

# acts

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

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco  
Via della Pisana, 1111  
Casella Postale 18333  
00163 Roma

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Tipolitografia Istituto Salesiano Pio XI - Via Umbertide, 11 - 00181 Roma  
Tel. 06.78.27.819 - Fax 06.78.48.333 - E-mail: [tipolito@pcn.net](mailto:tipolito@pcn.net)  
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**“WITH THE COURAGE OF DON BOSCO  
ON THE NEW FRONTIERS  
OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION”**

**Introduction.** **1. Historical approach.** A commitment of fidelity. Appreciation of our past history. A new mentality. A cultural conversion. Salesians' urgent need of formation. Organizational and institutional response. Further incentives for our future activity. **2. Challenges thrown up by social communication.** Development in technology. Innovations in the media at technical and structural levels. Characteristics of the digital culture. Challenges from the standpoint of education. Challenges from the institutional point of view. **3. Practical guidelines.** 3.1. Change of strategy. 3.2. Working tools. 3.2.1. Fr Vecchi's letter on social communication. 3.2.2. Salesian social communication system. 3.2.3. Guidelines for formation of Salesians in social communication. **4. Conclusion.**

Rome, 24 June 2005  
*Birthday of St John the Baptist*

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you after the experience of the Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, where together with numerous participants I inaugurated with a concelebrated Eucharist, followed by a cultural event, the parts of the restoration of the Basilica so far completed. Those parts now glow with light and colour; many of us had never been able to see such beauty in the structure and decoration which had become hidden by the dust of years. As I have done already during the celebrations at Turin, this letter gives me the opportunity to express my gratitude to all the Provinces, the Salesian Family and civic institutions, together with the communities, the many devotees and benefactors, who have shown their love of Mary through their financial contributions.

Since my last circular letter I have had numerous engagements, including several Team Visits. In particular we have witnessed some events of worldwide importance that merit a com-

ment: the sickness, death and funeral ceremonies of John Paul II and the conclave, election and inauguration of the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

In the declaration I wrote on the day before the death of *John Paul II*. I pointed with gratitude and admiration to some traits which, in my opinion, made of Pope Wojtyła an outstanding figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the greatest pontiffs, to such an extent that he was already being called “the Great”. His death had an effect on so many people that exceeded all expectations. The responsibility for such a phenomenon did not lie with the media – they merely reported it. Immense crowds of men and women, young and old, from all parts of the world and all religious beliefs and social classes filled St Peter’s Square and the neighbouring streets in an unimaginable expression of amazement and gratitude, of faith and of Church. And to these must be added the millions of people in all parts of the world who joined together for the celebrations and followed the various events through the media.

It is paradoxical that it took the death of John Paul II to manifest his greatness as a man, as a believer, as a shepherd. What he said at the end of his life, according to his personal secretary who had just told him that St Peter’s Square was full to overflowing with young people, could be applied to everyone: “I went to meet you in every part of the world. Now you have come to visit me, and I am grateful to you for doing so”.

It seemed that physical frailty and sickness had deprived him of the power of speech, but they had not bent his iron will to finish the mission the Lord had entrusted to him; rather did it make him more amiable, more attractive, more eloquent. It brings to my mind what Paul said to the Corinthians: “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”; “for while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor 5,1.4).

Now he is living close to God in the fullness of life. We are left not only with a host of memories, but with a spiritual testament, a testament of a love that endured to the end for the Lord Jesus, for the Church and for mankind. To us and to our young people in particular he leaves that message which we made our programme of animation and government for the present six-year period: “My dear Salesians, make yourselves holy!”

In the days that followed his death, the Church intensified her prayer. As usual the Conclave gave rise to much speculation. That is only natural, but this time expectations were greater than ever, not least because of the massive media interest, and the influence they were able to bring to bear through newspapers, magazines, television programmes and the internet. The media even went so far as to indicate the programme and priorities of the new Pope and what he should do. In an atmosphere of prayer and discernment the participating Cardinals elected the one whom the Lord had already chosen, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who took the significant name of *Benedict XVI*.

His first actions, and in particular his homily at the inauguration of his pontificate, have shown us a Pope with a clear mind, a deep humanistic formation a vast theological and cultural preparation, who prefers the essential to the rhetorical, but above all they have shown us the man and the believer. No wonder therefore that he has not felt “the need to present a programme of government” and that his fundamental choice is to “listen to the word and will of the Lord”, and let himself be guided by him “so that it is God himself who is guiding the Church at this point in time”.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, by explaining the signs that characterize the Petrine ministry, the pallium and ring, he gave a clear outline of the challenges: “to lead men out of the desert – the desert of poverty, of hunger and thirst, of abandonment and solitude, of destructive love, of ignorance of God, of the emptiness of souls that have

<sup>1</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for solemn inauguration of Petrine Ministry, OR*, 25.04.2005.

lost the awareness of the dignity and purpose of man – towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, to him who gives us life and life in all its fullness”; and “to use the net of the Gospel to lift mankind out of the sea contaminated by every estrangement into the land of life and the light of God”. It is the ministry of the shepherd and the fisherman. If this is the task to which the Pope feels himself called to carry out in the Church, he reminded everyone of the appeal of John Paul II 26 years ago: “Throw open the gates to Christ!”; and he added: “He who lets Christ in, loses nothing, absolutely nothing, of what it takes to make life free, great and beautiful”.

Today as we welcome Pope Benedict XVI we embrace him with affection, we accompany his ministry with our prayer as Don Bosco would do, and we promise him our fidelity and collaboration.

And now I turn to the theme of the present letter: **“With the courage of Don Bosco on the new frontiers of social communication”**. Some will wonder what a circular on social communication has got to do with the reflections and incentives contained in my previous letters. Various reasons have led me to make this choice. The main and most substantial reason is that social communication is one of the priority fields for the Salesian mission (cf. C 6); it is of so great importance that the last General Chapter finally decided to elect a General Councillor for this sector alone. The second, less immediate, reason was the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Don Bosco’s letter of 19 March 1885 on “*Spreading good books*”,<sup>2</sup> a true programme of social communication for the Congregation. And the final and more programmatic reason was the Apostolic Letter of John Paul II *The Rapid Development*, published on 24 January 2005, to recall the Decree of Vatican II *Inter Mirifica*, promulgated by Paul VI just over forty years ago. This series of factors convinced me that a letter on this theme would be opportune.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Letters of St John Bosco* (ed. E. CERIA), vol. IV, pp. 318-321.

Using what I have written in previous letters as a starting point, I could also add: holiness would be of little use if it did not provide visible and intelligible witness. A consecrated Salesian life would be well nigh useless if it could not be communicated and proposed to others. Even Don Bosco's experience of contact with Christ would become irrelevant were it not known and made public. And finally, hearing God's word is authentic only if it becomes transformed into witness, because every proclamation brings with it a vocation to be lived and a mission to be fulfilled.

By reminding the Salesians of Don Bosco's letter on good books, we want to recall and make re-echo in our hearts the heartfelt appeal by which our Father entrusts us with "a most important part of our mission", "one of the principal purposes of our congregation", "one of the greatest enterprises" entrusted to him by divine Providence, one of the best means – and even a "divine" means – of ensuring the fruitfulness of our ministry.

In this genuine "testament" prompted by his pastoral spirit, Don Bosco wants to make us fully aware of how indispensable this duty of social communication is for the fulfilment of the Salesian mission. The language he uses leaves us in no doubt; it cannot be played down. He speaks of a "most important part", of a "principal purpose", of a "main enterprise". But the most surprising aspect, nevertheless, is precisely the clear conception he has of the contribution of social communication to the processes of social renewal taking place in his time, and his inspired decision to be part of that renewal process. In this way he could provide cultural nourishment for young people and the working classes, who more than any others ran the risk of being overcome by the new developments. To carry out a work of culture, to provide valid means of knowledge and formation, to provide opportunities for healthy relaxation, these are all means for realising at the same time an effective process of education and evangelisation, and for involving young people themselves as apostles in the spreading of good books.

## 1. HISTORICAL APPROACH

### *A commitment of fidelity*

In line with the spirit of what he was writing about, the passion for the salvation of youngsters which always drove him on, one hundred years ago Don Bosco not only entrusted us with the “spreading of good books” but also called us to a “fidelity” which we must be able to interpret and make “coordinated” and “complete in all its parts” and in every context of our time for the effective implementation of the Salesian mission. We cannot educate, we cannot cooperate in the realisation of God’s kingdom without a serious commitment to the *spreading of a culture of Christian inspiration* among youngsters and people in general. Effective methods must be found to sow and develop a “thought of God” among those assailed by “godlessness and heresy”.

His talented commitment to the printed word was expressed in the strategy of forming an “well-ordered system” of publications. For Don Bosco this meant not overlooking anyone or any aspect of life: fostering virtue with edifying reading matter, instilling a spirit of devotion, preserving from error, providing material for quiet times, and making youngsters saviours of their own companions.

In the letter we find set out in detail the practical decisions Don Bosco made in the publishing field, and we know how he wanted to be “always in the vanguard of progress” in this area. Of us he asks that we commit ourselves to the “coordination” of his project so as to make it “complete in all its parts”. It is a demanding task that we must be able to interpret with ingenuity and make effective according to the requirements of the times and places in which we are working.

This is what the Congregation has tried to do in fidelity to our Father, and it is what we too are called upon to realise today with creativity and practical skill, precisely in the light of the circular of 1885 which has always been the guide for Salesian educative

and pastoral work and was defined by the SGC as the *Magna Carta* of Salesian activity in this field" (SGC 450).

Sometimes our attitude has been rather defensive; we tried to ward off the harm that could arise from the media; it was more a struggle against such means rather than an effort to make use of them for a good purpose. But this, nevertheless, did not prevent farsighted and courageous Rector Majors from setting up publishing houses which were able to give continuity to Don Bosco's work; we may recall the foundation of the SEI by Don Rinaldi and that of the LDC by Don Ricaldone. Their concern was not only to launch publishing houses, but also "to prepare writers, train technicians, improve our printing establishments and bookshops"; and this happened not only in Italy but in all the Congregation.

### ***Appreciation of our past history***

The springtime that followed Vatican II, and the incentives of the decree *Inter Mirifica*, approved on 4 December 1963, led to a reflection in the 19<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of 1965 on the instruments of social communication, their importance in our apostolate, and their use and functioning. The need was recognised to prepare Salesian and lay specialists to make the best use of productions in this field, to carry out a more effective pastoral work among young people and the working classes, and to be able to collaborate with institutions, associations and other bodies engaged in social communication (cf. GC19, 171). In the 1965 Chapter, forty years ago, it became evident that we were not fully aware of the commitment implied by the use of such means and that there was an evident lack of qualified personnel. In the wake of the conciliar decree there was an acknowledgement of the enormous importance of the instruments of social communication and of the need for qualified personnel to employ them at an educational and pastoral level. Since then a great deal has been accomplished, even though at times we were inclined to bite off more than we could chew.

The *Special 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter* of 1971-72, in the light of the new suggestions from the Church given in *Communio et Progressio*

which offered a positive vision of the new era of the media, emphasised the importance of the extraordinary phenomenon of the mass media and pointed out the great influence they had on history and human life. To avoid giving way in the face of the inordinate pressure they exerted on individuals, the Chapter asked that significant work be done at a cultural and educational level. Young people had to be helped to be aware and avoid becoming conditioned, so as to be able to make free and responsible choices. It was a question of accompanying youngsters so as to enable them to grow in the making of mature decisions by the development of individual talents, not least in reference to the mass media (SGC 458).

The new perspective of interpretation and understanding, careful reflection on the Church's teaching, and the experience and recommendations of Don Bosco in the circular of 1885 form the basis of the guidelines in the renewed Constitutions which received definitive approval in the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter of 1984. According to the new constitutional text, social communication becomes a privileged path for our mission as "educators of the faith for the working classes" (C 6). Then art. 43, taking up the considered reflection of GC21, points to social communication as "a significant field of activity which constitutes one of the apostolic priorities of the Salesian mission".

The 21<sup>st</sup> *General Chapter* of 1978 had already recognised and emphasised the implications of social communication (n. 148). In the renewed Constitutions, drawing inspiration also from the ecclesial reflection of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (n. 45), the heartfelt appeal of Don Bosco is reaffirmed in an effective and faithful manner, and they restore to the Congregation "a field of action" of extraordinary efficacy in the service of education and evangelisation. It is no longer merely a "vehicle" or "collection of instruments", no longer a particular apostolic activity or branch of it, but rather a "main road to the full realisation of our task as educators and pastors who are also communicators".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 400.

In this process carried out by the Congregation towards the reaffirmation of what our Father Don Bosco had prophetically proclaimed and achieved, we cannot forget two documents which have made a notable contribution to the enrichment and positive realisation of the course that has been followed: they are two contributions on social communication by Fr Viganò and by Fr Vecchi.

On the occasion of the centenary of the foundation of the Salesian Bulletin in 1977, the then Rector Major Fr Luigi Ricceri had written a letter on the significance and importance of Salesian information: *Family news*. In it he recalled the need for commitment in the field of information and in everything connected with social communication. Assiduity about spreading family news serves to foster the sense of belonging, of “feeling the joy of being sons of Don Bosco”, and of making known things that are done in order to create a positive image and, as Don Bosco expressed it, increase the number of the benefactors of humanity. But it is especially the letter of Fr Viganò and that of Fr Vecchi on social communication which have given impetus, depth and structural unity to reflection and implementation in this field. In the meantime the GC23 and GC24 have also made significant contributions in this connection.

### ***A new mentality***

Fr Egidio Viganò's letter of 1981, *Social communication challenges us*,<sup>4</sup> interprets the significance of the long reflection made by the GC21 and is a strong recommendation to Salesian activity in the field of social communication. Fr Viganò invites the Salesians to *change their mentality* in this regard. We cannot give it its true value unless we fully accept the new reality; we cannot consider it only as something from which we must defend ourselves; we must know it, and moreover assign to it its proper importance. We must become ever more knowledgeable about it; we have to recognise social communication as a massive educative factor that moulds mentalities and creates culture. Our mission of education

<sup>4</sup> Published in AGC 302, 1 October 1981.

and evangelisation is necessarily rooted in the area of culture and consequently we must be alive to the cultural transformation now in progress, so as to be able to provide a significant presence that allows us to spread our ideals and values.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> *General Chapter* of 1990 showed itself fully aware of the new social and cultural conditions in which Salesian communities were carrying out their mission. Having entered a world in which distances had been nullified by the ease of transport and communications, and in which new cultural trends and ways of life were being established, we had to prove ourselves capable of facing different contexts; it was a matter of grasping the problems and making them our own, so as to be in tune with the youth situation (n. 17). Young people in particular were much influenced by the language and life models proposed by the mass media. They are the natural users of such instruments, even though their use is marked by ambivalence (n. 63).

To remain alongside young people in their development and journey of faith, to enter into harmony with them, new and effective ways of communication have to be found. Like Don Bosco we must be capable of “great originality in the apostolic undertakings to defend and sustain the faith” (C 43; GC23, 256). Starting from these circumstances and requirements, the Chapter made clear the need for a new commitment to exploit social communication for the education of young people to the faith. Different things were necessary: at local level the ability of the community in the use of the mass media should be fostered; at provincial level someone needed to be in charge of this sector to follow up the individual communities; at central level animation by the Councillor for Social Communication was important for the formation of the Salesians and the launching of projects to meet the prevailing demands.

### ***A cultural conversion***

The emphasis and insistence on the importance of communication in the 24<sup>th</sup> *General Chapter* of 1996 were closely linked with the

new perspective of charismatic sharing between Salesians and lay people. The involvement of the laity in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco calls for a particular commitment in communication to foster the capacity for relationships, an active presence among the young, and the cultural and spiritual attitudes indispensable for effective communication. But it is not just a matter of functional reflection. It includes a deep awareness of the changing social and cultural situation and of the innovations and incidence of the means of communication; in this field lay people can make a notable contribution.

For the full and effective use of social communication, initiatives were suggested at different levels for the coordination of the demands of formation, of organisation and of the use of the media. There was insistence in particular that every Province, with the assistance of the Councillor General for SC, should draw up a plan for social communication. The Rector Major himself with his Council were asked to study “a practical plan for the promotion, coordination and exploitation of social communication, as a significant field of action which has a place among the apostolic priorities of the salesian mission (C 43)”.<sup>5</sup>

The letter of the Rector Major Fr Juan E. Vecchi of 8 December 1999: *Communication in the salesian mission*<sup>6</sup> asks for a true *cultural conversion*. Social communication is pervasive; it covers all salesian activity; we must be able to adopt new points of view, paying particular attention “to the communicative and involving ability of the context to affect typical values of the Salesian spirituality and mission” (p. 16). The possibilities offered by modern communication techniques must find us ready to adopt them and appreciate the extent to which they make possible instantaneous information all over the world.

Fr Vecchi asks us to consider how much the new points of view can enrich our commitment to social communication through collaboration with the laity and attention to local circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> GC24 137.

<sup>6</sup> Published in AGC 370, 8 December 1999.

Collaboration with lay people stimulates, in fact, the integration of views and experiences, which become effective to the extent to which they are the result of true mutual concern and synergy. Attention to local circumstances, moreover, requires the ability to communicate outside the religious community and collaborators; it makes us ask ourselves how we can make our Salesian presence more effective in our locality as regards what we can do for young people and the marginalised; it challenges us as to how we can make the pastoral and educative community a significant presence, able to involve others and radiate new sensitivities.

### ***Salesians' urgent need of formation***

This progressive understanding of the implications and significance of social communication has also made us aware of the need for an adequate formation on the part of the Salesians.

The document of the GC21, after the enlightening clarification concerning the relevance and manner of exploiting social communication, presents an unequivocal assessment of the situation regarding the formation of Salesians; it speaks of lack of professionalism and of a pioneering spirit among individuals and of the "distressing lack of confreres or teams of Salesians who can utilise the mass media both in substance and style for the adequate evangelisation of modern man. Teams who can plan, research, try pilot programmes and develop the mass media on a serious scientific basis are either insufficient or totally lacking" (GC21, 151).

Fr Viganò too, in his own letter, insists on the need for formation, study, research and structural planning to ensure that the confreres have at least a minimum of competence. In this specific field of formation the Congregation has made commitments resulting in the present Faculty of the Sciences of Social Communication at the UPS. Structures of animation have been set up at central and provincial levels; initiatives have been multiplied; new instruments and channels of communication have been installed, but we are not yet capable of building a new areopagus in the actual contexts where we are living and working.

We have still to find an effective method of facing the facts and entering into the new culture, of successfully integrating our thought and activity in the language and styles of communication, of helping to develop a critical and creative mentality with regard to the messages, languages, approach and attitudes etc. of the media.

As Fr Viganò had done before him, Fr Vecchi emphasised in his letter the need for an adequate formation process; if our skills do not keep pace with the changes, sooner or later we shall be left behind. What is required therefore is:

- *a basic formation*: this is a matter of learning to read and appreciate what we are all using, that is, to train ourselves to be able to make good use of the new media and to be able to do so in a discerning manner;
- *a second level of formation for animators and workers in the education and pastoral fields*: they must be able to integrate into their educational and pastoral plans the criteria of social communication; this is not merely the ability to use the media skillfully; it is a question of inculturation, of education and pastoral action within the new culture of the media (AGC 370, p. 24);
- *a third level of formation for specialists*: some confreres must be prepared in the field of social communication, with a formal invitation to take advantage of our university faculty for the purpose.

In view of an adequate formation of this kind, Fr Vecchi offered some practical guidelines which are very significant and enlightening at the level of community (pp. 29-37) and at provincial level (pp. 37-43).

### ***Organisational and institutional response***

These decisions about social communication, made by General Chapters or by Rector Majors, must obviously not be reduced to reflections or declarations of intent, even with some practical applications; they have been given concrete expression in a response that has become ever more structured and institutional.

So in the GC22 of 1984 the Department of Social Communication was set up, and the sector was entrusted to a member of the General Council. Then on 8 December 1989 the Institute of Social Communication was inaugurated at the Salesian Pontifical University, as a commitment linked with the centenary of Don Bosco's death and as an implementation of the charism of our Father, who was a great educator and communicator. In his inaugural address Fr Egidio Viganò emphasized this point: "We are convinced that with the creation of the ISCOS – alongside other well-deserving Catholic Institutions or new ones coming into being – we are making an important gesture, albeit in a humble way, for the evangelisation and education of young people and of the working class: to help them to mature in their ability to communicate in the modern world, and dialogue effectively with men and women of today".<sup>7</sup>

The Congregation is looking to this new foundation for the formation of educators and communicators of the Salesian Family at a high level, and for courageous research across the whole field of social communication, with special attention to theological and pastoral aspects of the sector, to the study of the social theories of the media, to the trying out of methods of education in the media, to the new languages of catechesis and religious communication, and to the production of religious and educational programmes.

Today ISCOS has become a faculty – an indication of the commitment of the Congregation and the Salesian Family to the preparation of personnel suited to the new task. It is evident that for the sustaining of so important a faculty the collaboration and shared responsibility of the whole Congregation is needed, and for this I make appeal.

In the GC23 the need for a provincial delegate for social communication was pointed out, and the GC24 emphasised the need for a provincial plan for this sector together with the need to

<sup>7</sup> Cf. F. LEVER, (ed), *I programmi religiosi alla radio e televisione*, LDC, Torino 1991, p. 138.

strengthen provincial animation through the assiduous activity of the delegate. In some Provinces these two guidelines have been well and successfully applied; for others, on the other hand, implementation is still on the back burner.

After considering the growing importance of the social communications sector in the context of the activities of the Salesian Congregation, and in the spirit of arts. 6 and 43 of the Constitutions already referred to, our recent GC25 made the decision that there should be a General Councillor dedicated exclusively to social communication. Following the Chapter, in the Project of animation and government of the Rector Major with his Council, particular attention was given to this sector with the provision of objectives, procedures and interventions in four areas: the overall view, animation and formation, information and business enterprises.

### ***Further incentives for our future activity***

A reminder about the “new mentality” and “cultural conversion”, to which previous Rector Majors have urged us, has come to us more recently from the Holy Father John Paul II who, in the Apostolic Letter already referred to of 24 January 2005, *The Rapid Development*, has emphasised that the Church at the present day is not only committed to the use of the media, but is called upon to “integrate the message of salvation into the ‘new culture’ that these powerful means of communication create and amplify” (RS 2).

This means without any doubt that the use of current technology and techniques of social communication form part of the Church’s mission at the present day, and such use involves various fields of activity: religious information, evangelisation, catechesis, the formation of workers for this sector, and education.

We are aware nevertheless that today social communication cannot be reduced to the use of the media; it has already become, in fact, a very powerful agent promoting and spreading ways of life and of personal, family and social behaviour. Because of this, the Pope tell us, we cannot ignore the fact that “the culture itself,

prescinding from its content, arises from the very existence of new ways to communicate with hitherto unknown techniques and vocabulary” (RS 3). In our “age of global communication” humanity is called upon to face up to “the different processes of the mass media”. From this confrontation are born convergences for “the formation of personality and conscience, the interpretation and structuring of affective relationships, the coming together of the educative and formative phases, the elaboration and diffusion of cultural phenomena, and the development of social, political and economic life” (n. 3).

All this represents a real challenge, especially for those responsible for the formation of children and young people (n. 7). For this reason too we must be aware of our responsibility in the field of social communication for a sort of “pastoral and cultural revision, so as to deal adequately with the times in which we live” (n. 8).

To be capable of accepting responsibility in the present media culture, the Pope invites us to a “*vast work of formation* to assure that the mass media be known and used intelligently and appropriately” (n. 11); to a “*co-responsible participation* in their administration”, appealing to a “culture of shared responsibility” (n. 11); to take advantage of “the great possibilities of mass media in promoting dialogue, becoming vehicles for reciprocal knowledge, of solidarity and of peace” (n. 11).

This church document, as was the case in preceding decades, is for us an incentive to accept the new elements of our time and to make decisions at the present day with the strength and spirit of Don Bosco.

## **2. CHALLENGES THROWN UP BY SOCIAL COMMUNICATION**

In the desire to live in fidelity to Don Bosco and his charism, and to take up this last appeal of John Paul II on social communi-

cation which appeared in the Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, I would like to share with you the challenges which the media culture presents to us today. This will enable us to better define what practical measures we should take, in view of the carrying out of our Salesian mission.

### ***Development in technology***<sup>8</sup>

Looking at communication as a complex system, it can be said that the birth of new technology never takes place independently of the social context, in which political, economic and cultural factors play a decisive part. But it is also true that when a new technology becomes part of everyday social life, it provides a new language for the interpretation of life. In this sense the different media help to interpret human existence in a new way and at the same time reveal the kind of understanding that man has of himself and of the world.

For example, the *book* has given origin and impulse to individuality, favouring the logical and linear approach and emphasising rationality. Within the written text one can move forwards and backwards; but the material it contains is set out in a sequential manner and presupposes a link between what went before and what comes afterwards. The power of the written word confers on the text the primacy of precision in the transmission of literary, poetic, philosophic, theological or political material. This is something that cannot easily be substituted by purely visual language.

*Television* prefers to use repetition rather than analysis, myths rather than facts. It concentrates on turning events into a spectacle; it therefore plays the role of the bass-drum, for the purpose of attracting the attention of many people in the great television piazza, where choral consent is called for rather than any personal approval. It is the constant chatter and image-changing that produces the lasting spell. The synchronisation of the viewers

<sup>8</sup> Cf. F. PASQUALETTI, *New Media e cultura digitale. Una sfida all'educazione*, in *Orientamenti pedagogici*, vol. 51, Jan-Feb 2004.

generates groups with commonly shared emotions; youngsters meet each other, discuss their preferred programmes, repeat expressions and catchphrases; adults exchange ideas on the basis of their preferences for one programme or another. The force of television lies in the magic of seeing images and movement; no matter how much one is used to it, the magic box keeps all viewers spellbound.

There are other *technologies related to television*, which have developed a process of ever greater and independent interaction, introducing practices that could be grouped under the word *control*.

The *analogue video-recorder*, for example, has given the user the possibility of changing the time and place for viewing a programme, and in addition has fostered the spreading of video material to contexts different from that of production.

The *remote control* has developed the style of *zapping*, which is not just the simple changing from one channel to another but can become a montage of clips from different programmes and is often just a way of escaping the advertisements.

The *video-camera*, from the now defunct VHS to today's digital model, has transformed the user into a small-scale producer of scenes from daily life.

The *computer* has gathered to itself the various languages of the classical media: written text, image, sound, animation, video, graphics etc., thus giving rise to a form of communication which has developed into the combined use of different media, interaction, interface, non-linearity, navigation, hypertext, access, etc. Nowadays at no great expense a user can set up an audio or video station and become a producer.

*Internet*, also defined as the network of networks, is the metaphor for the new communication. Like the telephone, it has annihilated space and time; but while the telephone carries only the voice, the internet has become the means for a new way of

living and thinking. Nonlinear, bidirectional, unconfined, interactive, mutant and floating, the network is a place, a language, a way of using and thinking communication, which arouses considerable interest and also concern.

Every day, by means of the network, hundreds of millions of users exchange all kinds of messages, gain access to documents, participate in telematic groups, meet each other in electronic chatrooms and discuss every kind of argument. The internet is becoming ever more a space for personal development or for that of a business or institutional group.<sup>9</sup>

With the internet all human activities have been made virtual, but in particular, a process of decentralisation of power and control over communication has been launched that never existed in previous history. From a positive point of view the internet can be seen as a great opportunity for the intellectual growth of humanity. Unless economic reasons totally prevail, the network is like a flowing sea of knowledge on which all can draw for their own political and economic purposes.

Two specialists in this field<sup>10</sup> assert that if you really want to understand *virtual reality* it is important to appreciate how we perceive the daily reality that surrounds us. Virtual reality is a way of visualising, manipulating and interacting with the computer and with extremely complex information. The method concerned with the interaction between man and machine is commonly called interface.

Virtual reality is nothing else but the newest method in a long chain of interfaces. In a certain sense it would seem as though it were intended to make the computer invisible by transforming the complexity of data into three-dimensional representations with

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G.S. JONES (ed), *Virtual culture: Identity & communication in cybersociety*, London, Sage, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> S. AUKSTAKALNIS - D. BLATNER, *Silicon mirage. The art and science of virtual reality*, Berkeley (CA), Peachpit Press, 1992.

which one can interact, giving greater space to the freedom and creativity of the user. This does not mean that the freedom and creativity of the user are guaranteed or augmented by the virtual reality. One might say that the latter is in an indirect way the recognition of the complexity with which man acts and interacts in an environment, to know, communicate and represent himself and the world. Perhaps the greatest service that virtual reality can give to today's culture is the recovery of reality.

### ***Innovations in the media at technical and structural levels***

Radio and television had already introduced the cultural model of mass consumption. Digitalisation leads to a form of personal consumption and, in the opinion of some people, to a true and proper digital culture. In this connection it will be of use to look at some transitions of a technical and structural nature, that have been fostered by the spread of digitalisation.

1. *From 'one to many' to 'many to many'*. The transmission of the mass media was a flow-type of one-to-many, unidirectional, intransitive, and tending to be receptive if not exactly passive. That of the digitalised media, on the other hand, is of the kind many-to-many, one-to-one, all-to-all. The flow is transitive, interactive, bidirectional, even reticular (or netlike). Reciprocity and exchange is possible: one can receive and give at the same time.

2. *From centralisation to decentralisation*. Europe and the USA have developed in two different ways as regards the mass media, and especially with regard to radio and television. Europe has a history of state monopoly, while the USA has always had market monopoly. Nevertheless the seventies in Europe saw the birth of independent radio and television stations, and within a few years voices and images had multiplied on the air, with the progressive passing from a media culture controlled and managed by a few to a culture managed and controlled by many. There was a progressive movement towards more pluralistic forms of communication with more participants. With the coming of digitalisation decentralisation is now the *status vivendi* of the form of

communication. On the radio, for example, it is now possible to listen to hundreds of radio networks from all over the world.

3. *From local to international communication.* The substitution of the older forms of aerials by parabolic antennas is an indication of the large and growing number of television stations no longer limited by national and cultural boundaries. Digitalisation through the network has merely amplified the tendency to globalisation.

4. *From mass-media to personal-media.* The production of media instruments of small dimensions and the progressive fall in prices have greatly increased the number of users of *personal media*. Personal computers, mobile phones, electronic notebooks, credit cards, identity cards, all function by the use of *bits* and ensure personal control of our options and actions. The other side of the coin is that digitalisation also allows control by hidden powers, such as secret services, or by big central commercial enterprises to keep tabs on the profile of their customers. The result is that the conscience must always be awake to the citizens' right to privacy and to the defence of democracy.

5. *From mass programming to personal programming.* The multiplication of media channels and offerings, in particular through the internet, is leading to the development of new styles of consumerism and new cultural habits. The network is providing a new way of exchanging information and of managing cultural elements such as films and music; this gives rise to more than a few problems at a juridical and moral level. About this aspect a great debate has been in progress for some time about the encrypting of languages, the defence of copyrights, proprietary culture, and the privacy of the user.

6. *From proprietary software to Open Source.* With regard to software there are two different concepts. The concept of a "closed source" or proprietary software is based prevalently on business and economic criteria; it claims professional rights and gives a guarantee to the user that it will function properly. The other con-

cept is that of the *Open Source*; it means that the software code should be known, so as to leave the user free not only to use it and adapt it to his needs, but also to improve it by adding his own contribution and making it available to others. It is a vision of shared knowledge that would be of benefit to all. The overcoming of the “digital divide” between the north and south of the world depends also on the choice of a technology permitting access to information as the right of everyone and not only of those who can afford it. The Open Source is a way of moving towards the democratisation of information and culture.

### ***Characteristics of the new digital culture***

The use of the new media has produced a culture which presents some characteristics deserving of attention, because they point to some tasks for education and formation.

1. We are living in a *high-speed* culture, Today communication travels very fast. We need think only of emails. Even when paradoxically we say the internet is slow, it still operates at a speed unthought-of until comparatively recently. The magic of a technology such as the internet lies in experiencing in a few simple actions the extending of our body around the world. I click on an address and I am in the Vatican. I click on another and download updates for a programme or documents. It all happens instantaneously. Speed is a characteristic of many other things: motor vehicles, aircraft, sport, medicine, economics etc. But there are also associated problems: those who are slow tend to become marginalised. Categories like the aged, the disabled, the poor, or those who do not fit into the prevailing social model, become similarly marginalised.

2. Secondly, the *interface* method is creating new attitudes and mentalities. The interface is the means of action between man and machine. The development of the interface has accentuated the need for the person to act – an attitude which is then carried over also into the social sphere. Everyone wants to be the active subject of his own personal and social life. The interface becomes therefore a metaphor for the environment, for design, for educa-

tion, for social life etc. Linked with the concept of interface is that of the communicative model. It must be said that we still live within pseudo-democratic models which provide an illusion of participation; in reality today's citizen has a prevalently consumer potential. We are free to decide what we want to buy, but not nearly so free to decide what we want to produce.

3. Thirdly, the new culture presents a *polyphonic vision* of reality. It is more difficult today to attain to certainty or truth because we are immersed in a sea of all the truths claimed to be absolute. An institution which at the present day wants to maintain its unique position finds itself confronted by a thousand others. Alongside a church site are found a host of other churches, religions and sects, from the most traditional to the most way out. It is the culture of co-presence, potentially a culture of dialogue, but also of hatred. An easy consequence of this culture is relativism. The network shows how one can live today in the simultaneous presence of contradictions. The different cultures show us that there are different ways of seeing the same things, but today the indiscriminate offering of anything and its contrary is only a click away. It is a culture that presupposes everyone is an adult; it does not respect the evolving development of the person, and leaves to the individual the responsibility for his choices.

4. Closely linked with the preceding point is the attitude of *nomadism*, which the network can develop. On the internet one browses or navigates. This passing from one point to another on the network is sometimes reflected in one's lifestyle as passing from one experience to another. In its positive form this is a culture of detachment, of research, of offering, but on the network it can also lead to abuse and dishonesty. From this point of view experience of the network highlights the need for forming persons of responsibility. Control systems are not enough; today the need is to educate to maturity and the ability to make choices consistent with one's own faith vision and one's personal projects of life.

5. The network itself can be an *instrument of education and formation*. The new techniques of electronic learning offer to geographically remote places the possibility of following educational programmes difficult to access without the network. The latter, moreover, makes possible contact, knowledge and the reporting of things that happen in the world such as wars, environmental abuses, racial hatred, etc. Even the scientific community collaborates more rapidly at the present day through the network. The *Open Source* is made possible only through the network, and only in the same way is it possible to get to know more about associations such as NGOs, Doctors without Frontiers, Amnesty International, Institutions such as FAO, UNESCO and the innumerable volunteer organisations.

6. We need to recognise that this environment, so highly influenced by the media, is driving us ever more into an almost total *dependence on technology*. A less obvious but more interesting aspect of this is that the computer is becoming ever more an item of furniture everywhere. Offices are becoming more and more computerised, and even homes are following suit with everything from microwave ovens in the kitchen to voice-operated light switches. Mobile phones are steadily becoming more like hand-held computers. The commercial world depends electronically on the internet, as also do all innovations in technology. From many points of view, the need to communicate creates in us the further need for an ever more sophisticated technology.

7. Precisely because the internet is becoming the place where the future will be shaped, it is generating within itself what is known as the *digital divide*. A glance at some statistics shows how the internet has penetrated the world revealing the following figures: Africa 1.5%, Middle East 7.5%, Asia 8.4%, Latin America and the Caribbean 10.3%, Europe 35.5%, Australia and Oceania 48.6%, USA 64.7%. In New York city alone there are more access points than in the whole of Africa. 15% of the world's population, living in the developed countries, use more than half of the fixed telephone lines and 70% of the mobile phones. 60% of the world

population, those living in developing countries, use only 5% of the internet connections. As well as the “south” of the world, there are various “souths” in countries, regions, towns and smaller areas. All this makes us reflect once again on the importance of not separating the problem of digital culture from the economy, politics and justice, at both local and international level, In this sense the new situation in both culture and technology challenges us with regard to exclusion and marginalisation.

8. The electronic media have an influence on the way control is exerted on social life; this brings into question the concept of *authority* in a media dominated society. In a social model based on the printed word there are two requisites needed for entry to public life and the exercise of authority: the ability to read and write; unless you have these you cannot take part in public discussion. But nowadays the electronic media make it possible for all to access the world of information; in this way any hierarchical control of information becomes destabilised, and this in turn leads to situations difficult to control. On the one hand the institutions that formerly had control of information are now easily set aside, and the very concept of truth and authority are going into crisis. And on the other hand, because of the provisional nature of the situation, institutions are rushing into spectacular presentations, typical of the language of the mass media, in a frantic search for audiences, and so forging a dangerous link between the truth and numbers.

### ***Some challenges from an educational point of view***

This new cultural environment is the result of mutations of a social, cultural, technological, political and economic nature. It has a basic characteristic that is very important: the ability to bring into convergence the use of different languages and to create an ever evolving culture with a certain tension between order and chaos or, if you want to put it in another way, between what we already have and what is yet to come. The characteristics of this new culture could give rise to some interesting approaches

and methods for those working in the field of education, as far as the planning of personal contributions and their actual presentation are concerned.

The culture of the media is a *culture of action*, of participation, of interaction, of the building of reality and of life. For this reason it makes more use of verbs than of nouns. What is urgently needed is communication itself, rather than more talk about it.

It is a *culture of processes*, based certainly on structures and even complex structures, but which must be able to persuade the individual or the community to do something, to act, to communicate, to build. More important than the actual result of the process is that people have become personally involved in it.

It is a *culture of encounter*. The concept of deterritorialisation indicates that a physical place is unnecessary; what is important is the activity established between those taking part in the encounter. What needs to be considered is the context for educational encounters, but prior to this, the method of communication to be used and the reason why there should be an encounter at all between those concerned.

Ideally it is a *culture of sharing* and of putting aside one's own intellectual rights in view of a sharing process and the common access of all to cultural benefits. These, in their many historical and geographical forms and expressions, should be strongly shared, interpreted, discussed, criticised and built up through the dynamic processes of intercultural participation.

We must face up to the accusation of promoting a culture of information that is so abundant that it begins to lose its value. Nevertheless, the technology of the internet generates of its nature a *culture of interchange*, rather than of the passing of information from centre to periphery. Because of the nature of political and economic structures it can also be a technology giving rise to a culture of division, the "digital divide", but in itself it remains a technology that can foster encounters, dialogue and communi-

cation beyond territorial, cultural, religious, political and economic boundaries.

Today's culture is striving with difficulty to harmonise logic and rational principles developed through the course of centuries, with those of the new electronic media. It is a *culture of the senses*, What we are experiencing is the travail inherent in every cultural metamorphosis which requires a great deal of rethinking, not only at the individual level but at the collective level as well.

It is no accident that we are living the paradox of globalisation while at the same time witnessing the rise of extreme and exaggerated nationalistic movements. All changes are accompanied by conflicts, though sincere efforts at dialogue may soften them to some extent and open the way to a mutually acceptable solution. This is why it is important to see all aspects of a problem and the various claims expressed. The media can help to develop a culture of pluralism precisely because of their plurality of languages.

This is why "democracy of the senses"<sup>11</sup> is spoken of as a condition for overcoming a culture much inclined to the visual and the rational. The arts and the media are perhaps the two areas which make possible a greater perception of the urgent need to harmonise and integrate the complementary elements of the senses and hence of languages.

Here then, dear confreres, we have an immense field of work and, at the same time, a huge resource to the extent that the challenges we face from the media culture influence our pedagogy and become part of our educational method. Otherwise we shall merely suffer their consequences, without being moved to introduce any changes that could make our educational activity more effective. We can never forget that our Congregation "evangelises by educating and educates by evangelising".

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. J.E. BERENDT, *The third ear. On listening to the world*, New York, Henry Holt & Company, 1992.

### ***Some challenges from an institutional point of view***

Social communication naturally poses challenges to the Congregation, to its life and to formation. We have to rethink our life within this media culture, but we must be careful also about what we communicate. Through the new technologies we can transmit a great deal of information and knowledge, but it remains true that we communicate especially what we are. We can be specialists and professionally trained, but at the same time pass on either our coherence and uprightness or our small-mindedness and mediocrity.

**The challenge of the communication of the charism.** We should all ask ourselves what we are communicating as a Congregation by our style of life and by our institutional options: are we communicating a radical option for God and the Lord Jesus, the fellowship of community life, our priority choice for poor and abandoned youngsters, the meaning of life and hope, unconditional dedication and the beauty of a gift freely given? It is not just a matter of paying attention to how we communicate, what means we make use of, what kind of language we adopt, what culture our communication displays; we must also be careful that we are communicating our own charism as well.

An element that characterises a lifestyle is the tenor with which it is lived. Today's challenge is the essential nature of the choices made. To the image of the gratuitous nature of the religious life should correspond a style of life that testifies that God is sufficient and that the young people, to whom we are sent, are more important to us than are many other things. In a culture of the superfluous we should bear witness to the culture of the essential. Our community and our charism must be visible, but what makes us visible is the witness we give to being "signs and bearers of the love of God for young people" (C 2). This is a challenge to the whole process of holiness, to the primacy of the religious life, to the application of the GC25, which must also find expression in social communication. In this sense all my preceding letters, when translated into life, find expression in social communication.

We must have the courage to make a serious revision of our lifestyle. We should bear witness to the gratuitous nature of God's kingdom, be advocates through our life and options that the most important things are God and our fellow-men. From the standpoint of communication this is more important than all the web-sites, radio, television programmes or newspapers that could ever be, because, in fact, if our mentality remains unchanged, even what we produce by the instruments of communication will do no more than reflect what we are. Communication is not made up only of words and images, but also of choices and behaviour that imply consistency between what we preach and what we practise.

Innovation will not be made through a face-lift, but in a renewed determination to apply ourselves one hundred per cent to the concrete problems of the young and of the newly emerging forms of poverty. We are putting on the line the credibility of the Church and of our Congregation through a process of acquiring consistency and evangelical radicalism. Social communication can help young people to discover the attractiveness of the Salesian vocation and be a form of vocational promotion.

**The challenge of technology.** This is a field of great importance. At the level of the mass media we should meditate on the metaphor of David and Goliath. Our Congregation, like the Church itself, in the face of the gigantic empire of the media must select different terrains and strategies so as to present an alternative to the dominant culture. In other words we need structures of communication that are light and strongly motivated but extremely flexible. The internet certainly offers possibilities more easily accessible, but instruments like the radio, especially in developing areas, can make an excellent contribution, as witness the radio stations in some of our missions.

We must not forget, and indeed we need to give new weight to the whole tradition of Salesian communication which covers active leadership from the level of the street to the playground, to the theatre, to music and to the liturgy. The most urgent problem is

to foster the desire to remain with the young and the poor. The force of the forms of communication at personal and group level cannot be replaced by any kind of technical application through the media, no matter how sophisticated it may be; both are forms of communication that need to be developed, but the primacy lies with personal relationships and personal contact.

**The challenge of the effective use of time.** Nowadays it is essential to be educated to the effective use of the time we have available. Statistics show that the time spent by young people before or with the media is growing through the very fact that we are living in a media culture, and I think that the same is probably true also for us Salesians. The challenge is one of formation, not only in the sense of education to the media itself but rather from the point of view of formation to responsibility in the proper management of one's personal life. The years of formation are vitally important and should be the time for a serious cultural and professional preparation. The communities themselves should be training grounds for communication and encounter rather than places for the sharing of information and its use. An excess of information makes us live fragmented lives; by concentrating on formation we must give back to our lives unity and harmony.

**The challenge of the means of social communication.** From what we have said so far it is evident that in the means of social communication we use we show what we are. The Congregation must be present in this world of the media. It is a question of our becoming accustomed to the use of the instruments; but also of reflecting on the sort of communication model we are using to bring about growth in the Congregation itself and its communication.

The risk at present is that we may focus our attention too much on the use of the instruments and their effectiveness and not concentrate sufficiently on our ability to communicate and create communication, and on what we actually communicate. It is our zeal for the mission that reveals what we are and what we are

communicating. It seems to me that Don Bosco, with all the zeal he had for needy youngsters, succeeded in inventing and working out ways of gathering people together and of communication that worked well. Where is our own zeal at the present day? Where is our heart focused? What are our real interests? What are we putting all our efforts into?

**The challenge of formation.** The means of social communication and the culture they spread call for a notable commitment to formation. A first task, without any doubt, is the formation to a critical use of the means of social communication and hence the formation of conscience. On the one hand one must learn to appreciate this “means of mass education” (C 43) as a gift of God which offers great possibilities for education and evangelisation. But on the other hand we must be aware of how the media are being used for purposes of exploitation, manipulation, domination and corruption. What is required therefore is formation to a sound spirit of discernment and, more broadly, to a proper understanding of the nature of the mass media, the techniques they use and the effect they have on those at whom they are aimed. A fundamental ethical principle needs to be inculcated, that is, that the human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the means of social communication. Communication should be made by persons for the benefit of the integral development of other persons.

It is not enough to be just good “consumers” of the means of social communication. We must know how to use them for educative and pastoral purposes. This requires competence in the use of the various instruments; it needs also the skill to integrate the educative gospel message with the media culture itself, and this in turn presupposes not only a sound technical knowledge, but the ability to read in depth the prevailing social and cultural situation.

The field of social communication is not exhausted by the media alone. It produces, and indeed is itself, a culture, and this makes it a great challenge to be faced especially in the field of

formation, which is not simply concerned with knowledge and skills, but essentially with helping to bring about in the individual a deep transformation at the level of his affections, convictions and motivations. Some aspects of the modern social communication culture create problems for formation, while there are other aspects that promote it.

The culture of social communication, for instance, tends to ignore the interior and transcendent dimension of the person and tries to build his identity in terms of his response to the situation in which he is living. Being a culture of the image, this is ephemeral and does not lead to true introspection; indeed it tends towards superficiality. Moreover, the culture of social communication tends also to a relativism, substituting opinion for truth and providing information and views of all kinds, leaving the recipient to freely choose what he wants; clarity then becomes obscured and the truth is often blurred by opinion polls. And given the reaction speed cultivated by social communication culture, this does not help formation which is a slow and patient process requiring much effort and hard work.

On the other hand, there are aspects of the culture of social communication that help to improve methods, especially in the area of formation. For example, it is typical of the culture of social communication to think always in terms of the reactions of receivers. There is great sensitivity about their background and capacity, their needs and interests. And this is a necessary aspect in the work of formation. It is a question of making the starting point not the curriculum to be followed but the individual subject with his capacities and abilities and his potential responses.

Again, the culture of social communication is intuitive rather than analytical and systematic; it is not inclined to long and abstract statements that appeal to the head, but uses brief, simple and clear messages that also appeal to the emotions, that is, to the whole person. And here, once more, there would be an enormous field on which to reflect when we think of the methods of teaching

commonly used in the houses of formation. Moreover the culture of social communication is based more on images than on words. The image of the face of a suffering Pope John Paul II is more eloquent than a torrent of words describing his suffering.

### 3. PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

#### 3.1. A change of strategy

And so, in the final part of the letter we come to the making of some practical choices, that is, to the moment when we follow Don Bosco's example and put to good use the richness and fruitfulness of the Salesian charism; we shall try to give a new creative and apostolic response to the challenges of the social communication culture and to the new needs of the young, *that part of human society that is most precious and most vulnerable*.<sup>12</sup>

In drawing up some guidelines from our preceding reflections, I think it important to make a *change of strategy*, which can help us to improve our reflections and actions. The strategy arises from a double observation. On the one hand we have before us the production of documents of the Congregation of all kinds – including the theme of social communication; they are rich and potentially fruitful; they constitute a wise tradition of analysis and interpretation of reality, a criteriology based on our charismatic sources and a true programme of apostolic action in the renewed Salesian mission. And on the other hand we find ourselves faced with difficulties, hard work and the risk of not being sufficiently creative, productive and effective in our ability to convert this doctrine into a reality of life and action.

What is written is unfortunately not read; what is read is not always followed by productive reflection; and when reflection is made it often fails to lead to any change in the actual situation.

<sup>12</sup> MB II, 45. Cf. Cost. 1.

How can we break this chain which keeps so much apostolic energy locked up? How can we remove this block in communication? How can we make our documents more significant and practical? And how can we do this in particular for the present letter of the Rector Major ?

In a certain rural environment of peasants, simple people but wise enough, hard-working and with a sense of humour, I heard a popular saying that made me smile and then led me to think a little more deeply. I pass it on to you as some light relief and to suggest a strategy. An old peasant remarked: *You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs*. Most of the nutritional value of an omelette lies in the egg – that is quite clear. But if it is left there it never becomes the pleasant food we know and moreover sooner or later it goes bad, loses its nutritional value and eventually reaches a point when it becomes unpleasant and can actually be harmful.

The strategy I propose, therefore, consists in not creating new guidelines, but rather in taking practical steps to release the life lying dormant in the doctrinal patrimony of the Congregation, and in finding ways of embodying it in our educative and pastoral communities and in our localities. There is so much light, so much charismatic inspiration, so much apostolic energy in our documents! But they run the risk of never becoming nourishment for our life and activity. And so I invite you to find time to read them again and study more deeply the situation of contemporary culture; to reflect on them personally, in community, and in the educative and pastoral communities; to compare ideas about the real situation of the young; and to have the courage to draw up a *plan of action* to be translated into the daily life of pastoral activity.

Some Provinces have already done a great deal in this sector of our mission; others are in the process of making courageous and creative decisions; and still others are only at the very beginning. With the intention of being not only generous but practical and realistic, we have to make some choices. Let the Provincial with

his council, and the provincial delegate for social communication with his team, together with the provincial delegates for youth ministry and for formation, the Rector with the Salesian community and the educative and pastoral community, commit themselves to finding the practical ways most appropriate for their own situation.

And so, as a strategy I put to you that of improving and putting into practice the **provincial plan for social communication**, which forms part of the provincial educative and pastoral project. I invite you to work creatively and effectively on the following three documents: the letter of Fr Vecchi *Communication in the Salesian mission* (AGC 370); the practical guidebook provided at the beginning of this year by the Department for Social Communication, entitled *The Salesian Social Communication System*; and the *Guidelines for the Formation of Salesians in Social Communication*, drawn up in synergy by the Departments of Social Communication, of Formation, and of Youth Ministry, to be published during this present year. Stimulated by these documents, we shall have a diagnosis of the situation, we shall decide on concrete steps to be taken through the provincial plan, and we shall be able to implement them in synergy and periodically verify how far we have reached.

In the paragraphs that follow, I have presented these documents, emphasising certain points (especially about practical aspects) and inviting you to give effect to this strategy in the service of the young. I feel sure of your willingness to correspond with the urgency of this work.

## 3.2. Working tools

### 3.2.1 Fr Vecchi's letter on social communication

In his letter *Communication in the Salesian mission*. "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak" (AGC 370), Fr Vecchi has left us a collection of reflections and a series of practical guidelines which can and must enlighten and stimulate our Salesian mission. Every Salesian, each com-

munity and all the Provinces are called upon to recognise the importance of communication and to keep it constantly in the forefront of their apostolic agenda. I emphasize two ideas and the practical guidelines of this document, while at the same time encouraging you to go back to the original text of the letter and transform it into life.

Social communication, with its various means and new techniques – wrote Fr Vecchi, following the Church’s magisterium – is important in our life and mission not only because it offers the possibility of extending education and evangelisation to millions of people, but especially because it constitutes a **“cultural centre”**, a school of model behaviour, of perception of the meaning of life, of ethics which reinterpret values, of the use of power and economy. This is a significant and decisive innovation: as I have said repeatedly in this letter it is not enough just to use the new languages and new means of communication; above all the message must be integrated into the new culture.

This cultural innovation challenges us to change our mentality, to make a real **“cultural conversion”**. It is not enough to do good within our own houses. We are called upon to extend our activities outside, listening to the expectations and demands of society, and interacting so as to give to that society a positive transformation. We have to foster dialogue, integration and mutual relationships with the laity and the whole of the educative community; we must be animators of the locality and involve other social institutions in synergy for the benefit of the young; we must use the new media, including the internet, to create opportunities for contacts and to be a leaven in this new areopagus.

Fr Vecchi then proposed a twofold series of guidelines: the first, linked more with the local community and the urgent need of education to communication in our own houses; and the second entrusted to the whole Province and linked with the need for a transformation of the social situation and culture for the benefit of the young.

*Every community* is called upon to improve institutional communication; to plan and bring about in the educative and pastoral communities education to communication and education through the media, “*educommunication*”, which includes education to the use of languages and of the media; the use of the media for education and evangelisation in schools, parishes, oratories, etc.; the promotion of dialogue with communicators, artists and publishers, especially if they are young; helping those afflicted by the new forms of poverty and those excluded by the new communication techniques; and improving the standard of media skills.

And at the same time *every Province* is called upon to plan and exercise its rights of citizenship, getting to know the laws and duties of citizens, and making them respected; by developing, for example, a watching brief over the rights of families and of young people, etc., and opening up to other institutions working for the common good. From this standpoint social communication provides a great opportunity for educating to and creating opportunities for *active citizenship*. For the animation of these activities our General Chapters have already created the role of the provincial delegate for social communication (cf. GC23) and his team and of the provincial plan for social communication (cf. GC24).

This is not a work for specialists alone, but a *work for all*; experts are welcome because they help others to join in, but all have their own part to play. If we speak of new means and technologies it is because we are concerned with culture and the quality of life, and the building of a more just and fraternal society. The means become mediations of the Kingdom. The reflections and practical proposals stemming from a re-reading of this letter in the local communities should be shared with the animation and government bodies of the Province, so that they may become part of the provincial plan for social communication at the service of education and pastoral work.

### ***3.2.2. Salesian System of Social Communication***

We all know the *Preventive System*: we learned it from our experience lived with the Salesians who educated and formed us; we

went into it more deeply through scientific study; we practise it and continually communicate it by our witness, by sharing our lives, by educative practice in word and teaching. We also know that the preventive system, dreamed of and lived by Don Bosco, clearly cannot be reduced to the classical pages written in 1877, but is rather – as Fr Egidio Viganò expressed it – “an organic collection of convictions, attitudes, actions, interventions, means, methods and structures which have progressively constituted a *characteristic general way of being and acting, both personally and as a community*, of Don Bosco, of individual Salesians and of the Family” (AGC 290, p. 10).

A similar dream – and it was not just by chance that the term ‘system’ was chosen – is made concrete in the pages of the “*Salesian social communication system*” (SSCS), which presents the guidelines for the Salesian Congregation. The Department for Social Communication has gathered together the traditional teaching of this sector of the Salesian life and mission and, after a fruitful process of consultation, has produced this working tool. I hope that these pages will become both enlightening and fruitful. It is a *working tool*, with a historical and doctrinal frame of reference and Congregational policies for the functioning of social communication. It is entrusted particularly to the Provincial and his Council, to the provincial delegate for social communication and his team, so that they may study it.

The General Councillor for social communication presents the document as a “a unified and integrated project with a shared vision of values and mission which is distinctly Salesian, with planned policies and actions in the areas of animation, formation, information, and production and with a management of organisational structures and communication processes networked with the various sectors within the Congregation and the Salesian Family, and externally with Church organisations, with those locally and in society taken broadly” (SSCS 19). In this working tool we find set out the *identity* (those to whom our work is directed, its mission and objectives, its convictions, policies and criteria of

action, its subjects), the *manner of functioning*, and the *organisation* of the Salesian Social Communication System.

It is not my intention to go into details about this working tool; we need to go to the text itself, let ourselves be guided by it and, moved by its spirit, in this way provide responses to the real needs of our educative and pastoral communities. I would just like to point out certain pages which, because of their simplicity and ease of application, may escape our attention. In the document we find two appendices: the first is a list summarising the main *Congregational sources*: Constitutions, Regulations, General Chapters, Acts of the General Council, etc. which present social communication to us in a Salesian key; and the second is an outline, a *map* for the construction of the **provincial plan of social communication**.

These appendices are at one and the same time an eloquent symbol and an urgent programme. They are a *symbol*, prompting us to return always to the sources, to our roots. For instance, reading again arts. 6 and 43 of the Constitutions and accepting the challenge of contemporary communication renews our awareness of being animated by the same Spirit that moved Don Bosco to be ahead of his time in the use of social communication for the education and evangelisation of poor youngsters and the working classes. The same Spirit moves us today to be creative, courageous and organised. These appendices also provide a *programme*; by following the points listed in the map and accepting the suggested guidelines we are led to diagnose, plan, implement and systematically verify the state of social communication in our Provinces. They help us to plan and manage animation and formation in social communication, information and public relations, and our social communication enterprises with the same pastoral charity shown by Don Bosco.

I add a further two suggestions of a methodological nature. The provincial plan for social communication should be drawn up and implemented with the greatest and best possible *participation*

at different levels; it should be constantly animated and periodically verified by the animation and government bodies of the Province. What is important is not so much a well structured plan as a shared plan that will help to make progress, to serve the young and the people in general, to leaven culture and so transform society. Some may consider this insistence excessive, but there is a great difference between reaching a goal by ourselves and reaching it together. The more we feel ourselves part of a common project, the more shall we be capable of building community and the quality of life.

A second suggestion concerns the variety of situations in our Provinces. The map proposed by the document does not imply that everything must be done at once and together; but we must choose with realism and generosity the steps we can take, according to the needs that exist and our ability to meet them. We do not have the *power of Goliath* in social communication, but in our educative communities and in our groups with our various different means we have many of *David's opportunities* for evangelising, educating, and building a more just and fraternal society. Recognition of our values, of our means and skills, our ability to be organised and create synergy, to involve others of good will from outside our house and collaborate with them, is a wise policy that enables us to combine the wisdom of the serpent with the gentleness of the dove for embodying the Kingdom in the diversity of contexts in which we may find ourselves. The provincial plan for social communication is meant to be an expression of the hope and dynamism of the gospel, which Jesus likened to the energy of leaven in the mass of dough (cf. Mt 13,33).

### ***3.2.3. Guidelines for the formation of Salesians in Social Communication***

There is no Salesian community or educative and pastoral community more communicative than one that bears witness to the following of Christ in the service of the young and the poor. And so the testimony of Christ and his gospel is the fundamental mes-

sage of all communication. If this is missing, no amount of theory, no technique or means of communication can make up for it. Don Bosco's faithfulness to poor youngsters demands of us that we communicate by our witness, sharing and total dedication to the mission "to our last breath". Precisely for this reason Don Bosco never neglected any language, means or instrument, traditional or newly discovered, that he could use to proclaim the good news to the young and people in general so that they could become upright citizens and good Christians. When we read the description Fr Egidio Viganò gives of Don Bosco as *a brilliant social communicator*, we are taken aback (cf. AGC 302, pp. 8-12). Our own fidelity to Don Bosco and to the young prompts us to be transparent witnesses, and hence good social communicators, by developing our natural gifts through the help of a good formation.

As long ago as 1981 Fr Egidio Viganò presented a synthetic proposal of formation in social communication for Salesians at three levels: a general basic level, a higher level for workers in educational and pastoral work, and a still higher level for the preparation of specialists (cf. AGC 302). In the year 2000 Fr Vecchi took up this proposal again in the letter I have already mentioned and spoke of the urgent need for qualification: "The only useful road ahead is through formation. The new literacy, that is, the ability to read and write in the culture of the media, affects everyone, and in so far as it concerns the faith it affects all believers. How much more then should it be of interest to educators and evangelisers!" (AGC 370, p. 23).

The Department for Social Communication took up the theme in a renewed form in 2004, and studied the history of the different congregational programmes for formation to social communication; it collected data regarding what was offered in this connection in initial formation throughout the Congregation; it then convoked a worldwide consultation on social communication which took place in Rome in July 2004. This consulting body reflected on the project of a formation plan and offered the Department an analysis and an interpretation of the data regarding the situation

of formation in the Congregation in this field, with some criteria for the guidance of such formation and some practical alternatives concerning the plan.

The Department for Social Communication together with the Department for Formation, on the basis of the reflection made by the consulting group, has drawn up some **Guidelines for the formation of Salesians in Social Communication**, soon to be published. It is one of the interventions foreseen in the Animation Project for the present six-year period (cf. AGC 380, p. 48). I ask those responsible for formation to willingly accept this aide which aims at ensuring an ever better formation of the Salesian as an educator and shepherd, and hence as a communicator.

The provincial delegates for formation and for communication, with their respective teams, enlightened by these Guidelines, will seek to find ways to determine the content and how to implement it, and this as regards both initial and ongoing formation. In the case of initial formation it is not only a matter of introducing a new discipline – communication – in every phase of the formative curriculum foreseen by the *Ratio*, but of paying attention to several other points as well: insistence on the communicative style; the animation of experiences and reflections on Salesian life and work, closely linked with today's youth culture and hence strongly communicative; the development of the communicative dimension of courses already foreseen by the *Ratio*; the organisation of workshops of "educommunication" for those who have not had this opportunity prior to their initial Salesian formation; the creation of formation opportunities for formation guides and for teachers of confreres in formation; the provision of work shops in languages, arts and media, in new technologies and particularly those more suitable for educative use, for the proclamation and celebration of the faith, for the spreading of values, for symbolic and ritual communication; the acquiring and improvement of communicative skills among the people, with the traditional languages and the limited means of various kinds available to them; the learning of the grammar of digital language and its many uses for

the knowledge, communication and creation of opportunities for meetings, etc.

In this case too, the more we succeed in involving the formation personnel, teachers and the confreres actually in formation in the construction of a programme made to measure for the formation community and in its implementation, the more fully will we achieve the objectives of these Guidelines. No teacher can give to a student what the student is not disposed to learn, especially in the art and wisdom of communicating, which is the sharing and communion of life. The same can be said of ongoing formation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

I end this letter on the Birthday of St John the Baptist, “than whom no greater man was ever born of woman” (Mt 11, 11), the man of austerity and the essential, frank in word and open to innovation, lover of truth and authenticity, strong and transparent in his testimony. His was the “voice crying in the wilderness”, proclaiming the coming of the Word. He was the teacher who introduced to his disciples the Lamb of God present in their midst. What a wonderful icon for the communicator!

This was the day on which Don Bosco used to celebrate his name-day – a true family feast for the youngsters, the Salesians, cooperators and past-pupils who vied with one another in expressing their love and gratitude to their “father”. Here was the man who had well understood that it was not enough to do good, but that this had to be known; that education is a question of the heart, and so it is not sufficient to love, but that the others have to feel that they are loved. This is the Salesian language of communication.

And we too gather around him today as his children and thank him for what he has meant in the life of each and everyone of us; that without him our lives would have had no meaning from the

moment we made our own his experience of faith, his plan of life, and his passion for the salvation of the young. Our affection is naturally accompanied by a renewed commitment to be faithful to him, to his charism, to his mission, to his choices like that of the "spreading of good books" for the service of the Church and society; and to be faithful also to the young people of today, so strongly influenced by the modern means of social communication, so sensitive to new languages, and in such great need of competent guides and educators.

It would do no harm to read again that programmatic letter of Don Bosco to find in it the light and thrust for this twofold fidelity, and with his courage to take our place on the new frontiers of social communication.

To Mary most holy, our mother and teacher, I entrust all of you with all your intentions and your efforts to be good educators who are at the same time shepherds and communicators.

  
Fr Pascual Chávez V.  
*Rector Major*