

# acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

year XCI  
september-december 2010 **N. 408**

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Editrice S.D.B.  
Edizione extra commerciale  
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*Finito di stampare: settembre 2010*

**«I am the vine, you the branches»**

**(Jn 15,5a)**

**THE VOCATION TO REMAIN ALWAYS UNITED TO JESUS  
TO HAVE LIFE**

**THE HORROR OF PEDOPHILIA. – SOME DATA. – IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL. –  
“WHAT MUST WE DO, BROTHERS?” (Acts 2.37). 1. Transparent admission of responsibility.  
2. Victims take priority. 3. Accompaniment of transgressors. 4. Preventing abuse. – FOLLOW-  
ING DON RUA’S EXAMPLE. – CONCLUSION.**

Rome, 16 August 2010

*The anniversary of the birth of Don Bosco*

My Dear Confreres,

I am writing to you on the anniversary of the birthday of our beloved Don Bosco. As we think of him, I am with you in whatever part of the world you may be where this letter reaches you.

This time I am not going to speak about the events of recent months; I would nevertheless like to recall the most important of them, which was, without doubt, the meeting with the Salesian bishops held in Turin between 21 and 25 May. It was a much appreciated opportunity and gift for all those who took part, and who enjoyed the various celebrations: Mass in Turin Cathedral on the occasion of the public display of the Holy Shroud; the Solemnity of Pentecost at Colle Don Bosco; the Solemnity of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco. All of these occasions were a profound experience of Salesianity marked by the congenial company of the Successor of Don Bosco, by the family spirit, by cheerful and sincere participation in the different events, by the rediscovery of the Salesian charism as a specific way of carrying out the episcopal ministry. For the rest, I am sure you were able to follow this and other Congregation events through our website.

## THE HORROR OF PEDOPHILIA

After my last letter on Salesian Youth Ministry which, especially because it deals with the “heart of our mission”,<sup>1</sup> I consider to be very challenging, I now propose to share with you in a familiar way, as a father with his sons, a topic which has recently taken centre stage in the media and which has caused a huge and very serious scandal. I refer to the wave of protest without precedent which concerns the Church, the priesthood and consecrated life, following the publication of news about terrible, horrible cases of sexual abuse perpetrated on minors, and about the often inadequate manner in which these cases have been handled. They are scandals the gravity of which we recognise and which need to be remedied promptly and effectively. “The Catholic Church”, someone has written, “is facing one of the most serious crises in its history”.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the eighties in Canada, the publication of these facts continued in the United States during the nineties, then coming more recently to Australia, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, England, Ireland, Italy, Holland and Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> The cases so far documented reveal a phenomenon which peaked in the thirty year period 1950-1980, but of which there were episodes which also took place many years previously; it is possible that other more recent facts may come to light. A veritable “tsunami” of news has borne down on the Church and, sometimes, on our Congregation as well, and unfortunately its intensity is unlikely to diminish too easily. To imagine these reactions, as being, or worse still, to reduce them to being merely an organised plot would be well off the mark. The crisis has made it clear that this is perhaps the one case in which society today, es-

<sup>1</sup> P. CHÁVEZ, “*And he took pity on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he set himself to teach them at some length*” (Mk 6:4). *Salesian Youth Ministry*, AGC 407 (2010), cf p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> EDITORIAL, *Scandal of pedophilia: God in the victims*, “Il Regno” – Regno-doc. n. 10, 2010, p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> A brief summary of the facts and of the reactions by the Church are listed in M.E. GANDOLFI, *Geografia di una crisi*, “Il Regno” – Regno-att. n. 6, 2010, 075 (2010), p. 168.



pecially the more liberal and secularised society, so often tolerant and even neutral regarding moral and religious values, is disposed neither to compromise nor to forget, and much less so when it is an issue concerning the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup>

For us Salesians this crisis is especially painful and discouraging. It is painful because as members of the Church we cannot but share with the Pope his deep distress, “shame and remorse”,<sup>5</sup> and with the victims the dismay and sense of betrayal they have experienced through these “sinful and criminal acts”<sup>6</sup> It is also discouraging since committed as we are to returning to the young with the heart of Don Bosco in order to bring them the Gospel of Jesus, these very grave faults and the reactions, not always adequate, of authority, represent a real ‘eclipse of evangelisation’: and, as the Pope wrote, “have obscured the light of the Gospel to a degree that not even centuries of persecution succeeded in doing”.<sup>7</sup> For us Salesians, finally, this crisis is especially painful and discouraging, because some of the victims are children who are the very reason for our consecration, and some of the guilty are Salesians, our brothers in vocation and companions in the mission.

It is my profound belief that we can, and we must, make of this crisis an occasion for deep-rooted personal and community purification, and for renewed commitment to apostolic holiness. So in this letter I want to offer you the reasons for and indicate ways of “passing through this trial as Christians should”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “What State has investigated this fearful phenomenon in depth, making provision, including preventative action, which is clear and explicit against the abuses of pedophilia which it finds amongst its citizens, in families or public school institutions? Which other religious confession has taken action to discover, report and take up the problem publicly, bringing it to light and explicitly pursuing it? Let us especially avoid insincerity: in other words focusing on the limited number of cases of pedophilia verified in the Catholic Church, while not opening our eyes to the tragedy of an often violated and abused childhood everywhere, yet without the scandal” (J. NAVARRO-VALS, *The Pope and the scandal of pedophilia*, “La Repubblica”, 1 April 2010, 35).

<sup>5</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, 19 March 2010, n. 6.

<sup>6</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Ibidem*, n. 1.

<sup>7</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Ibidem*, n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Opening Address of the Cardinal President at the 61<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Bishops’ Conference*, Rome, 24 May 2010, n. 2.

## SOME DATA

Even if it be true, and this must never be overlooked, that “the problem of child abuse is not peculiar... to the Church”,<sup>9</sup> it is absolutely necessary to recognise the fact that “one single case of pedophilia [in it] is already one too many... and such behaviour is doubly reprehensible when committed by a man of the Church, a priest, a consecrated person”.<sup>10</sup> Having said that, one has to recognise – and not remain silent about it, as the mass media tend to do – that the Catholic Church is not a place *par excellence* for pedophiles:<sup>11</sup> “cases of pedophilia amongst clergy are equal to or even fewer in number than those found in other categories of people”.<sup>12</sup>

The data, so shocking on account of the extent of the phenomenon of the abuse of minors, is available for everyone: in this regard one can read a report of the WHO with an estimate of the cases of the abuse of boys and girls in different forms referring to the year 2002.<sup>13</sup> More than a million and a half children each year are forced into international rings of sexual exploitation, adding to an already large number of ten million minors, enslaved in prostitution networks, the sex trade and sex tourism, pornography. According to UNICEF, the sexual market is an industry which, with an estimated turnover of 12 billion dollars annually,

<sup>9</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, n. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Mons. M. CROCIATA, *A look at the situation of the Church in Italy. Address at the Italian Priests' Commission*, Rome 29 April 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. INTROVIGNE, *What lies behind the scandals?*, “Avvenire”, 22 March 2010: “If we compare the Catholic Church in the United States with the main Protestant denominations we discover that the pedophile presence is – according to the denominations – from 2 to 10 times higher among Protestant pastors than among Catholic priests [...] During the same period when about one hundred American priests were sentenced for the sexual abuse of minors, the number of gymnastics teachers and trainers of youth sports teams... found guilty of the same crime by US courts was around six thousand [...] According to regular reports from the US Government, some two thirds of the sexual molestation of minors came not from strangers or teachers [...] but from family members”.

<sup>12</sup> Mons. M. CROCIATA, *A look at the situation of the Church in Italy*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, *Global Estimates of Health Consequences due to Violence Against Children*, G  n  ve, 2006.

appears, in terms of its monetary value, as the third illegal activity after drug and arms trafficking.<sup>14</sup>

Underlying this very real “sex industry”, there is also an active “sex culture”, often defended, fostered, and even justified. In a report presented to the UN General Assembly on 21 July 2009, there was mention of the extraordinary growth of *on-line* pedophile and pornographic websites.<sup>15</sup> One should not be surprised then, if “according to some recent statistics, one out of three girls and one young man out of seven have been subjected to sexual violence before they reach their majority”.<sup>16</sup> In addition it should be remembered that “the overwhelming majority of abuse (84-90%) occurs in the family, and 27% involves a close family member”.<sup>17</sup>

In general, one could say that among the cases of sexual abuse reported, 30% concern cases of pedophilia,<sup>18</sup> a further 30% ephebophilia and the remaining 40% deal with victims who had already reached their majority. “In the USA in 2008 alone 62,000 people were identified as having committed acts of abuse against minors, while the proportion of Catholic priests was so small as

<sup>14</sup> Cf. [http://www.intervita.it/IT/condividiamo/news/22\\_ottobre\\_2007\\_-\\_notizie\\_di\\_intervita.aspx](http://www.intervita.it/IT/condividiamo/news/22_ottobre_2007_-_notizie_di_intervita.aspx).

<sup>15</sup> The report gave a number of 261,653 sites in 2001. Three years later, in 2004, they had become 480,000.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *La Repubblica*, 24 August 1989, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> G. CUCCI - H. ZOLLNER, “Osservazione psicologiche sul problema della pedofilia”, *La Civiltà Cattolica* N. 3837 (1 May 2010), p. 214. In Italy, for example, “in 1999, of a total of 522 people reported, 357 were known to the victim; amongst these 338 belonged to the family nucleus; for the remaining 165 cases the perpetrator of the crime was unknown to the minor. In 2000, of a total of 621 people reported, 476 were known to the victim; of these, 449 belonged to the family; of the remaining 145 cases the perpetrator of the crime was not known to the minor” (M. PICCOZZI - A. ZAPPALA, *Criminal profiling*. From analysis of the crime scene to a psychological profile of the criminal Milan, Mc Graw-Hill, 2008, 228).

<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, pedophilia is sexual activity or phantasy with children, prepubescent as its object, children that is under 13 years of age, which takes place for a period of at least 6 months, and which is carried out by a person who is no younger than 16. Not infrequently it is incorrectly identified with ephebophilia, which is the attraction an older person feels to adolescents or older youths. Cf. ASSOCIAZIONE PSICOLOGICA AMERICANA, *Manuale Diagnostico e Statistico dei Disturbi Mentali DSM-IV-TR*, Milan, Masson, 2001, 610s.

not to be taken into consideration as a group”.<sup>19</sup> More concretely, regarding abuse carried out by Catholic priests, of the around 3,000 reports presented to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith over the period 2001-2010, only 300 cases, 10%, concerned acts of true and proper pedophilia; for 60% it was a matter of acts of ephebophilia and for a further 30% of heterosexual relationships.<sup>20</sup> Why therefore is so much said “almost exclusively about the cases which have occurred within the Catholic Church, while they constitute little more than 3% of the total number of reported cases?”<sup>21</sup>

Even though the statistics regarding the Catholic Church are not so negative, it is not right to take a defensive stance behind them nor to shout conspiracy. There is no justification for a defence to the bitter end: pedophilia is always “a serious sin and a heinous crime”,<sup>22</sup> and when it is committed by priests or religious it is a scandal without comparison. “We should not, in fact, be surprised if the reaction to abuse committed by ecclesiastics has been so strong... The anger and bitterness are significantly related to the awareness of the high moral and human standard of the clergy, as well as the greater trustworthiness we offer and which is expected by others, particularly in relation to minors consigned to our care and our educational responsibility. The highest expectations which are nurtured by our ministry render such a serious and devastating betrayal even more immeasurably intolerable and to be condemned”.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Note from Fr. Federico LOMBARDI concerning abuse. *Dopo la Settimana Santa, tenere la rotta* (9 April 2010). Cf. “L’Osservatore Romano” [English edition] Wednesday 14 April p. 4 [http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_lombardi-nota-abusi\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_lombardi-nota-abusi_it.html)

<sup>20</sup> Cf. G. CARDINALE, “Chiesa rigorosa sulla pedofilia. Interview with Mons. Charles Scicluna”, *Avvenire*, 13 March 2010, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> G. CUCCI - H. ZOLLNER, “Osservazione psicologiche sul problema della pedofilia”, *La Civiltà Cattolica* N. 3837 (01 May 2010), p. 219. In Austria, according to official data, out of 527 reported cases, only 17 regard religious (cf. *Il Foglio*, 16 March 2010). In Germany, according to criminologist C. Pfeiffer the priests involved vary between 0.1% and 0.3% (cf. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 March 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Opening Address at the 61st General Assembly of the Italian Bishops’ Conference*, n. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Mons. M. CROCIATA, *A look at the situation of the Church in Italy*.

It is not right for us to pretend that nothing has happened or that we are dealing with matters which do not apply to us. Our Congregation too has been involved in various countries provoking discouragement, indignation, anger, loss of credibility, in contrast to a history, more than a century old, of generous, qualified service in the field of the education and evangelisation of young people.

I am in full accord with Pope Benedict, and so grateful to him,<sup>24</sup> for having declared that even though in this storm we are experiencing under the attacks of the world that speak of our sins, the incidents of pedophilia and sufferings connected with it “come precisely from within the Church, from the sins existing within the Church”<sup>25</sup> herself... “Trials for Christians have never been lacking and in certain periods and places have assumed the character of true and proper persecution. Yet, despite the suffering they cause, they do not constitute the gravest danger for the Church. Indeed she is subjected to the greatest danger by what pollutes the faith and Christian life of her members and communities, corroding the integrity of the Mystical Body, weakening her capacity for prophecy and witness, and marring the beauty of her face”.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, “the greatest persecution of the Church comes not from her enemies without but arises from sin within the Church; [...] the Church thus has a deep need to re-learn

<sup>24</sup> Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, *Letter of the Rector Major and the Salesian Bishops to the Holy Father Benedict XVI*, Turin, 23 May 2010. The Holy Father answered this letter with a letter to the Rector Major dated 14 June 2010, in which he wrote: “This thoughtful expression of solidarity, shown in a difficult situation also for the whole Church, has produced in me a sincere sense of gratitude, also because it is sign of that deep communion and that ardent affection which the spiritual Sons of Saint John Bosco have also nourished for the Successor of Peter. Therefore, I want to respond to your message, which I greatly appreciate, with the assurance of a constant remembrance in my prayers, with which I very willingly accompany the praiseworthy proposals for a spiritual renewal and an ever more convinced attachment to the Gospel, demonstrated, in the name of the whole Institute, by yourself and by all those who have taken part in this significant meeting”.

<sup>25</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *To journalists on the flight from Rome to Lisbon*, 11 May 2010

<sup>26</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Mass for Saints Peter and Paul*, 29 June 2010, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng Edition 30 June 2010) p.6.

penance, to accept purification, to learn forgiveness on the one hand, but also the need for justice. Forgiveness does not replace justice”.<sup>27</sup> “The true enemy to be feared and fought” therefore, “is sin, the spiritual evil, which at times unfortunately, afflicts even the members of the Church. [...] We Christians are not afraid of the world even though we must beware of its seduction. But we must fear sin, and for this we must be strongly rooted in God, in solidarity for the good, in love, in service.[...] Let us follow this way together with confidence, and the trials that the Lord gives us urge us to greater radicality and consistency”.<sup>28</sup>

## IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

Because of this, we must understand the current crisis in the light of the Gospel. However, before reflecting on the Gospel with you with regard to what is happening in order to find criteria there for evaluation and for future guidelines, I would like to indicate, even if only briefly, the cultural and social context in which we find ourselves and starting from there we can listen to what the Lord is saying to the Church. The Word of God in fact throws light on the situations we are experiencing.

Our societies, in great part post-modern ones, accept and even justify the destruction of embryos, which are not considered to be human beings, commercialise ovules and sperm; consider masculinity and femininity as simple cultural “genders”; they would like to see assisted death as a noble choice; with irritating public exhibitionism they present a particular notion of sexuality, which permeates everything, even obsessively so; they spread pornography as a legitimate form of entertainment. Then there are also “the extreme positions of those who in the western world would even want to give political dignity to the practice of

<sup>27</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *To journalists on the flight from Rome to Lisbon*, 11 May 2010.

<sup>28</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Regina Coeli*, 16 May 2010.

pedophilia.<sup>29</sup> “Out of a kind of perversion of truth we find ourselves faced with an ethical confusion of such proportions that reality is lost in subjectivism. And so we see that the condemnation of the immoral behaviour of religious comes out of the same cultural environment which is ready to accept every individual’s whim. The reasons are ideological, but also financial as demonstrated by the American legal offices which have earned billions of dollars thanks to the unscrupulous use of accusations of pedophilia”.<sup>30</sup>

It is in this environment that God’s will for us must be intelligible, that is we need to have the capacity to *intus legere*. In the Gospels I find some passages which are really relevant, such as the one about the selection of the disciples, which highlights on the one hand the special love Jesus has for those he calls to be with him and share his mission, and on the other the inability of the disciples to live up to their vocation, because of the effort required in following Jesus or of the disappointments he arouses in them. In fact one betrays him, another denies him, they all abandon him (cf. *Mk* 14:43-46. 52. 66-71). It is interesting, however, to note the fact that, after the Resurrection and Pentecost, the Church comes to birth not from the betrayal of one or the abandonment of them all, but from the personal faith, the courageous witness, the full-time ministry, the martyrdom of the Eleven.

<sup>29</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Opening Address at the 61<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Bishops’ Conference*, n. 4. “The leader of the Greens in the European Parliament, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, already a charismatic leader of protest, has boasted not only of having recommended but of having practised sex with minors when he was a teacher... Sartre, de Beauvoir, Foucault, Jack Lang, the future French minister, signed a famous manifesto along with other intellectuals where – in the name of ‘sexual liberation’ – they demanded the de-criminalisation of relationships with minors, including children. In these ‘masters’ a long European tradition was revived” (V. MESSORI, *Un dolore vero per ridare fiducia*, *Corriere della Sera*, 19 April 2010, p. 11). More extraordinary cases are reported in G. CUCCI - H. ZOLLNER, *Contrastare la cultura della pedofilia*, *La Civiltà Cattolica* N. 3838 (15 May 2010) p. 322-325.

<sup>30</sup> A. GASPARI, *Investigation into pedophilia in the Church. Interview with L. Bertocchi, expert in the history of Christianity* (Zenit, 17.05.2010) 3. Cf. <http://www.zenit.org/article-22495?I=italian>.



Nowadays as then, in the Church and in the Congregation, Jesus continues to call and choose “ordinary” people, sometimes fragile and fearful ones; today as then, not all have been faithful; and the media have broadcast and magnified these isolated cases. There are very many, the great majority of priests and religious, who have lived out and continue to live out their fidelity happily and with total and freely given dedication, and who seek holiness without respite. What a pity that these stories – all stories about good people – have not been spoken about by anyone or almost by no one in these days of crisis! There are so many stories of ordinary holiness.

But I should like rather to spend a little time with a text from John (15:1-8), which is part of the farewell discourse of Jesus (*Jn* 15:1-16:3).<sup>31</sup> In these verses Jesus himself defines Christian life as remaining in Him (*Jn* 15:1-11), that is, being loved by Him (*Jn* 15:12-17) and hated by the world (*Jn* 15:18-16:3). Jesus follows the allegory of the vine (*Jn* 15:1-4.5-8), with the request to remain in His love (*Jn* 15:4.5.7.9.10) and to bear fruit (*Jn* 15:2.4.5.8.16). Those who remain firm in Him, will be loved by Him. The one who is unfruitful, unfaithful, will be cut away from Him, separated from him, destroyed. The disciple is not unfaithful when and because he does evil, but when he does not bear fruit: it is lack of fruitfulness that reveals infidelity. On the other hand, whoever remains in Him, bears fruit and is loved by Him as He is loved by the Father (*Jn* 15:9).

The identification of Jesus with the vine is somewhat unusual (*Jn* 15:1.5). An integral part of the agricultural landscape in Israel (*Num* 13,23; *1 Kgs* 5:5), the vine was a metaphor for the people of God. Jesus has more to say: He is the vine, the one and on-

<sup>31</sup> The choice of this passage was suggested to me by reading an interview which appeared in the Spanish magazine “Vida Nueva”, by Fr Carlos ASPIROZ, Master General of the Dominican Order; speaking about the situation of pedophilia in the Church and evaluating the rage against it, he said that our God is not a woodsman who gathers his wood from fallen trees, but a vinedresser who prunes his vines so they may bear fruit. It truly is “good” news knowing that God has today set about purifying and strengthening his Church.



ly true vine; His Father is the vinedresser (*Jn* 15:1); His disciples are the branches (*Jn* 15:2.5). He is the true vine, since He has not disappointed his Father, the owner and the cultivator, who has laboured to ensure fruitfulness. As a good vinedresser, the Father throws away whatever does not produce fruit and prunes the fruitful shoots, that they may give more and better fruit. Whoever lives in Christ becomes the field of work of the Father, the hardworking vinedresser.

Pruned by God, the disciples, like branches, are cleansed: Jesus' word has separated them from the world and focused them on God (*Jn* 15:3). The divine pruning has taken place, then, through Jesus' word, which has separated them, purified them and made them fruitful. Fruitful and clean, they are to remain in Jesus (*Jn* 15:4.5). To the central declaration "I am the vine and you are the branches" (*Jn* 15:5), Jesus adds a new detail: whoever does not remain in him, serves for nothing; everything he undertakes is ineffective; whoever does not remain firmly in him, withers and becomes useless, is ruined, and is good only to be burned (*Jn* 15:6). Jesus points to the experience of the disciples: when they have distanced themselves from him, they have lost him and they are themselves lost. And this is why the promise that follows has greater force: remaining in him and listening to his word will see to it that their desires are realised and that they are given what they ask for (*Jn* 15:7). Whoever keeps the word of Jesus, will be heard by his Father; listening to what Jesus tells us ensures that God himself listens to us!

I invite you to re-read the scandalous facts of the abuse of minors in the light of this allegory through which Jesus expresses his relationship with his disciples.<sup>32</sup> Through what has happened Jesus is also speaking to us his disciples. He is telling us that it is not sufficient to listen, it is necessary to remain in Him. Only in this way can He remain in us; only in this way can we "do

<sup>32</sup> Cf. J.J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Cuarto evangelio. Cartas de Juan*. Introducción y comentario, Madrid, CCS, 2002, pp. 307-309. For the commentary on the Gospel passage I have made use of this study.

something” (cf. *Jn* 15,5). And this something is nothing else but the commandment of love: «This is my commandment: that you love one another, as I have loved you.» (*Jn* 15:5); this is the identity card of the disciple: “By this love you have for one another, everyone will know you are my disciples.” (*Jn* 13:34-35).

If Jesus’ mission consists in revealing God and his love, the only way of making him visible and credible is love for His own to the end; “a man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn* 15:13). This and no other is the Salesian mission, as we read in article 2 of the Constitutions: “being in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for the young, especially those who are poor”. Such is our ‘Salesian’ way of becoming Christ’s disciples, grafted into Him, attended to by the Father. Therefore nothing is more contrary to the Salesian mission than doing the opposite, namely, “being signs of our selfishness in dealing with the young, especially those who are little and poor”.<sup>33</sup> If the glory of the Father is the result of communion with Jesus and mutual love, then disgrace is selfishness manifested in mistreatment, abuse, violence towards minors.

The fact that the world does not value consecrated life is the logical consequence of the hatred it has had for Jesus, to the point of deciding on his death. The reason for this refusal is Jesus’ claim to have come from God and to reveal God to a world which has its own ideas about Christ and the kind of relationship he had with God. If the disciples end up making the world’s beliefs their own, then the world will accept them, recognise them as its own, and will not hate them. Jesus on the other hand has joined his disciples to himself and as a consequence has drawn down the world’s hatred on them. The disciples should not have been so surprised about that. The servant’s lot is no better than that of his Master.

<sup>33</sup> Rightly the Provincial in Germany, Fr Josef Gruenner, in a letter addressed to all the confreres, was asking ‘what must we do today to restore credibility to our institution, our education, our mission?’ And the response can be none other than fidelity to Don Bosco, his charism, his mission, his Preventive System. The only credible language about God is love.

We can draw some comfort from the fact that we are not alone: the Father is at work in us, purifying us with his pruning hand and being glorified by our fidelity under trial to His Son. We also rely on the Holy Spirit, our consoler, advocate and teacher (*Jn* 14:15; 16:7). It is his indwelling which sanctifies us because he keeps us united with Christ, like branches to the vine; he strengthens us in the fight against evil, against the provocations coming from within us and the seductions coming from outside; he guides us in listening and in obedience to the Father in order to do his will.

### **“WHAT MUST WE DO, BROTHERS?” (*Acts* 2:37)**

In Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, “Jews of every nation under heaven” (*Acts* 2:5) could hear the Gospel for the first time from Peter’s lips, the disciple who only a short time before had three times denied his Lord (*Mk* 14:68.70.71; *Jn* 18:17.25.27). A disciple, who had misunderstood Jesus, was the first evangeliser, and how effectively so! At the end of his speech, the listeners, “cut to the heart”, asked him: “what must we do?” (*Acts* 2:37).

As happened once to Peter, even the most serious mistakes cannot take us away from the mandate to preach the Gospel (*Acts* 1:8). He who evangelises however, first of all, like Peter, bitterly repents (*Mk* 14:71; *Mt* 26:75) and, after an examination in love (*Jn* 21:15-17), re-assumes the commitment to the mission (*Jn* 21:19). Personal sinfulness is not a sufficient reason to abandon evangelisation, on condition that this is preceded by a true conversion and a return to the following of Jesus. What are we to do then, dear confreres?

**1. *Transparent admission of responsibility.*** As a first step towards an essential pressing conversion, we ought to look *squarely in the face*, courageously and compassionately, what has happened, *feel that we have been wounded* by every individual case of violence and damage to minors

We have to learn from Benedict XVI “not to be afraid of the truth even when it is painful and hateful, not to be silent about it or cover it up”<sup>34</sup> and “to bear the burden of the pain for the infidelities sometimes serious ones”, of some confreres. “In order to recover from this grievous wound”, in the first place we have to “acknowledge before the Lord and before others the serious sins committed against defenceless children”.<sup>35</sup> “From this pain will come a providential awareness: it is necessary to live ‘a season of rebirth and spiritual renewal’ [...] and ‘to find new ways to transmit to the young the beauty and the richness of friendship with Jesus Christ in communion of his Church’”.<sup>36</sup>

**2. Victims take priority.** This courageous and compassionate approach should serve, and be itself a proof of the establishment of the absolute priority of the victims whose trust has been betrayed and whose personal dignity has been violated. Nothing can cancel out the evil inflicted on them, and it is understandable that they find difficulties, at times insurmountable ones, in forgiving their aggressors and being reconciled with the Church, the Congregation. No hesitation, then, and fewer excuses still, in recognising that the abuses “cause wounds at a deep personal level”. We find ourselves before people who need to be protected, who “ask mainly to be understood and accompanied, thoughtfully and respectfully, throughout a patient journey of recovery and reconciliation especially with themselves and their story”.<sup>37</sup> In addition to their being made aware of “our sorrow, our profound regret and our heartfelt closeness”,<sup>38</sup> the victims need justice and solidarity. This is the challenge.

<sup>34</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Opening Address at the 61<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference*, n. 3.

<sup>35</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, n. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Card. T. BERTONE, *Address at the meeting of priests on the beauty and appropriateness for today of celibacy*, Vatican City, 6 June 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Opening Address at the 61<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference*, n. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Ibidem*.

The clear and pressing directives proposed some time ago by the Holy See and recently revised and updated,<sup>39</sup> must guide the efforts for complete transparency in identifying and opposing such behaviour and for responsibility and a firm determination to take the necessary measures for the truth, once the facts have been ascertained. Already in 2006 Pope Benedict asked the Bishops of Ireland “to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected and, above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes”.<sup>40</sup>

While making clear that responsibility in these cases is the competence of the individual Provinces, we need to recall that at the level of our Congregation, in 2002 (19 July) the Rector Major and his Council sent to Provincials guidelines with regard to the problem of the abuse of minors.<sup>41</sup> Subsequently in 2004 the Vicar of the Rector Major, in the name of the Rector Major with his Council, in a letter dated 24 July sent to Provincials, gave concrete directions on the management of such problems, indicating the procedure to be followed and the norms to be adopted, on the basis of the protocol sent to diocesan and religious ordinaries by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

**3. Accompaniment of transgressors.** We cannot overlook those who transgress; members of our Church and our companions by vocation and mission, they belong to us. They have betrayed “the trust that was placed in [them] by innocent young people and

<sup>39</sup> CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educational guidelines for formation to priestly celibacy*, Rome, 11 April 1974; IBIDEM, *Guidelines for the use of psychological skills for admission and formation of candidates to priesthood*. Rome, 29 June 2008. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *De delictis gravioribus Congregationi pro doctrina fidei reservatis*, Rome, 18 May 2001. And most recently: CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Normae de gravioribus delictis*, Rome, 15 July 2010.

<sup>40</sup> BENEDICT XVI, “Address to the Bishops of Ireland on their *ad limina* visit” (28.10.2006).

<sup>41</sup> Among the guidelines it was indicated that each Province should create “an appropriate Commission to deal with reported cases of abuse, to help the Provincial in his task”.

their parents”, “they have violated the sanctity of the sacrament of Holy Orders in which Christ makes himself present” and they have not remained faithful to their personal covenant with God in religious consecration. “Together with the immense harm done to victims, great damage has been done to the Church and to the public perception of the priesthood and religious life”.<sup>42</sup> But they should not be left alone/to themselves; like Jesus, and indeed with Him, who came to call not the just but sinners (*Mk* 2,17), we take their burdens on ourselves and accept responsibility before God and men for being “our brothers’ keepers” (cf. *Gen* 4:9).

We exercise this care by helping them and asking them to recognise their sins and “answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals”, since “God’s justice summons us to give an account of our actions and to conceal nothing”.<sup>43</sup> We accompany them to help them accept responsibility for the crimes committed and to express their sorrow; we remain close to them also in prayer and in our compassion, throughout their time of correction and supervision, until they openly recognise their faults, submit to the requirements of justice, without ever despairing of God’s mercy or our fraternal help. In a case where a criminal process is required, we encourage the victims to present the circumstances, and the accused to offer his full cooperation.<sup>44</sup>

The abuse of minors is a crime, a sickness and a sin. “A person who abuses minors needs at the same time justice, care and

<sup>42</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, n. 7.

<sup>43</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> The legal situation is not the same everywhere; in some countries with an Anglo-saxon legal culture, but not only these, the Ordinary, Bishop or Religious Superior who, outside the sacramental seal, comes to the knowledge of crimes committed by his subjects, is obliged by law to report them to the judicial authorities. Even though “we are speaking of a grave duty, since these Bishops [or Religious Superiors] are constrained to carry out an act which can be compared to that performed by a parent reporting a child of theirs..., in these cases the law is to be respected”. If instead the Ordinary is not legally constrained to report, he should “address himself to the victims to invite them to report the priests of whom they have been victims”, beyond offering them “every spiritual (but not only) assistance” (G. CARDINALE, “Chiesa rigorosa sulla pedofilia”, *Avvenire*, 13 March 2010, p. 5).

grace. All three are necessary, without their confusing nor distorting one another. The penalty imposed for the crime does not automatically cure nor give forgiveness, and conversely forgiveness for the sin does not automatically cure the illness nor is it a substitute for justice, and so care does not take the place of the penalty, nor even less can it remit the sin".<sup>45</sup>

**4. Preventing abuse.** Repairing injustices of the past and facing up to the responsibilities linked to the abuse of minors is not enough. The current crisis, "caused by faults that we ourselves have committed as Church", and also as a Congregation, "is a possibility offered us to come close to God", "to discover that Jesus is even closer than we had ever imagined".<sup>46</sup> This urges us to a more humble and radical conversion to God and to our brothers and to a more courageous evangelising presence and brings with it a real "*season of spiritual rebirth and spiritual renewal*".<sup>47</sup> But *how do we do this*, my brothers? Allow me to put it frankly, even though briefly.

The Holy Father says: "It cannot be denied" that some of us, especially called to the service of authority have "failed, at times grievously, to apply the long-established norms of canon law to the crime of child abuse" and that "serious mistakes were made in responding to allegations". Even though, given the extent and complexity of the problem, and the affective implications for those involved, it is difficult "to obtain reliable information and to make the right decisions [...] it must be admitted that grave errors of judgement were made and failures of leadership occurred".<sup>48</sup> In the name of the Congregation, of all Salesians and

<sup>45</sup> Card. A. BAGNASCO, *Opening Address at the 61<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference*, n. 2.

<sup>46</sup> T. RADCLIFFE, "Venite a me, voi che siete oppressi", *Il Regno* N. 1076 - Regno-att. n. 7, 2010, pp. 201-202.

<sup>47</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland* n. 13.

<sup>48</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, n. 11. Said more clearly: "Who has preferred attitudes of indulgence or practices of removal has never accepted the Church's directives, but has betrayed them, turning due reserve into a knowing cover-up" (Mons. M. CROCIATA, *A look at the situation of the Church in Italy*).

in my own name personally, like Pope Benedict and with him, “we too insistently beg forgiveness from God and from the persons involved, while promising to do everything possible to ensure that such abuse will never occur again”.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently I commit myself and I commit the whole Congregation, in addition to expressing “sincere sorrow for the damage caused to these victims and their families”, to make “a concerted effort to ensure the protection of children from similar crimes in the future”<sup>50</sup> in all the works and in all the services that we provide. We came into existence “to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people especially those who are poor” (C. 2) and with the special purpose of guiding and serving them. So that young people may feel at ease among us, accompanied and protected, so that our institutions may be a home for them and that they may find there nothing and no-one to fear, we pledge ourselves to recover and enable the “culture of chastity” which deeply marked Don Bosco’s thinking and work, to flourish.

Knowing like him that this great virtue, “the one to crown all others... is everywhere beset by the enemy of our souls, because he well knows that if he succeeds in snatching it from us, the whole affair of our sanctification may be said to be ruined”,<sup>51</sup> I am also taking to heart the rethinking and strengthening of preventative measures in place in the Congregation. I ask the Provinces to draw up, in harmony with procedures spelt out by the Holy See, and to put into practice a protocol for the protection of minors, and to see that it is known and applied by Salesians and all the lay collaborators involved in our works.

I also agree that “all institutions that have to do with children and youth attract people who seek illicit contact with minors”; and “this also applies to sports associations, welfare structures

<sup>49</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at Mass concluding the Year of the Priest*, 11 June 2010.

<sup>50</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland* n. 2.

<sup>51</sup> J. BOSCO, “To the Salesian confreres”, *Constitutions of the Society of St Francis of Sales*, Rome, Editrice S.D.B., 2003, p. 235.



for the young and naturally also for the Churches”.<sup>52</sup> Therefore I feel it is my undeniable duty to follow up more closely, through the Councillor for Formation, the long process of discernment of vocations to Salesian life, assessing the adequacy of the procedures for determining the suitability of candidates and also making use of the best achievements of the human sciences, ensuring their timely and correct application so as to prevent situations which are not compatible with the choice of God and dedication to one’s neighbour. I well know that the current scarcity of vocations could sometimes lead to the “temptation to easily accept people affected by problems that in time are seen to be devastating. [...] The sad facts over these years lead us unfortunately to recognise that our investigation and formation arrangements have not always measured up to the importance of this issue”.<sup>53</sup>

My concern does not finish with ensuring the suitability of candidates to consecrated life and priesthood. Among the elements that gave rise to the present crisis, Benedict XVI has identified an “insufficient human, moral, intellectual and spiritual formation”.<sup>54</sup> In addition to weighing up the authenticity of vocations, we must commit ourselves more to the accompaniment of consecrated Salesians, priests or brothers, “so that the Lord will protect them and watch over them in troubled situations and amid life’s dangers”.<sup>55</sup> For an effective prevention of abuse, I commit myself finally to rethinking and reformulating the holistic and mature formation of the confreres and the people in our educational and pastoral institutions, including from the point of view of sexuality; this has always been a not-so-easy challenge, especially in a cultural and social context marked by an omnipresent pan-sexuality and militant secularism. Basically it is a question of “rediscovering and reaffirming the meaning and importance of sexuality, chastity and emotional relationships

<sup>52</sup> M. LÜTZ, “La Chiesa e i bambini”, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 February 2010, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> G. CUCCI - H. ZOLLNER, *Chiesa e pedofilia. Una ferita aperta*. Un approccio psico-logico-pastorale, Milano, Ancora, 2010, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, n. 4.

<sup>55</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Mass at the conclusion of the year for priests*.

in today's world, and doing so in concrete, not just verbal or abstract terms". What a source of disorders and suffering its violation or undervaluing can be!<sup>56</sup>

Writing a circular letter from Rome as I am today, "promoting and preserving good morals among the boys kindly entrusted to us by Divine Providence", on 5 February 1874, Don Bosco told his sons in the Turin house: "if we wish to promote good morals in our houses, we must first set the example. Suggesting something good to others while we ourselves do the opposite is like trying to dispel the night darkness with an unlit lamp [...] in each case one not only demotes good morals but really sets a bad example and causes scandal". And he continued with an observation which is severe and extremely relevant for today: "The press often bewails immoral acts that have ruined good morals and caused horrible scandal. It is a great evil, a calamity, and I pray that the Lord will close all our houses before any such disaster befalls them".<sup>57</sup>

See, my dear confreres, how, by imitating Don Bosco, his word and action, we can find light and courage to face up to today's challenges. What our beloved Father wants to tell us is very clear: our youngsters, in order to remain chaste, need our chastity, lived out in the joy of our dedication to them; without us, called by vocation to be educators and teachers and therefore to live what we propose to the youngsters, they will not know how to succeed nor will they find the courage to commit themselves to living chastely. And more than this, there is something we should never forget. Don Bosco would have preferred not to have any works for the young if this were the price to save even one of them from abuse. He loved the holiness of his boys more than the existence of his work. How can we not love this Father and Teacher?

<sup>56</sup> Note by Fr. Federico LOMBARDI concerning abuse (9 April 2010). *L'Osservatore Romano* [English edition] Wednesday 14 April p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> BM X, p. 495-6.

## FOLLOWING DON RUA'S EXAMPLE

At this point, I cannot but recall the well-known and painful "Varazze scandals" and the exemplary way in which Don Rua dealt with them. We are speaking of a false accusation of pedophilia, which took place in July 1907, "a real and proper diabolical attempt aimed at destroying the Salesian Congregation". In fact the news spread rapidly throughout Italy, with large headlines in the newspapers, and with such reaction that Salesian works in Sampierdarena, Alassio, Savona, Faenza, Florence and elsewhere were the target of groups of hotheads. It was only in June 1908 that the court in Savona recognised the total inconsistency of the accusations against the Salesians, and another two years passed, until 2 August 1910, when the same court judged that the Salesian claim against calumny and public defamation was well-founded.

At first Don Rua felt depressed and saddened, he cried and prayed, seeing how the Congregation was under attack. Once he got himself together, he took up the matter energetically with the Italian Ministry for the Interior. It is in the minutes of the Superior Council meetings especially that he expressed his deepest feelings. On 5 August Don Rua, having recalled the "critical point we find ourselves at, perhaps the most critical the Congregation has ever experienced, leaving aside the question of human wickedness", he added that "we can take it as a warning from heaven, from the Ven. D. Bosco, and we can benefit even more by purifying our houses, eliminating the unworthy and distancing ourselves from offending God, the ultimate purpose of the work of D. Bosco. Don Rua proposed above all to move slowly and with every precaution in accepting to the novitiate to profession and to sacred ordinations".<sup>58</sup>

To get to know the personnel of the Houses better it was necessary to have a general inspection. According to the minutes

<sup>58</sup> *Minutes of the Superior Chapter Meeting*, 5 August 1907, in FdR 4247A11.

four decisions were taken which may surprise us for their courage, and their relevance for today: “1. Remove from the company of the young all those (be they priests, clerics or brothers - professed, novices or intern workers) who are seriously noted for questions of morality or cruelty. 2. Give other roles to Rectors who are not capable of carrying out their office, especially the direction of the confreres and supervising the boys. 3. Reduce the number of Provincials so as to have available a greater number good rectors and confessors, for which we feel great need. 4. Announce before 1907-1908, and almost simultaneously, a general visitation of all the Houses of the Congregation with a view to having a clear idea of the true moral, disciplinary, and financial state of the entire Congregation. [...] Don Rua adds that when there are accusations of immorality the local superiors need to get to the bottom of the seriousness of the fault and that they refer the matter immediately and well, so that the appropriate decisions may be taken, among which he indicates the laying aside of the clerical habit when the guilty person is a cleric not yet *in sacris*”.<sup>59</sup>

In a year when we are celebrating the centenary of his death, Don Rua encourages us and inspires us in the arduous task before us. After those resolutions, he dedicated some of the meetings of the Superior Chapter to finding ways to implement the decisions taken and others for meeting all the Provincials. Don Rua is for us an example, a patron and an intercessor.

## CONCLUSION

My dear confreres, I have written with my heart in my hands and with my hand on my heart, allowing myself to be enlightened by the Gospel passage from John, in which Jesus speaks to us as friends, and does not call us servants; He reveals the secrets

<sup>59</sup> *Minutes of the Superior Chapter Meeting*, 5 August 1907, in FdR 4247A11-12.

of the Kingdom to us and invites us to remain in Him, as the branch in the vine, in order to have life and be fruitful.

It is my hope that this letter and the guidelines proposed will be useful to us all, help us return to Don Bosco and the joy of living as witnesses to an authentic culture of chastity, and inspire in us practical actions and future planning.

To all of you my affection and blessing.

  
Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva  
*Rector Major*