

PRO MEMORIA

with regard to the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage*

1. Overall view

During the 1st International Seminar on the History of Salesian Work in Africa and Madagascar, held between 11 and 14 October 2011 at Karen (Nairobi – Kenya), it was possible to reflect in a special way on the question of the production and the conservation of the Salesian memory. It was noted that in the care of the Provincial archives (with few exceptions: as for example that of the Provincial Archives of Central Africa) much remains to be done from both the point of view of the personnel responsible for this sector in our Congregation, and from the point of view of the state of the structures that need to be put in place to safeguard in the best way the memory of what the SDB have done. Rather there appears to be an alarming situation which requires something to be done quickly, without it being put off indefinitely.

In general there is no awareness of the need to treat the Provincial Archives as a kind of precious treasure for the present, and even less for the future.

At local level, that is in the individual houses, there is no real awareness of having to give attention to this aspect of our activities. In fact, it is noted that in the individual houses there are no archives. Occasionally, one finds a sort of store for documents and without any order. Usually it is a place hardly suited for the purpose. Therefore in the future it will be impossible to write a history of an individual Salesian house. A proud past runs the risk of disappearing, of being lost in oblivion.

On the whole Provincial Secretaries are not fully aware of their responsibilities for the historical Archives and sometimes do not have a clear idea of what Historical Archives are and what the duties of an archivist are (it also happens that they do not even know how to distinguish between historical and current archives).

It is noted that the few archives that do exist (both Provincial and of individual houses) have neither a catalogue nor an inventory. To this is added the fact

* The “Pro Memoria” brings together the observations, suggestions, proposals and solutions which the scholars Marcel Verhulst and Albert De Jong have offered as well as those from the participants at the Seminar.

that the places used for the preservation of the documents do not have the essential equipment needed to prevent the real danger of them being destroyed due to the geographical location and the climate. Therefore not rarely papers are put in a folder/box. It is noted that the papers are exposed to the dust because they have not been enclosed in containers suitable for archives, and no other measures have been taken to protect the material in deposit.

A recommendation: perhaps a commission needs to be appointed to look into this question of the archives regarding Salesian activity, with the task of dealing with this and other questions, to determine a plan for the organisation of the archives of the Provinces and of the individual houses. The plan also ought to coordinate guidelines with regard to which documents ought to be preserved and put in the archives and which not, and when they ought to be put there. The plan ought also to consider the urgent need to computerise the cultural heritage of the Congregation.

2. Problems the archives in africa need to face

On the basis of the exchange of experiences which took place at the 1 International Seminar for Africa and Madagascar, it was seen that the question of the production and the preservation faces the following problems which need to be dealt with.

1. The archives do not constitute a priority in the planning of the Salesian Provinces and therefore they do not give them much attention.
2. There is a lack of qualified archivists. The archives remain the responsibility of the Provincial Secretary (according to our Regulations and official indications). Very often these are not really interested in this aspect of their work, and therefore do little or nothing about it.
3. The archives are neglected, that is to say they do not appear in the list of things to be done, put on the agenda and discussed in Chapters and other important meetings. Very few people are aware of the fact that the Province has archives available to it.
4. The documents are not treated in the proper way. The metal clips or staples which keep pages together are not removed and they get rusty.
5. In general special containers for archives capable of protecting papers and documents from the dust and from insects and other climatic dangers are not used. In addition they are not protected by the right sort of paper. For the folders it is necessary to use acid-free paper.
6. Inventories and catalogues of the resources of the archives do not exist. Therefore no one really knows what documents there are deposited there. Not even the person in charge of the archives knows, usually because he is not interested.
7. The conservation of documents in Salesian Africa (including Madagascar) presents other problems because of the humidity, mould, ants and silver fish, etc.

8. The conservation of electronic resources is even more difficult and problematic on account of the great humidity.
9. The concept of time in Africa is different from that of Europeans. Africans have a cyclical conception of time, not linear as have the Europeans. This could, though not necessarily, represent an obstacle for the correct evaluation of historical procedures and their documentation, as well as other resources on the part of Africans.

3. Some suggestions for a solution to these problems

We have to recognise that there are no easy solutions to the problems relating to the archives in the Provinces of Africa and Madagascar. Nevertheless, there is a conviction that with a well-thought-out plan, periodically assessed, it is possible to improve the situation. Here are some suggestions.

1. In the vast majority of cases it is impossible to engage a full-time archivist (even though this has proved to be the best solution). But in most cases, this is not even necessary, given that a full-time archive would not have enough to do to justify such an appointment.
2. When a part-time archivist is appointed who also works as the Provincial's secretary, or someone who in addition to the role of archivist has another role, it is advisable that before hand he takes a course on archives. If that is impossible, he should be given the opportunity to acquire experience during the holidays in the main archives of the Congregation, where a skilled archivist could teach him the basic principles of the archive work.
3. The archives ought to be located in a room separate from that of the Provincial's Office and ought to be kept locked. There should be a register of visitors. Visitors should not be allowed to take documents out of the archives.
4. To make the archives more accessible and to facilitate the research of those who use them it is necessary to prepare an inventory and a catalogue of the historical resources deposited in them.
5. It is necessary to obtain the appropriate archive containers for the papers and documents.
6. These containers should preferably be kept in metal cabinets to protect them from dust, insects and mould.
7. The document should be kept in acid-free folders.
8. Appropriate guidelines should be given for the consultation and the use of the archives by researchers.
9. The personal files of living members should not be deposited in the current archives. Only when a member dies is it correct to deposit his files in one of the archives (advisably the historical one).
10. In order to preserve the contents of the resources of the archives for the future, it is necessary to transfer them to microfilm and /or computerise them.

11. The problems due to humidity can be resolved only by the provision of air conditioning for the locations of the archives. Certainly this will be expensive, and very much so. If the material really is of essential value and an air conditioned location for the archives is not available, it is recommended that the material be sent to the central archives of the Congregation to be properly preserved.
12. The problems of acidification and corrosion due to the ink used can only be dealt with by and resolved by specialised experts. The documents affected by these problems should preferably be sent to the central archives of the Congregation to receive the appropriate treatment.

4. An outline of some guidelines, recommendations and proposals for the future

1. The Provincials of Africa should give more serious consideration to a sector of the life of the Province which seems to be much neglected: the care and safekeeping of the archives and of the libraries, and subsequently, the systematic study of their past.
2. Therefore they should prepare/provide “personnel” and “means” (logistical and financial), making Provincial Secretaries and the Rectors of the houses more sensitive to the need to maintain the archives, to preserve and to catalogue the documentation.
3. The Superior ought to give attention in the course of their canonical visitations to check that the Chronicle of the individual houses is well kept. It is also necessary to make sure that all the other documents concerning the community and its work are preserved
4. It is recommended that due regard is shown to the private archives of individual Salesian confreres. These are the personal writings (letters received, copies of letters sent, photos and documents of all kinds) which, normally, when a confrere dies should be classified in the Provincial archives. Personal archives take on more importance when it is the question of a confrere who exercised important roles in the Province (in a house or in a work) or who had taken the trouble to gather and preserve some documents through personal interest, but significant in our history.
5. A major problem seems to be the preservation of electronic documentation (the large amount of correspondence conducted by e-mail, short messages sent by Skype, Messenger, SMS...) which vanish like smoke. In this way whole areas of history totally escape the attention of future historians and no one can then re-construct them. More practical and precise directives ought to be given to Provincial Secretaries regarding the preservation in the archives of such electronic documentation.
6. In the main, the drawing up of Salesian history in Africa has still to begin. It is important that everything possible is done so that it is studied, and written up by African members of the Salesian Family.
7. A sad situation has to be faced: in recent decades love for the history of the

Salesian Family has diminished among the members themselves. Without blaming anyone, it is necessary to reflect on this state of Salesian affairs. Certainly, as widely as possible the study of our history should be promoted in both initial formation houses and in ongoing formation courses.

8. There should be a serious examination of the question of direct responsibility for the management of the historical archives of our Salesian Family. In many cases those directly responsible, in the case of Salesians the Provincial Secretaries, show little professional preparation or are not even prepared at all (good will is not enough) to undertake, with competence, this kind of work, and without wishing to, at times themselves do irreparable damage. To this should be added the fact that the secretaries unfortunately are often changed without having had the time to become aware of their responsibilities in the area of the archives. The early idea Don Bosco had of appointing an archivist seems to have been of great relevance for our times which require people of high professional and scientific quality in order to be able to skilfully safeguard the heritage of the historical memory.

5. History – Identity

For Salesian identity to come into being and to be shaped knowledge of one's own past remains indispensable. This knowledge process needs to start from the very first steps of initiation in the Salesian mission. For this reason it is important to include in a well-thought-out way in formation courses (in all the years) the study of the history of the Work of Don Bosco. In this historical learning process, the knowledge of the history of one's own Province should never be missing. This should be done in such a way that the young Salesians in initial formation can understand the history of the Province in which, (in their turn), they are being called to be active members after having absorbed this history so that it can become "their" history.

This means a sound historical knowledge so as to be able to make a judgement regarding the path followed and then to take new decisions. The formation role of the historical sciences should be employed to the extent in which it is presented as honestly as possible, without stretching it to say things which in fact it does not say, and without using it just to make some moral point.

It is fundamental for our religious to remember *the close link between history and spirituality*. The study of history enables us to show how the Salesian charism developed in a specific way in the context of a particular country, and what contribution it made to the kind of living tradition which will be continued by the African Salesian confreres.

It should be pointed out that to undertake research into Salesian history is also *to offer a service to the local Church and to civil society*, since it shows how the Congregation (the Province) has contributed to the development of the local Church and of civil society (and also has been conditioned by them). As a

very well-known Burkinabé historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who died in 2006, said, no one can deny that the “the Christian missions” – in spite of all the ambiguities which were a feature of the epoch “missionary work coinciding with colonialism – were one of the main influences in the social, intellectual and moral evolution of African countries”¹. It is therefore worth studying this past: it is certainly no small matter.

6. Appeal

In our days historical research into the Church in Africa (in all its expressions, clearly) needs to be done in such a way that sufficient recognition is given to the contribution of Africans to the history of their Church and of their continent. Although often research still concentrates on the European missionaries, the African themselves and collaborators of the missionaries should not be forgotten. They carried out their part in the establishment and the expansion of the Church in Africa. It has been repeatedly proved that often, in certain areas, they were the first evangelisers.

No history can be written without sources. At a certain point, in the life of a religious institution the need arises to investigate its own past and its own history. Questions arise about its origin and identity. The present and the future have their roots in the past. Archives, as the places in which historical sources are stored and safeguarded, are therefore of fundamental importance. In general we have to make greater efforts to keep them in order. This can be done by giving them a little more care and attention. Every Province (Vice Province, Delegation) of the Salesian Congregation needs to make an examination of conscience with regard to the archives within its jurisdiction. Great improvement can be introduced without too much expense. The future generations of our Congregation will be grateful for the way in which we have cared for and preserved the memories of the past.

7. Remembering don Bosco

I should like to conclude this “Pro Memoria” recalling our DNA, that is reminding ourselves that we are the heirs of an “Historian Father”, and therefore we have to do our best not only to safeguard but above all to appreciate our heritage of the historical memory and in an careful and attractive manner make it known to the world of today. Let us therefore be inspired by the approach of Don Bosco, who knew how to care for the historical aspect of his own intellectual formation and to write history to promote the wellbeing of the young!

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¹ Joseph KI-ZERBO, *History of Black Africa*. Paris, Hatier 1978, p. 439.