

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

«DA MIHI ANIMAS, CETERA TOLLE» Charismatic identity and apostolic zeal

Starting again from Don Bosco to reawaken the heart of every Salesian

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Rome, 24 June 2006
Birth of St John the Baptist

My dear confreres,

As I write this letter my thoughts go back in faith and gratitude to Fr Valentín De Pablo, General Councillor for the Region of Africa and Madagascar. His sudden and unexpected passing took us by surprise and humanly speaking has left us dismayed. I am grateful to all those of you who sent me deeply felt expressions of sorrow and sympathy. Let us be grateful to God for the priestly and missionary Salesian vocation he gave to Fr Valentin, and keep him in our prayers. In the last days of his life he took part in the General Council's choice of the theme of the General Chapter. Now close to God he will be able to intercede for all of us, for the success of the coming Chapter and for the Region of Africa and Madagascar.

1. CONVOCATION OF THE GC26

On the nameday of Don Bosco, our beloved father and founder, who used to gather around him on that day all his boys, collaborators and benefactors at Valdocco, I am glad to be able to write this letter to you in his name. By it it is my intention **to convoke, in accordance with art.150 of our Constitutions, the XXVI General Chapter.** The Chapter is the “principal sign of the Congregation’s unity in diversity” (C. 146). We shall come together once again to reflect on how to be “faithful to the Gospel and to the Founder’s charism, and sensitive to the needs of time and place” (C. 146). Don Bosco will certainly be with us at such a time.

I invite you to look upon this event as a new Pentecost in the life of the Congregation which, through the General Chapter, by “opening itself to the Spirit of the Lord seeks to discern God’s will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service” (C. 146). The Spirit’s greatness is revealed in his power which is able to renew the face of the earth (cf. *Ps* 104,30) and make all things new. The Spirit of God, present at every moment of history, will make new our love for Don Bosco.

The Spirit hovered over the waters at the beginning of the world (cf. *Gen* 1,2), and was communicated to man when the breath of life was breathed into him (cf. *Gen* 2,7). It led Abraham to respond to God with the obedience of faith when he was called to leave his own land and kinsfolk in order to reach the promised land (cf. *Gen* 12,1-4). It was given to Moses on Sinai as the word of life in the gift of the law (cf. *Ex* 29,1-16). It made use of men and women of Israel to convert them into liberators of their own people and into prophets of the most high God (cf. *Acts* 2,17).

The Spirit overshadowed the Virgin Mary and made her the mother of God’s Son (cf. *Lk* 1,35). He anointed Jesus on the day of his baptism and prompted him to preach the gospel of the kingdom (cf. *Mk* 1,19-15). He was poured out on the apostles in the form of tongues of fire and they were transformed into convincing

witnesses of the Resurrection (cf. Acts 2,1-11).

The Spirit continues at the present day to inspire the advancement of the life and dignity of the human person; he opens the minds and hearts of men and women to God and to Christ; he is a gentle guest who works not by compelling but by convincing and asking for docility to his inspirations.

The coming General Chapter will be the 26th in the history of our Society. It will be in continuity with preceding Chapters in a sincere commitment of dynamic fidelity to God and to the young. It will take place at Rome in the "Salesianum" at the Generalate. It will begin on 24 February 2008 in Turin, the cradle of our charism, where we shall come together to visit the house of our father and discover the roots of his spirit. We shall inaugurate the Chapter with a concelebrated Mass in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and a visit to our Salesian holy places, the source of our inspiration and dynamism. We shall then leave for Rome, the seat of the Chapter.

As Moderator of the Chapter I have appointed Fr Francesco Cereda, Councillor for Formation, who from now on has the responsibility for accompanying the work of preparation and the carrying out of the General Chapter.

"Da mihi animas, cetera tolle" (cf. C. 4) is the theme that, with the General Council, I have chosen for the GC26. It is a theme which has been frequently recalled in the Team Visits, and which I and the Council members have very much at heart. It represents Don Bosco's spiritual and pastoral programme, and in it is concentrated **the charismatic identity and apostolic zeal** of the Salesian.

The topic is huge, and for this reason we have decided to focus the attention of the Chapter on four specific areas: the urgent need for *evangelisation*, the need to *recruit* others to the consecrated Salesian life, the demand that we live in *evangelical poverty*, and the challenge of moving towards *new missionary frontiers*.

1.1 Reasons for choice of the theme

For some time now the conviction has been growing on me that today the Congregation needs to reawaken in the heart of every confrere the passionate zeal of “*Da mihi animas*”. In this way it can acquire the inspiration, motivation and energy to respond to what God expects of us and to the needs of the young, and to face up with courage and competence to today’s challenges.

By making our own the motto “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”, we intend to take up Don Bosco’s spiritual and apostolic programme, resulting in his tireless work for the “glory of God and the salvation of souls”. In this way we can find once again the origin of our charism, the purpose of our mission, and the future of our Congregation.

The bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco, of which the occurrence in 2015 seems not all that far away, is an invitation to call on Don Bosco to return among us and among young people: “*Don Bosco ritorna!*”. On the other hand, it is also a stimulus for every Salesian to return to Don Bosco and to the young: *Let us return to Don Bosco by returning to the young*. Don Bosco and youngsters are inseparable: he is our father and model; it is among young people that we “meet God” (C. 95) and find the “homeland of our mission”.¹ We cannot return to Don Bosco unless we return to the young.

The expression “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*” is a prayer addressed to God by one who, in the commitment and fatigue of an apostolic challenge taken up in God’s name, renounces all self-interest and wishes to take on the burdens of everyone. Precisely because it is a prayer, it enables us to understand that the mission does not consist only in pastoral initiatives and activity. The mission is a gift of God, rather than an apostolic task: its fulfilment is a prayer in action; this is the starting point for overcoming activism, and the risk of early ‘burnout’.

¹ E. VIGANÒ, *Consagración apostólica y novedad cultural*. Ed. CCS (Madrid 1987) p. 159.

I rather think that Don Bosco's programme re-echoes the expression "I thirst", pronounced by Jesus from the cross when he was giving up his own life in carrying out the Father's will (*Jn* 19,28). Whoever makes this prayer of Jesus his own, learns to share his apostolic passion to the very end. Christ's word becomes an appeal to each of us to revive our thirst for souls and renew the promise made by Don Bosco to his boys: "I will give myself to my last breath for you boys". For this reason the heart of the Salesian draws its inspiration from the pierced heart of Christ.²

Don Bosco's motto is a summary of Salesian spirituality and asceticism, as expressed in the "dream of the ten diamonds". Here two complementary perspectives are intertwined: that of the outward appearance of the Salesian, manifesting his daring, his courage, his faith and hope, his complete dedication to the mission, and that of the hidden heart of a consecrated person with an inner reality made up of deep convictions that lead him to follow Christ in his obedient, poor and chaste style of life.

1.2 Steps that led to the choosing of the theme.

In choosing the theme of the GC26 we wanted to start from the life of the Provinces. In preparation for the Team Visits the Provinces had been asked to carry out a verification of the extent to which the GC25 had been assimilated, and to present some future prospects, identifying what had been achieved in recent years, the more important challenges, the resources available for facing the future, and the difficulties being encountered.

The Team Visits thus became the first step in the preparation of the GC26, in the sense that they brought to light the state of the Congregation in its various contexts, its strengths and weaknesses, its prospects and challenges.

² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, n. 12.

Repeatedly there emerged a deeply felt need to inflame with joy and enthusiasm the hearts of the confreres in living the Salesian life and in the fulfilment of the mission to young people. It recalled the zeal of “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”. And at the same time, with various degrees of emphasis, there appeared other common topics such as evangelisation, vocations, poverty and new frontiers.

At the end of the plenary session of the General Council of December 2005 – January 2006, each Councillor gave me his proposals in view of the GC26. Here again the theme most frequently indicated, with a variety of motivation and emphasis, was a return to Don Bosco’s charism, to Salesian identity and to apostolic zeal. Specific arguments also emerged, among them evangelisation at the present day, vocations to Salesian consecrated life, poverty, the new horizons of the Salesian mission, formation and communication.

The process for choosing the theme concluded with a common reflection that took place in a special Council meeting from 3 to 12 April of this year. The result was the theme already stated.

1.3 Fundamental purpose of the theme.

The fundamental objective of the GC26 is that of strengthening our charismatic identity with a return to Don Bosco, by reawakening in the heart of every confrere the zeal and enthusiasm of “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.

This objective requires us to deepen our knowledge of Don Bosco and to take in hand the Constitutions, and in particular the second chapter on the Salesian spirit, so as to renew our commitment to identify ourselves with him, our father and teacher, and to take our inspiration from his great convictions.

It also requires the kindling of a fire of spiritual and apostolic zeal in the heart of every confrere, by helping him to motivate and unify his life around the commitment to achieve the “glory of God and salvation of souls”.

The approach of the year 2015, the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco, represents a grace for the Congregation, which is called to embody his charism in the various contexts, or in other words the spirit and mission of our founder and father. Such a celebration will constitute almost a goal for the GC26.

The attainment of the objective of the GC26 will require in the first place a better *knowledge of Don Bosco*: he must be studied, loved, imitated and invoked (C. 21). We must know him as a master of life, whose spirituality we absorb as sons and disciples; as the founder who shows us the path of vocational fidelity; as the educator who has left us the precious heritage of the preventive system; as the legislator, because the Constitutions, which have come to us directly from him and then through subsequent Salesian history, provide us with a charismatic reading of the gospel and of the following of Christ.³

With the passage of time the risk grows greater of breaking the living bonds that keep us united to Don Bosco. More than a hundred years have now gone by since his death. Dead are the generations of Salesians who were in contact with him and knew him close at hand. The chronological, geographic and cultural distance from the founder is increasing. The spiritual climate and psychological closeness which prompted spontaneous reference to Don Bosco and his spirit is beginning to disappear, as is even the simple display of his picture. What has been passed on to us can get lost. With increasing distance from the Founder, there comes a fading of the charismatic identity, a weakening of the bonds of his spirit; if we do not give new life to our roots we run the risk of having neither a future nor a right to citizenship.

More than a crisis of identity, I think that what we Salesians are experiencing today is a crisis of *credibility*. We are in a stalemate situation. We seem to be under the tyranny of the “status quo”; there is resistance to change, unconscious rather than

³ Cf. P. CHAVEZ, “*Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco*”, ACG 384 (2003).

deliberate. Even though we are convinced of the efficacy of evangelical values we find it difficult to reach the hearts of the young, for whom we should be signs of hope. We are shocked by the fact that faith is irrelevant to them in building their lives. We feel ourselves out of tune with their world and remote, if not completely excluded, from their plans and projects. We find that our signs, actions and language are no longer effective; we seem to make no impact on their lives.

Alongside the vital momentum that can lead to witness and self-sacrifice even to the extent of martyrdom, Salesian life is not immune to the "the insidiousness of mediocrity in the spiritual life, of the progressive taking on of middle class values and of a consumer mentality".⁴ In the documents known traditionally as his "spiritual testament" Don Bosco wrote: «When signs of an easy life appear among individuals, in rooms or houses, the decline of our Congregation will have also begun [...] When the desire for ease and comfort grows up amongst us, our pious Society will have run its course».⁵

The lack of vocations and vocational frailty make me think that many of us are perhaps not convinced of the social, educative and evangelising usefulness of our mission; others perhaps find that the degree of our commitment to work falls short of their aspirations because we fail in our efforts at renewal and the taking up of new work; some may feel themselves hemmed in by ever-growing emergency situations.

We must *get back among young people* with greater preparation. It is among them that Don Bosco developed his style of life, his pastoral and pedagogical legacy, his system and his spirituality. Don Bosco was single-minded in his mission. His only concern was with and for his boys, even when particular circumstances prevented him from being in immediate contact with them or

⁴ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 12.

⁵ P. BRAIDO (Ed.), *Don Bosco educatore, scritti e testimonianze*. Rome LAS 1997, pp. 409, 437.

involved some activity not directly at their service. For this reason he defended tenaciously his charism as a founder for the young people of the whole world, against the pressure from less farseeing ecclesiastics. The Salesian mission involves a *predilection* for the young. Initially such a predilection is a gift from God, but it is then up to us with our intelligence and heart to take it up, develop it, and make it effective.

The true Salesian never deserts the field of the young. To be a Salesian means to know all about young people; his heart beats in harmony with theirs. He lives for them; their problems are his problems. They give meaning to his life, to his work and study, to his inner feelings; his free time is for them. A Salesian has not only an practical knowledge of young people but a theoretical knowledge as well, which enables him to get to know their needs, and so engage in the kind of youth pastoral work best suited to the present times.

Nowadays a deeper understanding is needed of *Salesian pedagogy*. In other words we need to study and apply that updated preventive system desired by Fr Egidio Viganò. For those who study and apply it, it means developing its great implicit principles, modernising concepts, guidelines and interpretations so as to express the basic ideas in a modern manner: the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; living faith, firm hope and pastoral charity; the good Christian and upright citizen; the threefold "cheerfulness, study and prayer"; the three "S" (in Italian): health, knowledge and holiness: piety, morality and culture; evangelisation and civilisation.

The same can be said of the great guidelines regarding attitudes: make yourself loved rather than feared; reason, religion, loving kindness; father, brother, friend; familiarity, especially in recreation; winning over the heart; the consecrated educator for the good of his pupils; freedom to run about, play and chatter. All that must be re-read for youngsters of today, who have to live in a vast and hitherto unknown range of situations and problems, in

vastly changed times when the human sciences are themselves undergoing critical examination.

We must have a deep knowledge of *Don Bosco's spirituality* and also live it. A knowledge of the external aspects of Don Bosco's life and activities and of his method of education is not enough. At the foundation of everything, as the source of the fruitful results of his actions and activities, there is something we may often overlook: his deep spiritual experience, what we might call his familiarity with God. Maybe this is precisely the best thing he has left us in which to invoke and imitate him, and set ourselves to follow him so as to make contact with Christ and bring Christ into contact with the young!

It is not easy to identify precisely Don Bosco's spiritual experience. Perhaps this is an aspect of our founder that has not been studied at sufficient depth. He is a man totally intent on work. We have no descriptions of his interior development, nor has he left us any explicit reflections on his spiritual life; he wrote no spiritual diaries, offered no specific interpretations. He preferred to pass on to us a spirit by describing the events of his life, or through the biographies he wrote of his boys. It is certainly not enough to say that his spirituality is that of one engaged not in contemplation but in active pastoral work, a pastoral work of mediation between theoretical spirituality and its popular expression.⁶

At the centre of his spirituality is God alone, to be known, loved and served through the living out of a clearly identifiable personal vocation, centred on religious and apostolic dedication to young people – and especially to the poorest and most abandoned of them with a view to their overall salvation – through education and pastoral work and bringing them together; Christ the Saviour was to be the model, and Mary the Mother and Teacher. It is significant, for example, that the noun occurring most frequently in his letters is

⁶ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *La liturgia della vita nel servizio della carità tra i giovani di un contemplativo nell'azione*, in E. CARR (edited by), *Spiritus spiritualia nobis dona potenter infundit. A proposito di tematiche liturgico-pneumatologiche. Studi in onore di Achille M. Triacca*, Rome 2005, pp. 143-157.

“God”, and the most frequent verb (after “make” or “do”) is “pray”.⁷

The roots of Don Bosco’s spiritual experience are summed up in the motto *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, i.e. desire for the salvation of souls to the exclusion of all else. The quotation from *Gen* 14,21 takes on particular characteristics in him, as he gives to the biblical expression an accommodated, allegorical and prayerful sense. The term *animas* indicates persons and concretely the boys with whom he is dealing, seen from the perspective of their final salvation. The words *cetera tolle* imply separation from everything not contributing to self-annihilation and union with God. For Don Bosco detachment is the state of mind required for the most complete freedom and availability for the demands of the apostolate.

1.4 Other tasks

As well as the examination of the theme proposed, the GC26 has also some other particular tasks to fulfil. First among these is the election of the Rector Major and members of the General Council for the period 2008-2014.

There is also the response to some requests made by the GC25 and verification of changes introduced by the same Chapter. In line with what is indicated at nn. 112 and 115 an important point is a rethinking from an organisational and structural standpoint of some departments of our Salesian mission: youth ministry, missions, social communication. The GC25 also asked for a study of the organisation of the three European Regions (cf. nn. 124, 126, 129). The need is also felt, after the constitutional change that was made, of assessing the results of entrusting the Salesian Family to the Vicar of the Rector Major (cf. GC25, 133).

Finally, it is thought necessary to reflect on the figure and duties of the local economer (C. 184) with a view to responding to some practical problems.

⁷ Cf. F. MOTTO, *Verso una storia di don Bosco più documentata e più sicura*, in “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane” 41 (July-December 2002) p. 250-251.

2. CONTEXT OF THE GC26

The historical element in life and the principle of incarnation mean that we cannot prescind from historical conditions, which are not only the background against which the Salesian life and mission are set, but also provide its challenges and possibilities. I want therefore to give a brief outline of the context in which the GC26 will take place, from the standpoint of charismatic identity and apostolic zeal.

2.1 Needs and expectations of the young

Soon after his ordination, while completing his pastoral formation in the Ecclesiastical College of Turin, Don Bosco, under the enlightened guidance of Don Cafasso, began to scour the city streets; he frequented shops, building sites, the markets and prisons; he got first hand knowledge of the situation of many youngsters, their destitution and their aspirations. It made him feel the urgent need for someone to take care of them, to help them and be concerned about their salvation. The idea of the Oratory was born, where Don Bosco was to fulfil his vocation.⁸ The cry of the young explains the unconditional zeal of his programme: "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*".

If today we want to return to Don Bosco to deepen and renew our vocational identity, we too must start again from the young, understand their expectations, and listen to what God is asking us to do on their behalf.

Even though young people live in a variety of circumstances, they have a common sensitivity to the great values of life, love and freedom, but they meet with great difficulties in living out such values. We cannot fail to be concerned about their needs and expectations, and at the same time be unaware of the threats and obstacles they encounter.

⁸ Cf. J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Second decade, chap. 11 and 12.

Life: needs and threats

The young are looking for *quality of life*: they want to live life to the full; they are seeking meaningful models; they want to build their lives on self-esteem and positive self-acceptance. They feel the demands of *new values*, such as the central place of the individual, human dignity, peace and justice, tolerance and solidarity. They are looking for *spirituality* and transcendence, so as to find balance and harmony in this frenetic and fragmented world; they want a subjective kind of religion that is sincere and non-institutional. In their search for meaning in life they want to be accompanied by adults who will listen to them, understand them and be able to give them guidance.

The situation of *poverty*, generated by a neoliberal system, reduces many young people to a struggle for survival. More than 200 million youngsters, 18% of the world's youth, live on less than 1 dollar a day, and about 515 million on less than 2 dollars. In 2002 it was estimated that there were 175 million migrants at world level, 26 million of them youngsters. Unemployment, exploitation and a precarious and selective educational system limit their future prospects: 88 million youngsters are unemployed; 130 million children are without any schooling.

The culture of *violence* becomes a reaction to hardship and privation; common phenomena are drugs, terrorism, wars, boy soldiers and genocide. Levels of delinquency have soared in developing countries. Juvenile delinquency is often linked with the abuse of drugs and alcohol; in Africa it is linked with hunger, poverty and unemployment.

Threats to life and dignity are caused by *abortion, suicide, euthanasia and torture*, which give rise to a culture of death and the loss of the sense and meaning of life. In a single year 5 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 undergo abortion. Christian life itself risks being no longer valid for young people unless it can overcome the *dichotomy between faith and life*.

Love: needs and threats

The sensitivities of the young, their language, their way of communication and expression, their style of life, are becoming ever more different from those of adults. What are important for them are the central place of the body and image, the value of *sexuality* and the world of affective relationships, the *new languages* which give rise to new forms of communication and relationships made possible by the new technologies.

Young people are making strong demands for *new relationships* of friendship and affection to overcome the void which makes them insecure, with little self-confidence and incapable of making deep and stable contacts. The need for meaningful relationships between adults and young people is something we must recognise and address.

In particular, there are signs among the young of *new forms of commitment* and of participation in the social sphere through a great variety of open networks allowing for direct, limited membership or association which bridge the gap between private and public life, such as experiences of the volunteer movement or the various forms and styles of civil service, non-global, environmental or pacifist movements etc.

There is a threat constituted by a culture which promotes a *possessive love* – one that is merely superficial; one that seeks the pleasure of immediate satisfaction, which promotes the commercialisation of the body and sexual exploitation, the precocious pregnancy of more than 14 million adolescents, the instability of married couples. *AIDS* causes grave illness and inculcates fear: at least 50% of new HIV infections occur among young people; about 10 million youngsters are affected by *AIDS*, of whom 6.2 million are in Sub-Saharan Africa and 2.2 million in Asia. It is estimated that at the present time some 15 million children below the age of 18 are orphans because of *AIDS*; of these 12 million live in Sub-Saharan Africa and the number could rise to 18 million by 2010.⁹ The Church finds it dif-

⁹ The statistics are given in the *United Nations World Youth Report* (www.un.org/esa/socdev/ynyin/wyr05.htm)

ficult to present a meaningful moral programme to the young.

Freedom: needs and threats

Young people feel the need to build their *own identity*. They have plenty of knowledge and experience but live in a notably fragmented and disoriented manner, with few points of reference of any significance. This makes them uncertain and frail in seeking their identity and in shaping their future. They feel a great need for *happiness*: to be happy is the dream and greatest desire they foster in their hearts. They assert their *right to be different*, overcoming the tendency to a standardisation in a globalised society, and recognise *lived experience* as being of greater value than any doctrine or ideology. They have a need to be recognised and to be protagonists in social life, work and politics.

Cultural manipulation through the mass media fosters a culture that is merely superficial, consumerist and pleasure seeking. A considerable obstacle is presented by attitudes that severely limit the building of identity: *conformism* with its uncritical compromises, pragmatism with its seeking for immediate results, and a *relativist and individualist mentality* that seeks a freedom shorn of every value.

2.2 Social and cultural challenges

We must always keep in mind that at the present day the Congregation is living out its charismatic identity and its mission to the young within cultures and societies in widely differing contexts. Relationships with the culture and social relevance play a decisive role in the effectiveness of our work. Let us therefore try to identify some common features in all these different contexts.

Basic tendencies

We need to notice in the first place the existence of two *transverse tendencies* which characterise the times of extraordinary change through which we are living: on the one hand there is a

tendency to a cultural homogeneity which endeavours to reproduce the western model and eliminate any differences; and on the other there are some strong counter-cultures with religious roots which lead to greater contrasts, for example between Islam and the west, between a secularised society and Christianity.

Secondly we must recognise the phenomenon of *globalisation*, fostered by technological development, which permeates many aspects of society and culture. From an economic point of view the neoliberal model is spreading everywhere, based on the market system with its tendency to dominate other human values of individuals and peoples. From a cultural standpoint, a process of standardisation is imposed based on the western model, with the gradual elimination of the cultural and political differences between peoples. Finally, the impact of the mass media and the revolution in information technology lead to profound changes in behaviour, in the distribution of wealth and in the organisation of work through a culture and society dominated by the media.

Challenges at a social and cultural level

There is a clear and strong tendency to *human mobility* expressed by large numbers of people who, driven by poverty, hunger or underdevelopment, emigrate towards the rich and well-to-do countries. One aspect of this phenomenon is urbanisation or internal migration within countries. There is the enduring *challenge of poverty*, of hunger, of sickness and underdevelopment, together with challenges that arise from the exploitation of children and juveniles in the tragic circumstances of marginalisation, of child labour, of sexual tourism, of begging, of street children, of juvenile delinquency, of boy soldiers and of infant mortality. It is all summed up in a vision of society based on consumerism, and everywhere there is growing a *consumerist mentality*, in both rich and developing countries.

The paradoxical *culture of life and death* comes face to face with the development of biotechnology and eugenics. An *imbalance* has

occurred between human development and information technology and communication. The *culture of individualism*, which arises from a relativist view of the world and of man, is becoming more and more consolidated, and this anthropological view has given rise to a new formulation of human values, based on ethical relativism, which Pope Benedict XVI does not hesitate to brand as “tyranny”. A widespread psychological and motivational frailty can also be linked with these expressions of weak thought. There is a growing *educational problem* concerning the transmission of values, because of the continual transformation of customs, of the influence of the prevailing style, of models.

The diffusion of the phenomenon of *secularisation* extols the various forms of humanism without God, and relegates all expressions of religious faith to the private sector. Pluralism regarding such themes as the family, life, love, sex, a new sense of the sacred, the crisis of traditional institutions, and easy access to drugs are all provocative challenges. *Religious fundamentalism* is becoming more firmly rooted, with a consequent difficulty for real dialogue between different faiths. New *religious movements* are arising as a response to the need for spirituality and group worship, for example the phenomenon of the sects and the so-called “New Age” movement.

Cultural challenges of the Congregation

Naturally the challenges do not arise only from the external world; some of them come from within the Congregation itself, and are of various kinds: the advancing age of the confreres in some areas, the weakness of the functioning of government at different levels, the disparity between the living conditions of the Salesians and their environment of poverty and want.

Youth culture with its attitudes and life models makes different impacts on the personal and community life of the confreres: the difficulty of coping with a world of youth that can be very varied in its ideas and behaviour, the different degree of emphasis

on the relationship between education and evangelisation, different sensitivities regarding the social impact of our mission of human advancement. In some strongly secularised contexts it is even a problem to know what specific sense to give to evangelising activity and the explicit presentation of Christ as the Saviour of mankind.

There are still a few places where spirituality remains superficial, where pastoral work is not properly organised, where we are not really in touch with the world of youth, where problems remain concerning the inculturation of the charism, or where there is little knowledge of Don Bosco and his work.

2.3 Guidelines of the Church

In the spirit of Vatican II, the teachings of which have recently been described by Benedict XVI as “proving particularly relevant to the new situation of the Church and the current globalised society”,¹⁰ we have the great ecclesial guidelines in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996), in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001), in the Instruction *Starting afresh from Christ* (2002) and in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas est* (2005).

Starting afresh from Christ: holiness as a pastoral programme

Starting afresh from Christ means proclaiming that consecrated life is especially following Him and “*the living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting*”.¹¹ “This implies a particular communion of love for Christ who has become the centre of their life and the continual source of every initiative”.¹² “Yes, one must start afresh from Christ because it was from him that the first disciples started in Galilee; from him, that throughout history men and women of every status and culture, consecrated by the Spirit in the strength of their call, have started out; for him they have left family and

¹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *First Message* at the end of the concelebrated mass with the Cardinal electors in the Sistine Chapel, 20 April 2005, OR 21 April 2005, p. 9.

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 22.

¹² CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 22.

homeland, following him unconditionally, making themselves available for the announcement of the Kingdom and doing good for all (cf. *Acts* 10:38).¹³

Jesus Christ, “today, yesterday and always” (*Heb* 13,8), is the pastoral programme of the Church of the Third Millennium: “This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication”.¹⁴ Also we Salesians, as any other community or group in the church, have to translate this programme into appropriate pastoral guidelines, «which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture». ¹⁵

«I have no hesitation in saying» with John Paul II, that «all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*»¹⁶; which is «the foundation of the pastoral planning». ¹⁷ Our holiness comes first! I have said that to you from the beginning of my ministry as Rector Major and I wrote it in my first letter.¹⁸ I repeat it once again today with more conviction and urgency: holiness «is the most precious gift we can offer to the young» (*C.* 25); it is the highest goal that, with courage, we can set for all. Only in an atmosphere of holiness that is lived and experienced will the young people have the possibility of making courageous life choices, of discovering God’s plan for their future, of appreciating and welcoming the gift of a vocation of special consecration». ¹⁹

As well as presenting an attractive model of community holiness we need to evoke and sustain in young people “a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one’s

¹³ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 21.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29.

¹⁵ *Ib.*

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 30.

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 31.

¹⁸ Cf. P. CHAVEZ, *My Dear Salesians, be saints* ACG 379 (2002) pp. 3-39.

¹⁹ P. CHAVEZ, *Address at the closing of the GC25*, ACG 378 (2002), n. 196.

neighbour, especially the most needy».²⁰ As real educators we need to offer «a genuine “*training in holiness*”²¹ which is suitably adapted to people’s needs, which prepares them to become expert guides in the spiritual life and makes our communities “places for hearing and sharing the Word, for liturgical celebration, for the teaching of prayer, and for accompaniment through spiritual direction».²²

Bearing witness to Christ: evangelisation as the primary mission

«We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard» (*Acts* 4,20), Peter and John repond when the authorities in Jerusalem immediately after the first Easter Day try to forbid them to evangelise. We Salesians are present in countries that have long been evangelised and where the sun seems to be setting on a “Christian society”, and also in countries which joyfully welcome a first evangelisation. «We must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (*1 Cor* 9:16)».²³

At the conclusion of World Youth Day in Cologne, Benedict XVI told the young people, “Anyone who has discovered Christ must lead others to him. A great joy cannot be kept to oneself. It has to be passed on. In vast areas of the world today there is a strange forgetfulness of God. It seems as if everything would be just the same even without him. But at the same time there is a feeling of frustration, a sense of dissatisfaction with everyone and everything».²⁴ And to religious in Rome: «May your first and supreme desire therefore be to witness to the fact that God should be listened to and loved with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your might, before any other person or thing... Do not be

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 39.

²¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 31.

²² CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 9.

²³ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 40.

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the closing Mass of World Youth Day*, Cologne, 21 August 2005. OR 21-22 August 2005 pp. 11.

afraid to present yourselves as consecrated persons, also visibly, and do your utmost to show that you belong to Christ, the hidden treasure for which you have left everything... the Church needs your witness, she needs a consecrated life that confronts the challenges of our time courageously and creatively».²⁵

The great challenge facing us in this millennium scarcely begun is precisely “to make the Church *the home and the school of communion*».²⁶ The extremely important task in the new evangelisation entrusted to consecrated life,²⁷ is the witness of communion, «*sign for all the world and a compelling force that will lead persons to faith in Christ*»,²⁸ lived «first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today’s world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence».²⁹ In an era characterised by globalisation and the return of nationalism, our Congregation and its members, too, precisely because it is international, «are sent forth to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News»³⁰ «to uphold and to bear witness to the sense of communion between peoples, races and cultures».³¹ Our communities are called to become «training grounds for integration and inculturation and at the same time a witness to the universality of the Christian message».³²

More than our houses, works and organisations, the Church needs the presence of our consecrated lives, of our radical following of Christ. Pope Benedict reminds us: «In the face of the advance of

²⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Speech to Men and Women Religious, members of Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life of the Rome Diocese (December 10, 2005)*. OR 11 December 2005, p. 5.

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43.

²⁷ «Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion as “witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design» (*Vita Consecrata*, n.46; cf. also n. 51).

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 31.

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 51; cf. *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 28.

³⁰ JOHN PAUL II *Vita Consecrata*, n. 51.

³¹ *Ib.*

³² CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 29.

hedonism, the courageous witness of chastity is asked of you as the expression of a heart that knows the beauty and price of God's love. In the face of the thirst for money that widely prevails today, your sober life, ready to serve the neediest, is a reminder that God is the true treasure that does not perish. Before the individualism and relativism that induce people to be a rule unto themselves, your fraternal life, which can be coordinated and is thus capable of obedience, confirms that you place your fulfilment in God. How is it possible not to hope that the culture of the evangelical counsels, which is the culture of the Beatitudes, may grow in the Church to sustain the life and witness of the Christian people?»³³

Returning to the young: presence as a sign of Christ's love

The young are "for the Church a special gift of God's Spirit". We Salesians can only look on them as Jesus did: with compassion (cf Mk 6, 34); we should only give them what Jesus did, the good news of God (ibid); we have nothing else to do than as Jesus did, attend to their needs (Mk 6,37).

These «young people, whatever their possible ambiguities, have a profound longing for those genuine values which find their fulness in Christ... If Christ is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross». ³⁴ Like John Paul, we too should not hesitate «to ask them to make a radical choice of faith and life and present them with a stupendous task: to become "morning watchmen" (cf. Is 21:11-12) at the dawn of the new millennium». ³⁵

The evangelisation of the young through a loving presence and suitable challenging projects demands that, with courage and deep faith, we give fresh impetus to our Youth Ministry which can run

³³ BENEDICT XVI, *Speech to Men and Women Religious, members of Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life of the Rome Diocese (December 10, 2005)*. OR 11 December 2005, p. 5.

³⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 9.

³⁵ *Ib.*

the risk of remaining on the level of entertainment or education that is limited to civil or cultural matters or to a generic approach to the transcendent. Being reminded of those to whom our mission is directed obliges us to reflect and to operate “starting from the young” and not from our problems, and to return to the young who are the special “territory” for our mission, the church where we encounter God.

To the young, in addition to the proclamation of the Word (*kerygma-martyria*) and the celebration of the Sacraments (*leiturgia*), we offer a service of charity (*diakonia*), which for us is education not “a kind of welfare activity that could equally be left to others but [a service that] is part of the nature of the Church an indispensable expression of her very being».³⁶

A very real challenge with which the whole Church is seriously being faced, is the problem of vocations. We want to encourage the young “to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church’s life. Together with the ordained ministry, other ministries, whether formally instituted or simply recognised, can flourish for the good of the whole community, sustaining it in all its many needs”.³⁷ “A primary responsibility of all consecrated men and women is therefore to propose with courage, by word and example, the ideal of the following of Christ and then to support the response to the Spirit’s action in the heart of those who are called».³⁸

2.4 Challenges and perspectives in Consecrated Life

Challenges of Consecrated Life

Nowadays consecrated life faces considerable challenges. Rather than delay on external elements such as secularism, relativism and globalisation, I think it will be more useful to concentrate on the internal challenges.

³⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, n. 25.

³⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 46.

³⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 64.

Despite the authoritative reference in the Apostolic Exhortation on consecrated life, its *identity* is not always clear. Insistent proposals for its refoundation risk causing the awareness of its presence in the Church to become obscured. Moreover the lack of discernment about new forms of consecrated life lead to a confused image of it. And finally the weakness of the theology of Christian vocations makes such identity even more uncertain.

Consecrated life is not always successful in finding ways to express its *credibility* and its *prophetic quality*. The mission needs to be more boldly directed to the frontiers of poverty and evangelisation. The following of Christ requires us to find radical forms for authentic evangelisation. Fraternal life has difficulty in manifesting communion in face of the new demands of interculturality and globalisation. The spiritual life is still looking for ways to be lived and communicated.

A challenge, often felt as a threat, concerns the *uncertainty of the future* of consecrated life, especially with regard to the questions raised about its survival in certain parts of the world. The drop in numbers, lack of vocations and increasing age of the members create in the Congregations a lack of future prospects, the need for large-scale reshaping, and the search for a new cultural stability. To all this must sometimes be added a lack of vitality, vocational frailty, and painful desertions. It all leads to a lack of motivation, discouragement and paralysis. In such conditions it is difficult to discern a strategy of hope that will open up horizons, provide new paths to follow and ensure the necessary leadership.

Prospects for Consecrated Life.

Referring back especially to the International Congress of Consecrated Life in November 2004, entitled “Passion for Christ, passion for humanity”, it is possible to single out some possibilities for a course to follow today.

It is considered important in the first place to be able to *arouse a fascination* for consecrated life by making it something wonder-

ful and attractive. It is fascination that is capable of exciting intense interest, a pleasant freshness and a stimulating optimism. Consecrated life must continue to evoke grace and sympathy, fantasy and imagination; it must give rise to strength, enthusiasm and expectations. The appeal derives from the perception of its vitality, expressed in the primacy of God and in living intimately with him, with Christ and the evangelical counsels at centre stage, in availability to the Spirit and in the depths of a spiritual life, in the strength and boldness of the mission, in fraternal acceptance and communion, and in personal and community conversion.

It is important in consecrated life to *develop charismatic identity*. Without a charismatic project that is absorbing and engrossing, the process of vocational identification is difficult. A weak project leads to the development of identities that are confused and uncertain. A return to the Founder's charism is one of the decisive elements of identity. Today sociology makes it clear how the culture of excellence, the seeking for visibility and the sense of belonging help the development of the identity of religious groups. Our task is to be able to give proper theological and charismatic value to these sociological indicators by means of the evangelical excellence of consecrated life, the visible and attractive witness of our vocation and a strong sense of belonging to the community and the Congregation.

Consecrated life must be a *sign* that is *credible and prophetic*; in other words it must continue to look for forms of prophecy and credibility not only at a personal but also at an institutional level. It must return to a style of life that is poorer and simpler, frugal and basic. Structures need to be simplified; they frequently become far too heavy and, although they are useful, they do not always make clear the presence of God. Consecrated life must become a different way of living; it must inspire a new culture; it must adopt a critical approach and become a prophetic challenge to society and to the ecclesiastical world.

We need to *form people who are full of zeal and enthusiasm*. God has a passionate love for his people, and to this zealous God

consecrated life looks with eagerness. It must therefore form individuals equally zealous for God. But a passion for God and a passion for humanity are nevertheless a point of arrival rather than a point of departure. It is important to confirm confreres in their vocation, to revive the gift they received through their religious profession, to promote a generous response and sustain their vocational fidelity, Formation provides motivation, meaningful horizons, paths to be followed at all stages of life, opens the way to spiritual discernment and sustains vocation.

2.5 The process followed by the Congregation

The process being followed by the Congregation has its roots in the commitment to the renewal of consecrated life promoted by Vatican II. We may recall the valuable reflections and guidelines of the General Chapters that have led to an ever richer awareness of the identity and mission of the Salesian and the community at the present time.

The reflection began with the broad analysis and guidelines of the *Special General Chapter* (SGC), with a subsequent deeper examination in the light of various ecclesial documents. Here we find the basic foundations and broad horizons of the Salesian plan of life today, solidly rooted in the charismatic identity and in the specific mission to young people, given effect in a community approach and in solidarity with the Salesian Family and the laity.

A re-reading of the guidelines of the SGC gives us immediately an outline of the path the Congregation was to pursue in the General Chapters that followed. It will be worth our while to recall a summary of the rediscovery of our identity: the living sense of God's active presence, the mission to the young and the working classes, the building of community, the development in appreciation of the Salesian Family, and unity in decentralisation.

A first and close examination of some of these basic points was made in the GC21 and continued in increasing depth in the Chapters that followed.

GC 22: The Chapter of fidelity

The GC22 undertook the revision of the Constitutions in the light of Vatican II and the SGC. It can be rightly called the Chapter of the charismatic and missionary identity of the Congregation and consequently of the fidelity of the Salesians to their identity and mission.

The GC22 gave us the renewed text of the Constitutions, «an authoritative document» – Fr Viganò said in his concluding address – “which helps us to measure the truth and the relevance of our gospel choice of life and of our specific mission in history. Here then today is the new “identity card” of the Salesians of Don Bosco among the people of God!»³⁹

The approval of the renewed text of the Constitutions is a call to fidelity. Fr Viganò recalled Don Bosco’s words to the Salesians when the first Constitutions were approved: «What we really must do is strive to observe our rules and obey them faithfully. Now we have to abide by our rules, study them thoroughly understand them and observe them».⁴⁰ And in his spiritual testament Don Bosco had written: “If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our Constitutions”.

All this is enlightening for the GC26, in which we want to take possession of Don Bosco once again and re-examine him in the light of present-day circumstances. Taking the Constitutions as the basis for the formation and life of the Salesian and the community is the way to know Don Bosco and bring him back to life; similarly the better we know Don Bosco the more fully are we able to live the Salesian Rule of life.

GC 23: The Chapter of the mission

The GC23 can be defined as the Chapter of the mission, that “mission to the young and the working classes” spoken of by the

³⁹ GC22, n. 59.

⁴⁰ *BM XII* p. 61. cf GC22, n. 91.

SGC, to which the GC23 returned in greater depth, taking up some elements of the GC21.

The Chapter document, *Educating young people to the faith*, highlights the traits of this mission: the decisive option for young people in their present situation and different contexts, with particular attention to those in most need; an authentic education to the faith with explicit evangelising activity that does not just stop at the threshold of the Gospel but provides a broad education that leads to social commitment, to the formation of conscience, to growth in love; an education to faith that leads to the choice of a vocation; the proposal of Salesian youth spirituality.

It all takes us back to Don Bosco's charism and original mission, to be given effect at the present day in the act of faith expressed at the end of the capitular document which speaks of "listening once again today to Don Bosco's voice". And as a condition for effective evangelisation the Chapter asked for the witness of the communities.

GC 24: The Chapter of sharing with lay people

The GC24, in a further study of the Salesian charism, recalled another element of the Oratory of Valdocco: Don Bosco's ability to involve many people in his mission for the young. The Chapter prompted us to renew the oratorian heart so as to share with lay people not only the mission but also the Salesian spirit. It was a new facet of the relationship between Salesians and laity called to share the same mission and spirituality.

Among the points to which it gave special emphasis were the elements of pedagogy and spirituality to be lived in common; competent training and formation; the essential role of consecrated persons as the "soul of the EPC"; the Salesian community as the guarantor and witness of the charism; and the Chapter made specific reference to works managed by lay people within Salesian projects, for which clear intentions and options were required so as to guarantee the charism.

Although the theme of the GC24 covered lay collaborators in general, it nevertheless referred in many places specifically to the Salesian Family, and to its commitment and to the involvement of the community in this regard. It leads to an emphasis on the importance of an examination by Salesians of this point also in view of the GC26.

GC 25: The Chapter of the Salesian community

The GC25 probed another essential element of the Salesian project: "*The Salesian community at the present day*". Starting from the fact that Don Bosco gathered around him a community of consecrated persons for the salvation of the young, the Chapter highlighted the fundamental elements in a Salesian community project for education and evangelisation: fraternal life, evangelical witness, and animating presence among the young.

We may note once again the close connection between clear references to the evangelical values of the primacy of God, the following of Christ and brotherly love, and the missionary trait of being with young people after the manner of Don Bosco. To this end there is also emphasis on the promoting of vocations. An essential role to which the GC25 points for the implementation of the community project as Don Bosco wanted it to be is that of the Rector.

From this rapid glance at the General Chapters of the period following Vatican II we can see the successive development and deeper study of the basic themes of our project of consecrated life, missionaries of the young according to the mind of Don Bosco. A Chapter like the GC26, centred on Don Bosco. on his charism and mission as they must be realised today, can serve as an evaluation of what we have done so far and as a relaunching for the future.

2.6 What the Provinces say

As I said earlier, the starting point for the choice of the theme for the GC26 was the situation of the Provinces, as it appeared especially from the Team Visits.

These revealed the importance of the processes launched regarding the *Salesian community*. The Provinces had been asked in fact to make an assessment of how the GC25 had been received, what difficulties had been met with in its application and what commitments had been made. The community was considered to be the centre of every renewal strategy. Its spiritual and fraternal life must continue to be fostered, its qualitative and quantitative consistency be maintained, its animation be assured, especially through the action of the Rector, and its ability for discernment and planning be increased.

The Team Visits also brought to light the needs and prospects most keenly felt by the Provinces. In the first place the need to rekindle the *apostolic zeal* of the individual confrere was expressed. Any renewal of the spiritual and pastoral life of the community was thought impossible without an effort by every individual member. Examples came to light once again of activism, dispersion, and spiritual and pastoral mediocrity. There is an awareness that the fire of pastoral love, apostolic zeal and the oratorian heart find their origin first of all in the spiritual life. The mission must not be identified only with the works, activities and initiatives; it is an expression of zeal for the salvation of souls.

There was an evident awareness of the urgent need for *evangelisation*. Every Region has its own particular challenges. Through the continental synods the Church has expressed its own new tasks in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortations "Ecclesia in Africa", "Ecclesia in America", "Ecclesia in Asia", "Ecclesia in Europa", and "Ecclesia in Oceania". The Congregation too feels the urgent need to update its own evangelising options, which were expressed in the GC23. One need think only of the challenge posed by non-Christian religions and in particular Islam, of the phenomenon of the sects, of relativism and laicism, of poverty and social exclusion, of the opportunities arising from immigration, of frontiers of the mission "ad gentes". And the Provinces also expressed the need for more explicit evangelisation in the field of education.

Another keenly felt need concerns the fostering of *consecrated Salesian vocations*. Experiences of the Congregation since the GC24 make it clear that if Don Bosco's charism is to flourish, there is need for consecrated persons. Within a youth pastoral work of an explicitly vocational nature, still more specific attention needs to be given to the consecrated Salesian vocation. A notable commitment is also needed to a deeper knowledge and greater visibility of the identity of the Salesian brother, to fostering his formation and promoting his particular vocation.

In the Team Visits the call to *evangelical poverty* was also emphasised. There is an awareness in the Congregation that contexts of both poverty and well-being invite us, for different reasons, to live a life that is simple, basic and austere. Our witness risks losing all credibility if ways and means are not found for the visible manifestation of a poor life. Consumerism and the shift to middle-class values are giving rise to individualism and are undermining apostolic enthusiasm. The search for an easy life puts a brake on pastoral initiatives and apostolic dedication. Poverty needs to be expressed also institutionally; there is need for transparency in the making of decisions, the sharing of goods, and solidarity with those in need. We must get back to being a Congregation of poor people and a Congregation for the poor.

Finally the Provinces are asking themselves about new *forms of poverty among the young*. The need is felt to reflect on this and return to being with young people. So far we have not sufficiently analysed what it is that keeps us away from the young and sought out what would facilitate our remaining with them. In the Provinces there is a movement towards going to places where youngsters are in the greatest need and to starting work among them. The Congregation needs to mobilise its best forces, those most generous and most available, so as to be ready to go into the most arduous, risky and demanding situations of the mission.

The Team Visits also revealed specific problems in every Region, such as the situation regarding restructuring, the inculturation of

formation, and the formation of lay people. The theme of the GC26 will be able to provide visions and perspectives that can throw light on even these more particular situations.

3. THE THEME OF THE GC26

The theme of the GC26 is both strongly challenging and powerfully stimulating. The phrase "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*" takes both the confrere and the community to their roots as being consecrated, and in particular to the heart of the mission, which is none other than being taken over by God for the purpose of becoming his transfiguring presence among the young. The passion for God and the passion for humanity, which consecrated life nowadays feels itself called to uphold, finds in Don Bosco's programme of "*Da mihi animas*" a perfect Salesian translation.

3.1 Programme of life of Don Bosco and of the Salesian

In "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*" we, sons of Don Bosco, find the motive and method for meeting the present cultural challenge courageously and without ambiguity.

"*Da mihi animas*" puts at the centre of the life of the consecrated Salesian the meaning of the fatherliness of God, the riches of the death and resurrection of Christ and the power of the Spirit, which are given to every young person. At the same time it arouses in the confrere the burning desire to make these possibilities known to the youngsters, so that they may relish them, live a happy life enlightened by faith in this world, and be saved for all eternity. It will prompt the confrere to make every effort and use every means, even when there is at stake a single youngster, a single soul.

"*Cetera tolle*" motivates the consecrated Salesian to keep away from the "liberal model" of consecrated life depicted in the letter

"You are my God. My happiness lies in you alone".⁴¹ To attribute the crisis to the prevailing culture, that is to factors such as secularism, consumerism, hedonism, is not enough. Historically consecrated life was born as an alternative, a counter-cultural movement, a contestation and revival of the faith in a stalemate situation. What makes it fragile at the present day is a weakness of motivation and of identity in the face of today's world.

Don Bosco's motto and programme sums up our spirituality (cf. C. 4). It is valid for all Salesians at every time of life – not only those who because of age and good health are full of energy, but also for the sick and elderly. The zeal of *Da mihi animas* implies the fire of charity. It is expressed not only in tireless educational and pastoral work but is manifested also in patience and suffering, which take on a saving value in the cross of Christ.

3.2 Charismatic identity: the Salesian spirit

I would like at this point to quote a passage from 120 years ago which, apart from some obsolete terms, could have come from the present day. It is from a source outside Don Bosco, and shows us what others thought of his work by highlighting the identity of the charism of our holy founder.

It is something said by the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Lucido Maria Parocchi who in 1884 was wondering what precisely was specific in the Salesian Society, and came up with the following reply: "I want to tell you what is the distinguishing mark of your Congregation, what it is that forms your character, just as the Franciscans are distinguished for poverty, the Dominicans for the defence of the faith, the Jesuits for culture. You have traits similar to those of the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits, but they are differentiated by their manner and purpose... What therefore is special in the Salesian Congregation? What gives it its character and physiognomy? If I have properly understood it and unless I am

⁴¹ P. CHAVEZ *You are my God, my happiness lies in you alone*, AGC 382 (2003) pp. 3-28.

much mistaken, what gives it its specific character, its essential note and particular countenance, is charity practised in accordance with the world's needs at the present day".⁴²

The second chapter of the Constitutions gives a clear outline of the elements of the Salesian spirit, putting on the lips of Don Bosco almost from the outset the words of St Paul to the community at Philippi: "*What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do, and the God of peace will be with you*" (Phil 4,9).

It seems to me that this was a happy choice of a text to introduce the identity of the Salesian spirit, because it is a "reminder, at once affectionate but deeply felt, of fidelity to Don Bosco as the primary and authentic source of the Salesian spirit, in so far as he himself, like Paul, was a first genuine imitator of the Gospel of Christ and hence our authoritative and indispensable model".⁴³

Much is said nowadays about the "*refounding of Consecrated Life*". The expression is well grounded if it expresses the desire to take it to its foundation which is no other than the Lord Jesus:

⁴² BS 8 - 1884 - n. 6, pp. 89-90.

The Cardinal continues as follows: "Today's world can only be attracted and drawn towards good by charitable works. Nowadays the world has no time for anything besides material things; it doesn't want to know anything about spiritual things. It ignores the beauty of the faith; it knows nothing of the greatness of religion, it rejects any hope in a future life, it denies God Himself. This world understands Charity only as a means, not as the end and the principle. It knows how to analyse this virtue but not how to make a synthesis of it. *Animalis homo non percipit quae sunt spiritus Dei*: as St Paul puts it. If you tell people of this world: "It is necessary to save the souls that are being lost, it is necessary to teach those who do not know the principles of religion, and to give alms for love of that God who one day will reward those who are generous", the men of this world will not understand.

It is necessary therefore to adapt oneself to this world, which is in full flight. God makes himself known to pagans through the natural law; he makes himself known to the Jews by means of the Bible; to the Greek schismatics through the great traditions of the Fathers; to protestants through the Gospel, to the world today through charity. Tell this world: "I am taking youngsters off the streets so that they don't fall under the trams, so they don't fall down a pit, I will put them in a hostel so that they don't waste the best years of their lives in vice and carousing, I bring them into schools to educate them so that they don't become a prey on society, don't end up in prison; I call them to me and I look after them so that they don't poke each others eyes out", then the men of this world understand and begin to believe".

⁴³ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*. A guide to the Salesian Constitutions, Rome, 1986, p. 156.

“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3,11). Moreover this process can be successful if the aim is to bring back consecrated life to the Founder of every charism: “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4,9). Any other interpretation given to attempts at refoundation are doomed to failure.

The Salesian spirit was defined in the SGC as “our own style of thought and feeling, of life and activity, in putting into operation the specific vocation and the mission which the Holy Spirit does not cease to give us”. (*SGC*, 86). The Salesian spirit is before all else the “spirit of Don Bosco” or, in other words, the vocation, life work and teaching of our father; it is realised concretely in the history and life of the Congregation and the Salesian Family, which means in the holiness of life of the Salesians (cf. *SGC*, 87). The definition was developed in a more structured manner in the GC21 and GC22.

The second chapter of the Constitutions presents the basic attitudes that animate the Salesian: pastoral charity, which is the centre and synthesis of the Salesian spirit and finds its source in the heart of Christ, apostle of the Father; union with God, the secret of growth of pastoral charity in the vision of faith, and in a permanent commitment of hope in daily life; the sense of Church; the love of predilection for the young, loving kindness as an expression of spiritual fatherhood, a family atmosphere, optimism and joy; work and temperance, creativity and flexibility, the preventive system as a synthesis of all this commitment; and finally Don Bosco as the practical model of the Salesian spirit.

3.3 Apostolic zeal: “the glory of God and the salvation of souls”

The glory of God and the salvation of souls were Don Bosco’s deepest interests. Working for God’s glory and the salvation of

souls amounts to conforming one's will to that of God, who communicates himself as Love, thus manifesting his glory and immense love for men, all of whom he wants to be saved.

There is a unique point in the "story of a soul" (1854), where Don Bosco reveals the secret of the purpose of all his activity: "When I dedicated myself to this part of the sacred ministry I intended to consecrate all my labours to the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; to work to produce good citizens for this earth so that one day they might be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to be able to continue until my last breath. Amen".⁴⁴

Don Bosco's holiness shines out in his works, but the works are only an expression of his faith. It is not the works in themselves that make the apostle, as Paul tells us: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love... I am nothing" (1 Cor 13,1), but it is certainly faith given new life by works of charity that makes the apostle holy: "You will know them by their fruits" (cf. Mt 7,16.20).

To "life in God" and "union with God", in a real and not only psychological manner, all Christians are invited. Union with God means living one's own life in God; it means remaining in his presence; it is a sharing in the divine life that is in us. Don Bosco made God's revelation the reason for his own life, according to the logic of the theological virtues: with a faith that became a sign that attracted the young, with a hope that became for them an enlightening word, and with a charity that they saw as a gesture of love.

Don Bosco was always faithful to his mission of active charity. Where a spurious mysticism could have cut the link with reality, faith compelled him to persevere through fidelity to needy youngsters. When his work was threatened by tiredness or resignation

⁴⁴ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Piano di regolamento per l'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco. Introduzione*, in P. BRAIDO (Ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore. Scritti e Testimonianze*. Roma, LAS 1997, p. 111.

he was supported by the same means as Paul: *Caritas Christi urget nos* (2 Cor 5,14). His charity never quailed in the face of difficulties: *I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some* (1 Cor 9,22). In matters of education he did not fear defeat, but only apathy and lack of commitment.

In Don Bosco we have an example of spiritual theology in action; his prodigious activity was prompted by the urgency of the needs he faced. His hard work was a consequence of his interpretation of a particular aspect of asceticism: it was an apostolic activity from start to finish. If in St Alphonsus asceticism is an element particularly internal to man, in Don Bosco it took on meaning in connection with work; it consisted in wholehearted commitment to the tasks God gave him to carry out.

In Don Bosco we discover the meaning of relativity between one thing and another, and at the same time the need to use them for the purpose he has at heart. He preferred not to hold rigidly to certain schemes – he found a practical pastoral and spiritual approach better than one that was theological and speculative. His apostolic zeal had a particular tone to it: salvation is to be achieved by methods of loving kindness, gentleness, joy, humility, eucharistic and Marian piety, and charity towards God and men.

3.4 *Da mihi animas*

For Don Bosco therefore the first part of the motto, “*Da mihi animas*”, expresses zeal for the salvation of souls, made concrete in the urgency of evangelisation and the need to promote vocations to the consecrated Salesian life.

3.4.1 *Urgent need for evangelisation.*

Evangelisation must be motivated and encouraged. We recall Don Bosco’s own example, who always felt the salvation of the young as a pressing obligation: “he said no word, he took up no

task that was not directed to the salvation of the young" (C. 21), And we remember the need for all peoples to know the gospel, which is the source of humanisation and the advancement of the human race.

The main priority of the Congregation is to take on the task of evangelisation in the field of education. Conversely, when we take on direct tasks of evangelisation we cannot fail to educate; for us Salesians any kind of catechesis without education is impossible.

Nowadays evangelisation presents new and different tasks according to different regional areas. It is important therefore that every Region study its own frontiers of evangelisation so as to move to the places where the mission is calling.

3.4.2 Need for recruitment

Here again we return in the first place to Don Bosco. He became aware that he could not confront the numerous needs of the young on his own. And so he appealed to the availability and expertise of many other people. He knew also that for continuity and strength his charism would need consecrated persons; in particular he understood the need for Salesian priests and Salesian brothers.

Especially after the GC24, we too became aware of the need to involve lay people, but also that the charism will make no progress unless there is a strong and visible nucleus of consecrated persons. Moreover we realised that the Congregation would put its identity at risk if it lost its consecrated lay component. It is particularly necessary that the vocation of the Salesian brother be kept alive in the Congregation.

We must therefore acquire the skill and ability to involve and recruit others, to suggest to young people the charismatic experience of Don Bosco, to invite them to stay with him for ever. And we must also have a systematic plan for following up vocations to Salesian consecrated life in both its lay and priestly forms.

3.5 *Cetera tolle*

For Don Bosco the second part of the motto, "*cetera tolle*", means detachment from whatever can keep us away from God and from the young. For us at the present day this becomes concrete in evangelical poverty, and in deliberately choosing to work for youngsters who are "poor, abandoned and in danger", by being sensitive to the new forms of poverty and working on the new frontiers where they are in most need.

3.5.1 *Evangelical poverty*

Consecrated life in future years will be realised in its concentration on the radical following of the obedient, poor and chaste Christ. If all three of the evangelical counsels speak to us of our total offering of ourselves to God and dedication to the young, it is poverty that leads us to give ourselves without reserve or hesitation even to our last breath, as did Don Bosco. The practice of the evangelical counsels lets us give free rein to the utmost limits of our availability.

There is nothing more contradictory and inconsistent than to make profession of the total donation of ourselves through the evangelical counsels, and then live with reservations attached to our energies and availability, giving way to temptations to an easy life, spending old age in a kind of vocational rest-home, indifferent to the drama of poverty involving millions of people in the world.

We Salesians bear witness to poverty by tireless work and temperance, but also by the essentials of an austere and simple life, by sharing and solidarity, and by the responsible use of resources. Our poverty calls us to carry out an institutional reorganisation of our work in a way that will avoid the risk of seeming to be in the educational business rather than being apostles through education. Anyone who has chosen to follow Jesus has also chosen to make his own Christ's style of life, to shun riches, to live the beatitude of poverty and of simplicity of heart, and to be on easy familiar terms with the poor.

3.5.2 *New frontiers*

The image of Don Bosco roaming the streets of Turin in search of needy children is not just a figment of the imagination. For us it is an imperative, a natural course of action. The ascesis of the preventive system requires us to go to young people most in need and take up our work where they are to be found. As individuals and as an institution we must identify what it is that blinds us to their situation or, if we do see, what it is that prevents us from reacting with the mind and heart of Don Bosco. Availability means we have to be ready to go into mission situations that may be risky, demanding and fraught with difficulties.

The existence of the new forms of poverty means that we have to keep in mind that nowadays all young people are in need, but especially is this the case for those in whom material poverty is combined with affective, spiritual and cultural forms. And when we speak of new frontiers of the Salesian mission, referring to the different contexts in which it is carried out, it means we must address problems in the fields of immigration, social exclusion, discrimination,⁴⁵ sexual exploitation, child labour and the lack of a religious sense.

Our option for the most needy of poor youngsters and for the new frontiers where they are waiting for us has its source and deepest motivation in the love of God that prompts us to perform works of charity. This frees us from any ideological or sociologising tendency.⁴⁵ Such a choice has also an evangelising purpose, as Jesus pointed out in the synagogue of Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (*Lk* 4,18). It is not a matter therefore of reducing our option for the poor to mere human advancement, but of bringing to them the treasures of Jesus and his Gospel.

⁴⁵ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 31b.

3.6 Requirements for bringing the theme down to earth

To give the theme concrete expression some requirements must first be established: the taking of certain steps, the conversion of mentalities, and the changing of structures.

Steps to be taken

Keeping in mind the objective of the GC26, which consists in the strengthening of our charismatic identity by starting again from Don Bosco and reawakening in the heart of every confrere the zeal of "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*", we must accept the fact that achieving this goal will require the following out of certain processes.

The charismatic identity asks us for a *mature knowledge of Don Bosco*, of his motivations, his great spiritual and apostolic options, and a *knowledge of the Constitutions*, which enshrine Don Bosco at the present day.

Apostolic zeal demands the resurgence of an explicit *evangelisation* in all our works and foundations, the courage to invite others to *consider a vocation* to the Salesian consecrated life, the renewal of a *poor and austere lifestyle*, the finding of fields of work that will allow us to concentrate on educative priorities and evangelisation in our mission rather than on the management of works, the identification of new forms of poverty and the frontiers where they are to be found, and the making of a reappraisal of our works and activities from a charismatic standpoint.

The first step in this process will be taken *through the involvement of the communities and through the Provincial Chapters*, in which what God is calling for must be identified with regard to the above-mentioned aspects, the reading of the situation of communities in this regard together with the challenges presented, and proposals of what must be done for renewal.

The second step will be the *celebration of the GC26* and the guidelines it will give to the whole Congregation.

Mentalities to be changed

There is need to start up a process of personal conversion regarding our Salesian charismatic identity, through a responsible reviving on the part of every confrere of fervour and vocational fidelity, a change of heart, and a life of apostolic zeal. It is first and foremost a matter of a change of mentality.

This means launching initiatives that will make a powerful impact on motivation in the confreres from a spiritual and psychological point of view, by improving their charismatic identification and their self-esteem.

This in turn will require a dynamic re-enforcing of the fact of being consecrated Salesians; of adopting a poor and simple lifestyle and shunning any "liberal model" of consecrated life; it will mean committing ourselves with apostolic dedication to the mission of evangelising the young; it will mean being available for activities of updating and renewal; it will mean supporting the plan of the community.

Structures to be changed

The process of structural change must be consistent with the conviction that "the mission is not the same thing as initiatives and pastoral activity".

It means taking effective action to change the structures of community life and the way we carry out our mission: alternative kinds of work, revision of the roles of Salesians in the mission, the management of complex works.

These changes must be inspired and guided by courageous decisions of government which make our convictions credible.

4. PRAYER FOR THE GC26

I end this letter with an appeal to Provinces, Vice-Provinces and Delegations, to communities and individual confreres to place

themselves in the atmosphere of the General Chapter, gathered around Mary who was so attentive to the voice of the Spirit.

The General Chapter cannot be reduced to the Assembly of Provincials and Delegates, but includes the whole process from its convocation to the approval of the guidelines it gives at its conclusion: it involves every community and every individual confrere.

The General Chapter is important especially for the processes it launches. Such processes cannot be completed in a period of six years, but start up a dynamic transformation that extends beyond the following Chapter.

The General Chapter is a time of intense ongoing formation that fosters a change of mentality. It makes us look at ourselves in the light of God's call expressed in the Constitutions, not to discourage us by examining the reality of our present situation but to help us to seek together the ways that will enable us to give a fuller response.

The General Chapter inculcates in us an attitude of discernment of God's will for the Congregation at the present moment in history, so that we can better respond to his designs and the expectations of the young. This requires a strong climate of prayer and of listening to God's word.

To Mary, who collaborated by her motherly intervention when the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco (cf. C. 1) and showed him "his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work, especially in the foundation of our Society" (C. 8), we entrust this Salesian Pentecost that will be the GC26. With her help we shall be able faithfully to continue our mission among young people as "witnesses to the young of her Son's boundless love" (C. 8).

I offer you now a prayer to our Father Don Bosco, that could be recited in communities and by individual confreres to obtain from God the reawakening in our hearts of the zeal of "*Da mihi animas*,

cetera tolle” and his assistance in the preparation and celebration of the GC26, from which we hope to receive abundant fruits for our Congregation and our young people.

PRAYER TO DON BOSCO

DON BOSCO,

*You were raised up by the Holy Spirit,
through Mary’s motherly intercession,
to play a part in the salvation of the young.*

*You have been given to us by God as a father and teacher,
and have left us an attractive programme of life
in the motto “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle”.*

*You have passed on to us, through God’s inspiration,
an original spirit of life and action,
centred and summarised in pastoral charity.*

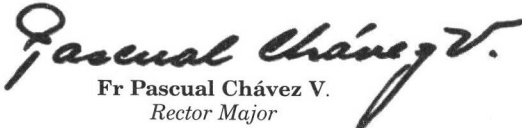
*Obtain for us that our hearts may be inflamed
with a burning zeal for evangelisation,
that we may be credible signs of God’s love for the young.*

*Help us to accept with joyful serenity
the daily demands and renunciations of the apostolic life
for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.*

*Obtain for us that the General Chapter may help us
to strengthen our charismatic identity
and reawaken our apostolic zeal.*

AMEN

With all best wishes,


Fr Pascual Chávez V.
Rector Major