2225, 24.11.1875.

³ MORAND WIRTH. "Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni" p. 175, nota 14.

a letter to Don Rua, brought Don Cagliero and Brother Joseph Rossi to Seville (**Spain**) on a fact-finding mission: Cagliero was wearing the official ecclesiastical headgear of Spain and Rossi wore a top hat. Two days later the Archbishop of Seville, very well impressed by the two illustrious visitors, wrote to Don Bosco: "I think that this Congregation is destined to spread and do a great deal of good in Spain... My best wishes to the new workers".⁴ The prophecy would soon be realised, and to an eminent degree.

Cagliero and Rossi left behind them in Spain a glowing interest and enthusiasm for the works of Don Bosco. John Cagliero "had won over the vivacious Andalusians by his great simplicity, his constant good humour and way of dealing with others, his frankness and cordiality".⁵ Despite the gratifying nature of the journey, the promise of a salesian community for Spain could not be fulfilled until 16 February of the following year 1881, when Utrera saw the arrival of the first six Salesians sent by Don Bosco for the foundation in Spain.

If the fact-finding mission made by train by Cagliero and Rossi had been picturesque, that of the members of the first community – made by sea – was accompanied by storms and gales, high seas, fog and sea-sickness, the lot. At Gibraltar they said good-bye to the confreres continuing their journey to America, while the new community finally disembarked at Cadiz. Now on dry land, from Cadiz they went by train to Utrera. At half past six in the evening the pilgrims came in sight of the towering spires of the city, and Don Cagliero cried out with emotion: "Look! It's Utrera!" "And all the Salesians joined their hands and said a Hail Mary to Mary Help of Christians. Thus began Don Bosco's work in the Iberian Peninsula".⁶

⁴ A. MARTIN GONZALEZ. "Los salesianos de Utrera en España, 87.

⁵ Ibidem, 100.

⁶ Ibidem, 165.

If you visit the salesian houses of Andalusia you get the impression that the Salesians have never stopped reciting and singing that Ave Maria among the people. When Don Bosco sent the first Salesians to America in 1875 he bade them farewell in the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians and gave them in writing twenty recommendations which form a true breviary of pastoral practice and retain all their validity at the present day:

Seek souls, not money, honours or dignities...

Love one another, advise one another, correct one another...

Promote devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians...

Let the good of one become the good of all...

In time of fatigue and suffering, do not forget that a great reward is prepared for us in heaven (MB XI, 389-390).

Those first Salesians set out from Italy and put the advice of their Father into practice in the Iberian Peninsula too. "The people welcome them and venerate them because they are men of God; they help young people in their needs, seek remedies in the struggle against misfortune and try to avoid it; they are tireless and unselfish workers".⁷ The salesian spirit, demonstrated in their concern for the education of poor and abandoned youngsters with the simplicity and popular style of the festive oratory, and especially in the spreading of devotion to Mary Help of Christians, enabled them immediately to win over the hearts of the Andalusian people and opened all doors to them, including some of the Spanish nobility and "conservative" middle classes, who were worried on account of the disastrous consequences that followed from the lack of instruction and Christian education among the children of the poor and the working classes.

Thanks to the effective intervention of Doña Dorotea de Chopitea, who was anxious to be able to do something for the poor youngsters of Barcelona, in 1884 the Salesians arrived at

⁷ A. MARTIN GONZALEZ. "Los salesianos de Utrera en España, 103.

Sarriá, where the development of workshops and her influence on salesian Spain have been described as “bordering on the miraculous”. Don Bosco’s visit to Barcelona in 1886 gave rise to a great outpouring of enthusiasm and generosity on all sides, climaxing in the presentation to him of the hill of Tibidabo for the building of a temple to the Sacred Heart.

The earliest requests for salesian work in **Portugal** go back to 1877,⁸ but the first formal negotiations for a foundation in the country began in 1882 through the efforts of Don Sebastião Vasconcelos, who approached Don Bosco directly and in 1883 inspired by the spirit of the Saint, founded the “Oficinas são José do Porto” (Workshops of St Joseph of Porto), for the education and vocational training “dos rapazes da rua” (of street-children), giving to the workshops the typical characteristics of a salesian house.⁹ But the Salesians arrived formally in Portugal only in 1894, when Don Rua was Superior General. Although the city of Braga had not been the first to ask for the sons of Don Bosco, it was in fact the first to receive them. The first community – two priests and a student – took over the “Colégio dos Órfãos de São Caetano” (School of the Orphans of St Cajetan). This was followed by further foundations in Lisbon (1896), Angra do Heroísmo (1903), Viana do Castelo (1904), and Porto (1909). The Portuguese are well known for their great sea-faring enterprises, and it is not surprising therefore to find the Salesians soon afterwards going from Lisbon to Macao (1906), to Tanjor (1906) and Maliapor (1909) in India, and in 1907 they set up a trade school in Mozambique. The salesian charism in Portugal developed to such an extent that in 1899 the works were erected as an autonomous Province, separated from Barcelona as the first Province in the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁰

⁸ In 1877 Mgr. Lacerda wrote to Don Bosco in the hope that he would send his sons to Portugal (*Annali* II, 345). In 1880 there was a lengthy correspondence between Don Bosco and Portugal (*ibid.*). In 1881 Don Bosco sent Don Cagliero from Utrera to Oporto on a fact-finding visit (*Annali* I, 453. 612).

⁹ Cfr. AMADOR ANJOS: “Centenário da obra salesiana em Portugal”, 27.

¹⁰ Cfr. AMADOR ANJOS: “Centenário da obra salesiana em Portugal”, 27.

We can also consider as miraculous the beginnings of salesian work in **Belgium**. On 7 December 1887 the Bishop of Liège, Mgr. Doutreloux, went to Rome to try to persuade Don Bosco to open a trade school in his city. The Superiors, in agreement with Don Bosco, thought it best to wait a while before accepting. But the following morning, "to the great surprise of Don Celestino Durando, (who was in charge of the negotiations for new foundations), Don Bosco said 'yes' to the Bishop as though the difficulties raised the previous day no longer existed".¹¹

What had happened? In the morning of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception Don Carlo Viglietti went into Don Bosco's room and was told: "Get some paper, pen and ink, and write down what I tell you. Words literally spoken by the Immaculate Virgin who appeared to me during the night and said: 'Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary want a house opened at Liège in honour of the Blessed Sacrament' ".¹² Soon afterwards Mgr. Cagliero came in and Don Viglietti read to him what he had written. The Bishop was astonished and said: "Yesterday I too was opposed to the plan, but now we have the decree. There is nothing more to be said!".¹³ It was on this occasion that Don Bosco made the famous statement: "So far we have always gone ahead with complete certainty; we could not go wrong because Mary is guiding us."¹⁴ The way in which the land was acquired and the work at Liège established soon showed that Mary indeed wanted that house in the city of "Corpus Christi". The foundation at Liège was followed by one at Tournai, a novitiate house at Hechtel and other works, leading to the erection of the Belgian houses into an autonomous Province in 1902.

¹¹ Cfr. MB. XVIII, p. 437.

¹² Cfr. MB. XVIII, p. 438.

¹³ Cfr. MB. XVIII, p. 439.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

Spectacular development

Spectacular is the right word to describe the development of the Congregation in the various countries of the Region. When Don Albera, the first Provincial in France, returned to Italy in 1892 to be appointed Catechist General, he left behind thirteen flourishing foundations. Even opponents in their own way bore witness to the vitality of the Sons of Don Bosco who, according to the spokesman of a committee of the French Senate, formed “a recently created group, but one which is today irradiating the whole world”.¹⁵ In 1896 France already had two Provinces and “on the occasion of the World Exhibition of Paris in 1900 the Salesians were awarded two medals for their successful social work”.¹⁶

In **Spain** too “the work of the Salesians was much appreciated by the government. A decree of 1893 gave them high praise and highlighted the contribution they had made to solving the labour problem. Similar praise was heard in the following year at the Fourth Catholic International Congress of Tarragona”.¹⁷

As in Argentina so also in Spain Don Cagliero was the founder of the salesian work. Nevertheless, Fr Philip Rinaldi, Fr Peter Ricaldone, Fr Juan Branda and Fr Ernest Oberti were the ones who firmly planted the salesian charism in Spain and Portugal.

In 1889 Fr Philip Rinaldi arrived in Spain as Rector of the house of Sarriá. His amiable disposition, greatness of heart and psychological intuition immediately gained for him the affection and good will of all. Three years later he was appointed the “first Provincial of Spain and Portugal”, with headquarters in Barcelona. After a further nine years he returned to Italy as a member of what was then known as the Superior Chapter. He

¹⁵ MORAND WIRTH. “Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni”, 275 – Citato: *Annali* III, 135.

¹⁶ MORAND WIRTH. “Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni”, 283.

¹⁷ MORAND WIRTH. “Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni”, 282.

left behind him twenty salesian communities in Spain and three in Portugal. It was at this moment that Fr Peter Ricaldone took the stage, a man of great dynamism and charisma.

He too had had the opportunity to know and greet Don Bosco. He made his novitiate at Valsalice, "where he had as companions Augustus Czartoryski and Andrew Beltrami".¹⁸ He was 19 when he first went to Spain. From Utrera he successfully founded the festive oratory in the difficult suburb of Seville-Trinidad. In 1889 he was ordained priest and a year later was appointed Rector of the same house of Seville-Blessed Trinity. He was then only 24 but, as Don Rinaldi said to Don Rua, "he is indeed a man, and very much loved".¹⁹ In Seville he made himself both Spanish and Andalusian, and in 1901 was appointed "first Provincial of the Betica Province". At this point, and only twenty years after the arrival of the first Salesians, four provinces were created in the Iberian Peninsula: three in Spain and one in Portugal.

The beginnings of the twentieth century did not bode well for religious congregations in Europe. They faced a violent storm of laws passed by liberal and openly anticlerical governments. The revolution of 1910 put a sudden stop to salesian development in **Portugal**, and the northern Province of **France** was suppressed.

Another severe trial for the Congregation was the first world war. Almost half the Salesians were conscripted and had to bear arms. Many colleges were requisitioned to be transformed into barracks or hospitals. But it was precisely in France and Belgium that, when the war was over, salesian work was to be reborn with extraordinary strength, to such an extent that in 1959 Belgian salesian activity was organised into three Provinces: North Belgium, South Belgium and Central Africa, and the two

¹⁸ "Don Bosco, cien años en España...", 40.

¹⁹ J.M. ESPINOSA. "Cara e Cruz de Don Pedro Ricaldone", 103.

French Provinces (two once more from 1925) began working in Africa (Congo, 1959).

Spain, for its part – and in it the Salesian Family – experienced a bloody civil war (1936-1939). It was a period of trial and purification to which the martyrs of the Salesian Family, 95 in all, bear clear witness. But as Tertullian says: “the blood of the martyrs is always the seed of new Christians”, and in this case too, many vocations followed. At the end of the ‘50s and the beginning of the ‘60s the growth in vocations was such that the Provinces in Spain increased to seven, and Spanish missionaries spread the salesian charism to the most remote parts of the world. In the same period Portugal became responsible for the houses of Macau, Cape Verde and Mozambique.

Today's cultural, social and religious situation

The Region covers an area which at the present day has about 120 million inhabitants with a density of population that varies from 80 persons per sq. km. in Spain to 334 in Belgium. Infant mortality is never greater than 0.9%, and life expectancy reaches 74 years for men and 80 for women. Illiteracy has practically disappeared, apart from a small minority of ethnic groups. In all the countries of the European Union the trend of family units being now headed by a single individual is increasing and has reached more than 28%.

At a sociological level one cannot overlook the massive presence of **immigrants** as an important social factor – of concern to both Church and State – and one which presents problems of no little importance also to us. On the one hand Europe needs immigrants, but on the other the illegal circumstances in which so many immigrants arrive and remain is a cause of great anxiety. The result is exploitation, the development of mafia-like groups, marginalisation, inhuman living conditions and/or recourse to

delinquency for survival. Belgium is the country of the Region with the greatest proportion of immigrants – more than 10%.

Through schools, colleges, youth centres, other social works and “reception centres”, the Salesian Congregation in the Region is trying to collaborate by offering rapid and creative responses to this besetting problem.

Particularly striking is the increase of **Moslems** in the Region; they now number about 7.5 million (and Islam is the religion with the second highest number of followers). This leads naturally to a demand for their rights and for political and social recognition, but also to clashes between their culture and that of Europe, and even in the matter of human rights (especially in what concerns women). Another serious phenomenon is the spreading of **sects**, which challenge our ability to evangelise.

The phenomenon of **globalisation** has – in common with all historical realities – some positive aspects, especially if it manages to acquire a human face and make the interests of the person prevail over other concerns. But we are well aware that this world is not always ruled by evangelical values. We need only notice what little recognition is given to Christian roots in the European Constitution.

Secularisation, which has its own value, has been changed into **secularism**, which rejects any reference to God in the organisation of personal and social life. At the same time, the quality of being lay has been changed into **laicism**, on the pretext that civil affairs should be accorded absolute autonomy; this has led some countries to declare themselves “lay and non-confessional”, but without any guarantee of what the lay character should imply, i.e. “a space for communication between a nation and its various spiritual traditions”.²⁰ It is true that at this level

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, 12 January 2004 (*Oss Rom*, 12-13 Jan. 2004, pp. 6-7).

freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Constitutions of the different European countries, ensuring the equality of all citizens “without distinction of origin, race or religion”, but unfortunately it does not work out like that in practice. Here and there one comes across attitudes that are clearly anticlerical and an aggressive laicism that has its roots in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; it does not remain a simple cultural attitude but pervades and shapes the civil institutions themselves.

The **consumer society** attempts to satisfy the needs of the human being by reducing them to those of a material nature and transforming the person himself into a mere consumer of products, of feelings and of experiences, while **professionalism** – even though positive and necessary – often imposes limits on the opportunity for mission for many charisms. Obviously self-sufficiency and the maturity of the affluent society are good in themselves to the extent that society is capable of satisfying the main needs of the population: education, health, employment, housing, concern about marginalisation – all of this undertaken in centres managed in a truly professional manner by public institutions. But the fact cannot be denied that this kind of organisation is ever more restrictive of the space left for free self-donation, which is a characteristic element of the religious life. On the other hand, social fragmentation confines the religious and transcendent dimension to the purely private sphere.

The **drastic fall in the birthrate** in this social model must not be seen only as a matter of statistics but also as a trait illustrating the mentality of the affluent society. There is hedonism and selfishness which see pleasure as one of life’s primordial objectives without ensuring respect for other people or for the moral law. This leads to serious repercussions on the family: divorce, the delegation of the education of children to others, and difficulties or exploitation in interpersonal relationships.

The result of these phenomena is the spreading of a culture marked by a certain sceptical relativism and disenchantment which presents a strong challenge to the Church, to religious life and to the salesian charism.

To speak of the **religion** or religions of Western Europe is a truly complicated matter. Official figures for adherents have to be set against personal and social practice (baptisms, marriages, attendance at Sunday Mass, funerals), deeply held beliefs, a whole range of different kinds of religious experience extending from the convinced and coherent believer to the practical atheist and most radical agnostic, all of which contributes to the growing disaffection for the Church, especially on the part of the young.

Many articles and studies have been published in recent years on the religious issue. In general they are pessimistic in tone. It is enough to read some of the titles: "Must we believe in the future of Christianity?",²¹ "Has Christianity any future?",²² "Has Christianity run its course?",²³ "The last of the Mohicans?",²⁴ "Catholicism, the end of a world?".²⁵

This social phenomenon is of concern to us Salesians, especially because of the effect it has on young people. "They are a section of the population more sensitive to cultural fashion, and certainly more affected by the secularisation of the environment".²⁶ Evangelisation becomes progressively more difficult because of such secularisation. I think it can be truly said that there is a real divorce between the new generations of youngsters and the Church. Religious ignorance and the prejudice fostered by

²¹ OUEST-FRANCE, 26 novembre 1999.

²² PHILIPPE BAUD. Livre collectif.

²³ BRUNO CHENU, *La Croix*, 20 octobre 2000.

²⁴ CHARLES DELHEZ, *Sur le catholiques en Belgique*. 1998.

²⁵ HERVIEU-LEGER (Bayar), 2003.

²⁶ LLUIS OVIEDO TORRÓ. "La religiosidad de los jóvenes". *Razón y fe*. Giugno 2004, p. 447.

certain sections of the mass media have formed in them the image of an institutional Church which is conservative and opposed to modern culture, especially in the field of sexual morality.

The religious transformation in Spain has been so rapid that the cultural horizons of our young people can be quite unknown to us. "In particular we note the increase in the number of factors dealing with secularisation in this section of the population and especially their drifting away from the Church as an institution which in the eyes of the young is losing both esteem and value".²⁷ The studies made by the "Fundación Santa María" reach the conclusion that the Church in Spain has lost its monopoly of religion. This means that it is no longer a question of choosing between different absolutes, but that all religious propositions become automatically devalued and made relative. Each person is free to choose between the different things on offer, all on the same level, and live his religion as he chooses for himself.

The breaking of the links in the chain of transmission of the faith has been dramatic. The natural and traditional settings (family, school, parish) are sometimes found to be ineffective in passing on the faith. Consequently there is a growing religious ignorance among the new generations.

One analyst of Spanish religious sociology declares that among young people "a silent departure from the Church is taking place". In his article "Una Iglesia irrelevante para la juventud actual?" (Is the Church irrelevant for today's youth?) he maintains that "the young continue to believe in God, continue to claim that they are practising Catholics, but go to church less and less frequently".²⁸ With all the reservations needed in approaching surveys, it is nevertheless right to recognise that in our western society everything points to an increase in the number of those who

²⁷ Ibidem, 449.

²⁸ GONZALEZ ANLEO: Una iglesia irrelevante para le juventud actual?, *Sal Terrae*. Settembre 1999, p. 310.

say they are believers in some way but without belonging to any specific religion. "Religious beliefs multiply and are less and less bound by ecclesial rules; hence there is a slow decline in the levels of religious practice; prayer and the sacraments".²⁹

If we delve a little deeper, we note the absence of a sense of sin. Also according to the statistics, more than 50% of the young people in this Region say that they do not feel any sense of sin, and one can note in them a marked tendency to greater permissiveness and relativism in regard to morals.

But if religion and politics are the values least appreciated by today's young people, it is equally true that the religious phenomenon is strongly present in European society. There are so many positive aspects in the social and cultural context that we may rightly speak of a period of intense **work of the Spirit**. The young continue to surprise us by their generosity, by their ability to respond with admiration to certain ecclesiastical figures (the Pope, for example), and by their reaction to noble causes. The picture we have given might be considered negative and lead us to pessimism. But that is not the case at all! We need to be forthright in saying that although these new situations and ideas may leave us perplexed, deep changes are never the consequence of the caprice of a few but a response to the needs of the times. This means that behind them there is the activity of the Spirit and the energy of the Risen Christ, carrying out in history a work of purification and renewal, shattering the inertia of society and rejuvenating the Church, making room for a social organisation more in keeping with the saving design of the Father. It means that the present situation is full of new opportunities, that forces of salvation are at work that are leading to change. The future of Christianity and the religious life depends primarily not on man but on God, who can give the lie to all statistics and the most fatal prognoses. I venture to say that Eu-

²⁹ LLUIS OVIEDO TORRÓ "La religiosidad de los jóvenes". *Razón y Fe*. Giugno 2004, p. 449.

rope's present hour is a distinctly salesian one, because today's youngsters have a greater need than ever before of the salesian charism. The new social and cultural situation is a challenge but at the same time an opportunity.

For us statistics and surveys are never the last word. It is important however to know about these studies because they reveal the situation in which we have to live and fulfil the mission entrusted to us; they help us to interpret and understand it, and above all they can serve as a basis for our educative and evangelising endeavours. I invite you therefore to examine these studies on the current situation of our young people more deeply. It is a first expression of our love for them.

The comment of Hölderling comes to mind: "Where danger increases, there too grow the possibilities of salvation". Our hope and our strength are in the Spirit of the Risen Christ. No doors are closed to his transforming energy, His words are reassuring and encouraging: "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16,33b). All we need is docility to his Spirit who takes care of us and revitalises us. Who knows whether now is in fact the time that the Spirit is urging us towards the desert, towards purification and expectation. Perhaps this is the time to break the bonds which bind us to past ways of seeing and living. Perhaps even now the Spirit is raising up powerful forces for the transformation of history which will require us to be ready and prepared. One thing is certain: we are not alone. He is with us and is faithful.

Salesian situation in the Region

We find ourselves in the paradoxical and challenging situation that while the youth situation (religious ignorance, mistaken beliefs, new forms of social poverty, family problems, emigration and the exploitation or abandonment of juveniles, night cul-

ture – a present-day theme which is causing concern to the authorities) calls for real and enterprising apostles, vocations to the religious life and priestly ministry in general, and to salesian life in particular, are in a state of steep numerical decline.

Before offering you some figures, I want to remind you about the facts themselves and their purpose. As I said earlier they illustrate the real situation, and in consequence prompt us to reflect on our works and style of activity; they enable us to make sound plans for the future by boldly facing the challenges of today. That is my line of approach.

There are 1,795 Salesians in the Region. It should be noted that in the last twenty-five years this number has decreased by about 2,000 confreres. Some of them have chosen to remain in the new Circumscriptions of salesian Africa, some have gone to various missionary countries, some have left the Congregation and others have died. To these must be added on the one hand the drastic fall in vocations in all these countries, France, Belgium, Spain and Portugal, and on the other the ageing of active confreres and the increasing complexities of our works. The overall result of all these factors is that our best energies are being spent in the management of structures and in organisation, and the quality of interpersonal relationships and pastoral animation are put at risk. It is true that the educative competence and salesian identity of lay people as well as the efforts of the confreres preserve the salesian character of our various works and activities, but nevertheless the salesian community loses visibility and significance.

A word about the different Works

It must be said that **the school** is the most consistent salesian work of the Region. There are 217 of them with a total of 105,800 pupils. In general the schools are subsidised by the

State or local authority. From a professional standpoint they are well organised and often managed by lay people or at least with a strong lay presence and collaboration. Here I would like to emphasise the effort made by the French Province through the "Maisons Don Bosco" Association, the "Tutelle" and their various organisations, in trying to guarantee the salesian identity of the projects in the different works managed wholly by lay people. The same can be said of the "Réseau Don Bosco" in Belgium and of the various non-profit organisations.

The Schools have all drawn up their Educative and Pastoral Projects, in which they are defined as Catholic and Salesian. In general freedom is ensured for the organisation of their academic activities in accordance with this particular feature. But there is not always the same freedom in the selection of teachers, and there is still a certain struggle between public and private schools. Parents' Associations exist and there are various interesting initiatives for the formation of their members.

The professional, Christian and salesian formation of the teachers, and especially of management teams, is fostered in a variety of ways in a generous and responsible manner.

The Region's schools for **technical and vocational training** deserve special mention. Of these there are 78 in all, with about 30,000 pupils.

From the simple workshops of Nice to the modern technical and agricultural schools of France, from the school of arts and trades in Sarria to the Universities and schools of engineering in Spain, the Salesian Congregation has written glorious pages in the story of the advancement of young workers. The Past-pupils have filled the factories and businesses of Europe as fully trained workers, competent technicians and professionals, as upright and responsible citizens.

The technical and vocational high-schools of agriculture and horticulture in **France** (13 centres with some 8,000 students)

provide the population with a social service of the highest quality, and the same can be said of those in **Belgium**. The image of the Congregation in this Region is strongly marked by traits of social advancement, vocational training, and involvement in the world of work. The good relationships with industry often ensure immediate employment for many of the pupils who complete their vocational training in salesian schools.

If Doña Dorotea de Chopitea was the foundress of salesian workshops in **Spain**,³⁰ Don Rinaldi and Don Ricaldone were without any doubt the promoters of their slow but progressive growth. The enterprise of the Salesians was matched by the generosity of Cooperators and benefactors. Fidelity to their vocation and the readiness and initiative of Don Bosco's spirit created a truly salesian model of the "vocational school".

Worthy of considerable praise was the social work carried out by the vocational schools of **Portugal** until 1974. The "Oficinas de são José" at Lisbon, the technical school of Estoril, the "Colégio dos Orfãos" of Porto, the school of "Artes e Ofícios" of Funchal, the vocational school of Iseda, Santa Clara di Vila do Conde, provided society with good and responsible professionals at a time when Portugal was beginning its industrial revolution. Unfortunately with the political changes of 25 April 1974, all industrial, commercial and vocational training completely disappeared.

As part of its work of education the Region has 38 boarding establishments, some of them with many students such as those of France with 600 pupils. It is worth recalling the importance of boarding schools in salesian history. Nowadays it is desirable that they have a good Educational and Pastoral Project, coordinated with and complementing the overall objective of the work, while at the same time profiting by the unique educative possibilities offered by boarding schools and hostels. We must keep in

³⁰ Cfr. RAMÓN ALBERDI. "Don Bosco: cien años en España", p. 114.

mind the responsibility we have with regard to these youngsters for whom, unfortunately, problems are on the increase, even in their own families.

Altogether there are 111 **parishes** in the Region under the pastoral responsibility of the Salesians. In addition in France and Belgium various confreres are working in diocesan parishes. Everywhere we look after many chaplaincies. The Iberian Conference has had for years its "Educative and pastoral programme for the salesian parish", which serves as a model for the drawing up of the pastoral project for each parish. Usually there is a committee for the animation of this sector within the overall youth ministry project. It is important that the desire to guarantee the specific identity of our parishes is continually renewed by ensuring the characteristics that make them truly salesian, i.e. working class, youthful aspect, educative and with a missionary and community outlook. In our present cultural situation parishes need to make a special effort to be centres for formation, evangelisation and transmission of the faith.

The statistics show that the Region has 81 **oratories** and 110 **youth centres**, with some 15,000 oratorians and about 30,000 teenagers and youngsters members of the youth centres. The programmes and activities are aimed at catering for some 75,000 young people.

Spain has a Confederation that brings together most of the youth centres in the salesian provinces and those of the FMA (about 200), and **gives support to the SYM**. At present it is made up of 10 Provincial Federations, corresponding to Spain's ten "autonomous regions".

One of the more evident results of youth pastoral work in Spain and Portugal is the number and quality of youth leaders. Their salesian identity and professional competence is on a par with their self-giving and generosity. The challenge for the Salesians is to ensure that they receive adequate personal guidance.

Social concern and a sensitivity for poor youngsters have always been characteristic traits of the Salesian Congregation. The fact that the countries of the Region fall within the so-called “affluent” society of the west does not mean that we can close our eyes to the “new forms of poverty and marginalisation” to which this society gives rise. The Salesians of this Region are a living proof of great sensitivity and social commitment. Immigration, scholastic failure and all the problems associated with the family (divorce, separation, etc.) are a challenge to the creativity and the heart of the Salesians who are doing everything they can to find new solutions to new problems. In the Region there are 65 foundations working to assist youngsters with particular problems.

Excellent work is done in the social field by the schools and in particular by the vocational training centres, with their programmes aimed at finding employment for less gifted youngsters. There are also other initiatives in operation which make the social orientation of the Congregation significant: houses for boys from broken homes, workshops for remedial work or occupational therapy, “day centres”, units for out-of-school remedial teaching, educative programmes for the suburbs, hostels for problem children or those with court orders, initiatives for the follow-up of minority or ethnic groups and their social advancement. Social awareness has increased in all the Provinces, particularly with a sense of coordination and organisation, and of working in accordance with overall projects. In this way the salesian network of “établissements d’action sociale” has been set up in France and similar foundations in other Provinces.

On 30 January 2002, the Spanish Government conferred its Silver Medal of Solidarity on the National Confederation of Salesian Youth Centres – a well deserved recognition of the social work that had been carried out.

The option for the poorest of the poor is one that must characterise the life and pastoral activity of all our communities and

works, because it is one of the preferential criteria for our significance. Hence the validity of the observation made during the last Team Visit at Santiago de Compostela: "Promote in all salesian communities, and pastoral and educative communities, a more systematic and committed option for young people who are poor".³¹ In this sector too it is evident that our work must have an educative and evangelising slant; in this connection I quote another conclusion of the same Visit: "Develop among the poor youngsters the process of education to the faith proposed by the GC23".³² by fostering in particular a presence that is an explicit evangelical witness that can be a point of reference for the young and a stimulus helping them to open up to the faith. For this purpose the motivations of the vocation and the faith of the educators themselves must also be developed and deepened.

Youth pastoral work

"Evangelise by educating and educate by evangelising" was one of the pithy classical statements of Fr Egidio Viganò for summing up the whole of our mission. It states clearly and convincingly that all salesian activity must be at one and the same time both educative and evangelising, and that every kind of work or activity must be a means for education and evangelisation. With this in mind, I think that everything we have said so far falls within the field of youth ministry, which embraces all dimensions of the person and every sector of the salesian mission (schools, parishes, oratories, youth centres, marginalisation problems, sport and free time).

In the Region every Province has a full-time Delegate for Youth Ministry. The new educative and pastoral model of shared

³¹ Conclusioni - Significatività 1-1. Visita d'insieme Europa Ovest. Santiago de Compostela 1999.

³² Ibidem, Significatività 1-2.

responsibility between Salesians and the laity has been accepted and put into practice. For some time now each work prepares its own Educative and Pastoral Project and updates it with regard to formation and the application of the preventive system, so that it can be a point of reference for all members of the educative and pastoral community. Systematic and structured programmes are in use for educators and animators to enable them to fulfil their educative and pastoral vocation, recover the joy and originality of the salesian presence among young people, the zeal and freshness of pastoral and missionary work, and guarantee the salesian identity of our works.

Group activity is one of the columns of youth pastoral work in the Region, especially within the Iberian Conference. It is considered the ideal platform for the guidance of young people in their process of deepening and maturing in the faith, as a means for transmitting salesian spirituality, and as a context for the proposing and growth of vocational choices. It would be well to intensify the opening up of associations, structures and youthful formation processes, to the entire Salesian Family, by finding suitable occasions for an appropriate presentation of the salesian charism as a vocational option to each of the different groups.

The education of children today cannot be contemplated without an effort to become acquainted with all the contexts in which they live. The main one is – or should be – the family. We are tackling work in connection with parents' associations through ad hoc schools for parents, but we must do so more decisively.

The Delegation of the Iberian Conference and the **National Centre for Youth Ministry in Madrid** have carried out a serious work of reflection, recommendations and follow up in the entire field of Youth Ministry; they have made a notable contribution to putting into practice the suggestions of the last General Chapters. So too the committee for schools, the technical

secretariat for vocational formation, the “coordinadora de las plataformas sociales”, the committee for marginalisation, the committee for youth centres with the confederation and committee for sport carry out their work of coordination and support for the Iberian Conference. One result has been the drawing up of the educative and pastoral plan for each sector (school, parish, oratory, youth centre, sport and free time, social activities) and, especially, the “process of education in the faith”, the plan for the human and Christian formation for children, adolescents and young adults, which allows for personal guidance until the time of making a vocational choice in the Church and in society.

In every Province or at the level of the Iberian Conference some interesting activities are organised, such as Easter celebrations, the “Campobosco”, a spiritual retreat in Turin for leaders etc. These achieve their full effect to the extent that they are integrated into the general plan of formation, a process which includes daily items like the ‘Good Morning’ talk, weekly items (e.g. catechism class, group meetings), monthly (the 24th of the month, commemoration of Don Bosco), quarterly (days of retreat, campaigns and celebrations of various kinds), or annual (e.g. camping expeditions and other meetings in addition to those already mentioned).

It would be true to say that there was a period when the Iberian Conference served as a kind of experimental workshop for trying out new projects in the Congregation’s pastoral activity. The broad lines were defined and were successfully put into practice in the main areas of activity through sound organisation, and especially through group activity in which the emphasis was on processes of individual personal contact.

Perhaps the success of the youth pastoral work can be described as follows: on the one hand it centred on the individual youngster who needed to be accompanied in his growth in all aspects, intellectual, social, spiritual and vocational; and on the

other hand, there was a sense of unity and totality and therefore coordination of the various projects. The central position of the youngster requires team work and the fostering of cooperation between the different sectors of activity: school, parish, youth centre etc. They are different contexts which mutually reinforce each other and have the same fundamental objectives.

But this is a field in which there are always possibilities for further improvement. Communication channels constantly change, and so we must always be creative in seeking new ways of reaching the young; this will make of all our works settings for evangelisation and will enable us to ensure a better follow up of individuals in their process of growth and vocational discernment, with clear reference to salesian youth spirituality.

Social Communication

The Region has 29 houses with **social communication** activity of various kinds, including 17 bookshops and 6 publishing houses.

Each Province has a Delegate for social communication. In Spain there is also a National Delegate who is also the director of the Salesian Bulletin and the ANS correspondent.

At Marseilles there is a multimedia centre for reflection and production.

The Salesian Bulletin is published in three languages: in Portuguese bimonthly with 10,000 copies printed, in French bimonthly with 36.000 copies for France and Belgium, and in Spanish each month with 75,000 copies.

Outstanding is the interesting work of the publishing houses: "Editions Don Bosco" at Paris, which specialises in history, pedagogy and salesian spirituality; "Edições Salesianas" at Porto, with specialisation in salesianity, youth ministry and cate-

chetics; the “Central Catequística Salesiana” in Madrid (CCS), founded by Don Ricaldone and specialising in salesianity, catechetics, education and the formation of workers for the educational and pastoral sectors; and the EDEBE of the Barcelona Province which publishes scholastic texts in the different languages spoken in Spain, and has business agreements with our publishing houses in Argentina, Chile and Mexico.

The missionary dimension

All the Provinces of the Region have been animated by a **strong missionary spirit**. In 1959 the first African Province was erected with works that previously belonged to Belgium. In the same year Salesians from France began working in the Congo. To highlight the apostolic zeal of Portugal one need mention only Macau, Timor, Mozambique and Cape Verde. And Spanish missionaries are scattered the whole world over, being second only to the Italians. At the time the two new African Vice-provinces AFO and ATE were set up, 101 confreres who had formerly belonged to the Region stayed behind in the new circumscriptions, while at present more than six hundred missionaries in different parts of the world remain members of the Region.

Worthy of mention is also the **Missions Office of Madrid**, which has a function much wider than that of just collecting money for the Missions. It is organised in four sections, according to the services it offers: missionary animation in Spain by means of missionary exhibitions and the Magazine “Juventud Misionera”; accommodation and practical support for missionaries passing through Madrid; the collection of funds that every six months are placed at the disposal of the Rector Major; and the NGO “Young people for the Third World”, which has the double dimension of presenting and supporting projects and following them up, and that of promoting and fostering the formation of volunteers and providing them with experience.

I take this opportunity of expressing my personal gratitude and that of all the Congregation for the valuable service given by this Missions Office together with the generosity of so many benefactors.

The Salesian Family

The Salesian Family is one of the Region's consoling features. The *Cooperators* have carried out a notable work of updating and made a great effort to rediscover their true identity. The number of Cooperators in the Region who have made the Promise has reached about 1,940 with a further 600 aspirants. There are 140 centres of *Past-pupils*, organised in provincial federations. The vocation to the Salesian Family in the process of the maturing in the faith is included in the programme of youth pastoral work, and there is a praiseworthy involvement in the salesian mission on the part of the Cooperators, Past-pupils and the 'Friends of Don Bosco'. Because of their enthusiasm and the progress they have made the *Associations of Mary Help of Christians*, which in Spain alone have some 100,000 members, should be mentioned. The groups do not limit themselves to devotional practices but become involved in their own formation and also in catechetical work in youth centres, in visiting and caring for the sick, and collaboration with 'Caritas' and the whole Salesian Family in social activities on behalf of the poor and marginalised; but their main efforts are directed to spreading devotion to Mary Help of Christians.

There are also various groups of the *Don Bosco Volunteers*, and four centres of the "*Damas Salesianas*". A movement originating in Spain and linked with the Cooperators is the "*Hogares Don Bosco*", small groups of couples who want to live the preventive system and salesian spirituality within their own families. They are numerous and lively, especially in the southern provinces. Membership has reached 1,150 couples.

It may also be opportune to emphasise the fact that in addition to the *martyrs* of the Spanish civil war already beatified (and we are awaiting the reading of the decree of martyrdom of another 63 of them), the Region's Salesian Family has produced other wonderful *fruits of sanctity*: Sister Eusebia Palomino (FMA), Alexandrina Maria da Costa (Cooperator), Prince Augustus Czartoryski of Western European birth and blood, and others whose cause for beatification is in progress: Doña Dorotea de Chopitea (Spain), Fr Auguste Arribat (France).

At this point the role of the Congregation within the Salesian Family should be recalled. It has the duty of ensuring animation and formation, especially through the various delegates or assistants.

Though not all of them belong to the Salesian Family, the **lay people** who collaborate in our works are very close to us in so far as they share with us the same mission and spirit. In the Region 95% of those engaged in education or pastoral work are laymen and lay women, who in general carry out their roles with skill and responsibility in the various fields of education, pastoral work and administration.

The Provinces have drawn up the "**Lay Project**" which deals with relations with our collaborators, their responsibilities and their formation. For many years teachers, youth leaders and catechists have been engaged in formation activities in their own professional field and in that of Christian and salesian pedagogy, as well as in programmes undertaken either in the various centres or in activities organised by the Provinces or at other levels. Some interesting initiatives are in progress and the consequent formation is being shared to an increasing extent in various ways by Salesians and laity together. Special mention must be made of the "Jean Bosco" Centre in Lyons, inaugurated by Mother Antonia Colombo and myself on 13 February this year as an example of the desire to harness the combined efforts of Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the formation of reli-

gious and lay people in history, pedagogy and salesian spirituality. The same idea is behind the setting up the salesian network "Réseau Don Bosco" in Belgium.

Unfortunately there are still some places where traces remain among the Salesians of an old proprietary mentality which is slow to accept the great options of the GC24 which asked us to move on to a new model of relationships between SDBs and lay people, not only as regards working together but in a true sharing of responsibility in directive roles. Neither is there always ensured the personal salesian guidance of those laity called to a greater identification with Don Bosco and his charism, pedagogy and spirituality, precisely in view of their greater involvement in the mission.

Initial and subsequent formation

Such a considerable and robust salesian presence presupposes pastoral work for vocations and an initial and ongoing formation of high quality. Well remembered are the days when every Province of the Region had its own well filled houses of formation. The names of Lyons, Salamanca, Barcelona, Sanlúcar, to name only the theologates, still live in the hearts and minds of many confreres of the Region and from other parts of the Congregation, who learned there how to model their own lives on that of Don Bosco so as to become like him "priests for the young". Naturally, after all we have been saying, today's situation is very different. The crisis in vocations experienced in the Region is without parallel in any other part of the Congregation. We need only recall that on 16 August this year in the whole of the Region only three novices made their first profession. The reasons are to be found precisely in the factors that together make up today's culture in this part of the world.

Here, more than in any other aspect of the life of the Church and the Congregation, there is need for faith in the Lord of his-

tory who has his own times and rhythms, but this does not mean that we become resigned to it. It is up to us to continue working with a pastoral ministry to youth of a high quality, challenging in its aims and skilled in spiritual guidance, so as to help in the maturing process of life choices. We must also beg the Lord to send workers to this part of his harvest too. I invite you to read again the letter of Fr Vecchi: "*Now is the acceptable time*" (AGC 373). It should make each of us and everyone of our communities become promoters of vocations.

Formation has the wonderful task of transmitting the salesian charismatic identity to new generations, together with a store of knowledge and an intellectual and cultural preparation that enables them to live as consecrated apostles and to develop the mission. It must ensure charismatic identity, but also professional qualification as educators and shepherds of the young. All this requires time, a calm approach, structures, means, and above all competent formation guides, suitable programmes and a sufficient number of candidates to make the application of the means and programmes possible.

In the Region every Province has its own Delegate for Formation, and these are coordinated to form the Delegation for Formation of each Provincial Conference. It is gratifying to note that at every stage of initial formation the Region tries to promote the greatest possible "inter-provincial collaboration".

In the matter of formation we have only one road to follow: avoiding emergency solutions. We must seek **quality**. This implies certain demands imposed on us by our religious state and by the mission which must be implemented in a very concrete historical and cultural context.

- *A team of formation guides* that is sufficient and adequate both in number and in quality: men prepared in doctrine and by study for this task; men who understand modern youth culture and its problems; men who are skilled in spir-

itual direction and guidance, with the ability also to infuse enthusiasm for the religious and salesian life.

- *Adequate programmes*: Four years ago the Congregation published the new edition of the *Ratio*. It now needs to become known by all, especially by Provincials and their councils, by Rectors and formation guides, and to be put into practice. It is a question of programmes, content and processes to guarantee quality and identity in the maturing of the salesian vocation. If the mission is not merely generic in character, neither can formation be so.

The Region has always been outstanding for the attention it has given to the houses of formation, sparing neither personnel nor investment in their regard. Heartfelt thanks are due for the determined efforts being made at the present time despite the reduced number of candidates.

The Congregation must invest with generosity and responsibility in the people, time and means necessary to provide for the charismatic identity and the professional competence of every confrere, so as to ensure that the mission flourishes in the future. Time taken from reflection, from study, from prayer during the formation period is time completely lost, to the detriment of the quality of vocation and of the future mission; it will show itself later in superficiality and lack of enthusiasm and pastoral zeal. The educational zeal of *Da mihi animas* is the result of a life totally consecrated to God and given entirely to the young; it needs to be cultivated systematically with dedicated generosity at the school of Don Bosco. This is why it is so important to give due importance to the carrying out, accompaniment and evaluation of the pastoral procedures at every stage of formation.

I would also like to say a word about the vocation and formation of the **Brothers**. In the Region we are faced with widely differing situations, from Provinces with just 4 Brothers to the Province of Madrid which in the whole salesian world is sec-

ond only to the ICP for the number of lay confreres, or that of León which is the Province with the highest percentage of Brothers. The lay salesian has always been given special importance in the salesian life of the Region. We must do justice to history and prepare an adequate plan to encourage the vocation of the Brother at the present day, making sure at the same time that he receives the proper formation. To this end we shall have to have recourse to interprovincial collaboration, as has been done at other times with satisfactory results. Think for instance of the experience of La Almunia or of Urnieta.

Ongoing formation

In every community ongoing formation is generally structured around a weekly community meeting. The "community day" has its place in most programmes with gratifying results. In these meetings the Rectors make use of material offered them by the Provincial Office, or in the case of Spain by the Iberian Conference (Notebooks for Ongoing Formation – Ventall). I have noticed that the Rector Major's letters are printed separately and a copy given to every confrere, and also that the Congregation's documents are duly studied.

The Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians of France and Belgium have coordinated the organisation of various formation activities for their younger members in the course of the year. The Iberian Conference organises meetings of formation guides for different stages through the National Delegation for Formation. Other initiatives in ongoing formation are: an annual course in September, courses in preparation for perpetual profession, courses for recently ordained priests and young Brothers, courses for the elderly, trips to the Holy Land and Turin, courses of ongoing formation at Campello for the 40 to 55 age group, in which confreres from Latin America often participate.

For new Rectors of communities the Iberian Conference organises a week's course, every two years, in which various General Councillors take part.

The Western European Region has well understood that ongoing formation is a priority requirement for our vocation and mission, and has tried to take action accordingly. The cultural context changes very rapidly, especially among young people, and our mission as **educators** and **pastors** obliges us to keep ourselves updated. The great challenges of today's culture and of the consumer society must be faced with courage and competence through the quality of our education and evangelisation of the new generations of young people, and through the animation and formation of the laity, youth leaders, teachers, and those responsible for the communities and groups of the Salesian Family.

The fact remains however that the best contexts for ongoing formation are the community and daily life, for which a rhythm must be found that fosters the quality of prayer, of communal life, of work, study and reflection, of programming and subsequent evaluation. We must consider daily life as the best platform from which our formation takes off. It is a question of "keeping ourselves in form" professionally, pedagogically and spiritually; so it is not enough to know about the latest pedagogical principles or technical advances; it is also necessary to ensure a positive attitude of the heart in the face of today's youth culture and the educative and pastoral challenges it presents to us. It is fine to think of the whole of life as a vocation and mission, but it is equally exciting to be always willing and equipped to cope with it.

The great challenges of the Region

The presentation of the Western European Region brings before our eyes an area well identified and organised from a sale-

sian point of view with sound works and activities: highly esteemed academic centres under professional management; a strong social organisation and outreach; a growing attention to the world of marginalisation with a generous and creative approach; a strong and committed salesian youth movement organised (at least in the case of Spain) through a confederation of youth centres; a clear and demanding formation plan ("Processes of education in the faith") for the follow-up of youngsters from first communion until they decide on their vocation; well drawn up and shared programmes for schools, parishes, youth centres, free time and the social sector; animation with a missionary spirit, well expressed, among other ways, in volunteer work; a Salesian Family alive with vitality; professionally competent lay people conscious of their salesian identity and sharing responsibility for the salesian mission; a high level of study, knowledge and assimilation of salesian documents (General Chapters, letters of the Rector Major, Strennas, etc.); a considerable investment in the formation of lay people (teachers, leaders, catechists, Salesian Family); important business enterprises and activities in the field of Social Communication.

It is surprising that after all this the pastoral and vocational results do not correspond to the efforts that have been made. But in an affluent society that is ever more pluralist and secularised may be this is normal. Our task is to sow the seed; it is up to the Lord to make it bear fruit spiritually, pastorally and in vocations. I have already referred to the fact that here the State is able to satisfy the main needs of society. From this point of view the West has no need for the religious life considered as an economic factor in the fields of education, health and social development, and not even for caring for those most in need and the marginalised, like immigrants. What then is our mission in such a context? What place is there in it for the religious life? As Salesians what can we offer to young people? Or again, is the salesian charism of any use; is it needed and has it any future in this western society?

I reply at once that it most certainly has such a future. Indeed Europe is the place where the salesian mission seems to be most urgently needed. From an economic point of view modern European society is self-sufficient, but a huge mass of young people are lost and dissatisfied. Despite all the material resources at their disposal they find no meaning in their life and their horizons become oppressive and asphyxiating. These European youngsters are a direct challenge to the salesian charism; they put us to the test and question the truth, the practical relevance of the mission, pedagogy and spirituality of Don Bosco. For us the awesome challenge is to know whether or not we are able to accompany these youngsters who are searching for meaning in their lives, whether we can succeed in becoming signs and bearers of the love of God for young people marked by the new forms of poverty, whether we can bring them to the person of Christ as the only one who can satisfy the deepest yearning of their hearts and ensure for them the fullness of life.

European youngsters oblige us to deepen the heart of our charismatic identity: we need to convince them that God loves them, that God has filled them with a positive energy that must be set free, and with a power that must be developed; that God believes in them as leaders and agents of change for the building of a more human world. We cannot fail them! To do any less would be to deceive them and become useless in God's sight. The salesian mission is perfectly described in the Constitutions: "to be signs and bearers of the love of God" (C 2), which means being a visible, intelligible and effective presence of the love of God for them. Without this sign of grace the salesian presence among young people loses its missionary character and becomes nothing more than a job, mere philanthropic activity.

I wonder could there ever be any task more thrilling than this. Europe can render a great service to the Congregation: it can set us thinking and lead us to discover new ways of evangelising the young people of a post-modern and post-Christian

world. Bold and courageous initiatives have been started up, but we have to recognise that traditional formulas have little effect on the young from these new and different cultures. We must reinvent nearly everything: religious life as prophecy and a parable that speaks of God; and the salesian mission as the gateway to the meaning and fullness of life.

And this is something quite compatible with aging confreres or those who are sick, because it depends not so much on numbers and activities undertaken as on the fire carried by each one in his heart to be spread abroad and to become light.

Courses of action

Here then are the **courses of action** I propose to respond to the great challenges of the youth situation of today. We know that without Salesians Don Bosco's charism will not survive. The great problem in Europe is precisely the lack of vocations. Therefore the fundamental challenges will be to cultivate vocations, to ensure the organisation of the life of the Provinces and to restructure the Region so as to concentrate on communities that are more charismatically significant and so, from a pastoral and vocational point of view, more fruitful and productive.

1. - To develop a specific kind of work for vocations that bears witness to community life and the fruitfulness of the mission.

The way things are going with regard to vocations in the Region is disturbing, and all the indications are that the situation will remain the same in the absence of vigorous counter-measures. So decisive action must be taken. But we know that vocations are not so much the result of purely human techniques and strategies as the gift of God, who asks for our collaboration in tireless prayer to the Lord of the harvest, in the acceptance of

our own life as a vocation, and in fidelity to the charism and generous dedication to the mission among those to whom by preference we are sent.

For this reason pastoral work for vocations implies:

1.1. - *Ensuring the conditions for each community to live a true spiritual experience and be a witness to the faith that is visible and intelligible to the young.*

The current climate of secularisation and religious syncretism prompts religious communities to emphasise their character of sign and prophecy by ordering their daily life so as to express the primacy of the spiritual. A religious life that offers the world its holiness, one, that is, that aims at “the seeking and contemplation of God”, the reading, deciphering, recounting and interpreting of the constant interventions of God in history; this is the best service religious life can offer for the benefit of contemporary man. Therefore a religious family which is not a school and proposer of spirituality has little to say to this society. But spiritual depth is not given to us automatically. It is the fruit of grace and personal effort. There is a need for loving fidelity in observing the simple daily practices: meditation, spiritual reading, days of recollection, use of the sacrament of Reconciliation. The first element in the mission is allowing the young to observe our life: how we live our alliance with God, how we love each other, how the radical living of obedience, poverty and chastity makes us more free and available for generous dedication to our mission among them. This means in turn ensuring in practical terms that each community has within it the numbers and sufficient variety to enable it to bear witness to our life and animate the educative community. We must invest in the community to provide good **communication** and **interpersonal relationships**, so as to create an intense family experience; in this way the community will be both a witness and a prophecy of communion to those among whom it is work-

ing. The functioning of all the structures of the community (councils, assemblies) and the recovery of the charismatic role of the Rector will enable us to go beyond the managerial roles and enjoy the riches of salesian, religious and community life.

If we want to ensure that we are successful in our good resolutions and the objectives we set ourselves, it will be well to establish a time scale and criteria to be observed by the community to assess the witness value of their lives and apostolic zeal among the young.

1.2. - Creating a new kind of salesian presence that is truly meaningful, attractive and inviting for young people and with evangelisation as its first objective.

In the first place this implies “being present in a salesian manner” among the young, and making it clear in a practical way that the lowliest and most needy will always be given preference in salesian works and activities. We must reclaim evangelisation of the young as the primary objective of the Salesians: we are missionaries of the young. We are aware of the growing religious ignorance among the new generations; we know that the natural and traditional settings (family, school, youth centre, parish) are finding it more and more difficult to transmit the faith. The new evangelisation is the challenge for the Church and for the Salesians in Europe. Neither academic success nor social advancement is sufficient in itself to justify a salesian presence in Europe if there is not at the same time the practical possibility and a real determination to present the faith to the young.

The drawing up and putting into practice of a structured, systematic, unified pastoral plan with a concrete itinerary, as was asked for by the GC23, ranging from the first approach to personal and vocational guidance for those better disposed, will help to make of every sector (school, parish, free time) a seedbed for evangelisation.

Dear confreres, I encourage you to offer young people, with all freedom and respect and in a pedagogical manner, genuine faith experiences: schools of prayer, personalised educational approaches to sacramental life; experiences of free self-giving. the promotion of various kinds of voluntary work. At a time when the channels for communicating the faith seem disrupted we must encourage groups and associations, and the SYM as the means for the transmission of salesian spirituality and as opportunities for proposing Don Bosco's charism as it is lived in consecrated life. I emphasise the importance of ensuring for the young a sound Christian formation by means of systematic courses of religion and through catechesis. Careful attention must be given to the content, because the faith cannot be built on religious ignorance.

By the grace of God the Region can count on extraordinary material and structural resources, and especially on a number of outstanding lay people at every level, even in the field of salesianity. We must show our confidence in them by involving them in pastoral work and ensuring their proper formation. Together with them we must use creativity and imagination to find responses to the questions and challenges raised by the culture and by evangelisation of the young at the present day.

It is true that the average age begins to be much higher than it was, but young people want from us both personal and vocational guidance. It is a matter therefore of rekindling in our hearts the flame of the *Da mihi animas* of our beloved Don Bosco, which is nothing else but the passion for God and the passion for the young.

2. - To implement the necessary changes in the life and organisation of the Provinces and of the Region.

It is not difficult to identify some of the dangers that threaten us at the present time: imbalance between the number of

Salesians and the vast and complex nature of the works, which means that we have to invest our best personnel resources in the organisation, management and maintenance of structures, and so at times weaken our presence among people (youngsters, leaders, teachers and parents) and the educative and pastoral guidance of individuals; the heavy burden of work undertaken which can cause the community and the individual Salesian, the serious reasons behind the work and the community's role as animator of the EPC to be lost sight of; activism, which on the one hand deprives the salesian mission of its real meaning, and the confreres of the freshness and satisfaction of the vocation they are living, and on the other impedes reflection and becomes an obstacle to any change as it prevents us from listening to reflections within the Congregation, to the signs of the times, to the action of the Spirit, and even to youth culture itself.

The number of Salesians, the ageing phenomenon (which is going to become worse in the years immediately ahead), the fall in the number of vocations and the need to make our communities and mission more meaningful are demanding urgently a new kind of organisation within each community and Province, but also a restructuring of the Region itself, because we cannot allow routine or the weight of organisation to hold back the vitality of the charism or impoverish the service we give to the young.

The Region understands the urgency of this matter and has already taken the first steps to meet it. France has already seen the unification of its former two Provinces, and Belgium, Spain and Portugal have launched studies in view of a new restructuring.

When we speak of restructuring, we do so only in view of a better and more agile service to the mission and a more significant formulation of the charism. Within each Province and at the level of the Region itself we must make use of the dynamics of synergy and gather our forces together so that they can be applied in a more significant and successful manner, pastorally and vocationally, remembering that at the present moment the

primary objective of the Region is that of developing a specific kind of work for vocations that may be expressive of the fruitfulness of community life and of the mission.

Risks are not lacking: one of them is not being able to overcome the inertia imposed by the management of huge structures and not having the courage to make bold choices clearly consonant with our charismatic identity. If spiritual superficiality is the great danger that can destroy the meaning of religious life in the West, "genericism" is the first enemy of the mission.

It seems to me that the most important words of the Congregation on behalf of European youth have not yet been spoken. The salesian mission in this secularised world of ours is so great and important that perhaps even from a pedagogical point of view a crisis is needed to prepare ourselves adequately for a task so extraordinary and worthwhile.

New wineskins for new wine. This is the image I used in my closing address to the GC25. We cannot remain bogged down in the past. To a new culture with new kinds of poverty and new needs, we must offer new responses as Don Bosco did, inventing them to meet the needs of the young. In fact, it is not structures that make up a salesian work, but the educators defined by a charism, those to whom the work is addressed, and the programmes of education and evangelisation offered them. And there is no doubt that the first thing we must offer the young is our heart, totally focused by pastoral charity and the educative zeal of Don Bosco.

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Dear confreres, the Region is living at an exciting and challenging time: a crossroads, a profound cultural turning point, a "*kairós*". And there are no special strategies for achieving the desired results. The only things that are relevant here are coherence in personal life, communal witness and boldness in the mission of evangelisation.

After this presentation of the Western European Region, during which I have had in mind grateful and happy memories of each and everyone of the confreres who have written and continue to write golden pages in the story of these countries of Europe, I conclude by thanking God who makes use of us to further his wonderful saving design for the young.

May Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco's Madonna, devotion to whom has been so wide-spread and so well received in this Region, and particularly in Spain as perhaps in no other part of the Congregation, continue to bless our communities and be with us in our apostolic work. To her I entrust each and everyone of you.

Pascual Chávez V.

Fr Pascual Chávez V.
Rector Major