

WRITING SALESIAN HISTORY IN AFRICA. WORKSHOP

Introductory notes

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1. Why write our history?

Our charismatic identity, the solidity of our being SDB, FMA, is determined by the knowledge of the history of our congregations and of the Salesian Family.

Our history helps provide us solid roots.

Our charism is written in history and through history. It is passed on to us by all those who have preceded us.

Where do we come from, and who are we?

History provides us some answers.

Knowing our SDB and FMA history, helps us to understand better who we are. It's an invitation to find courage by returning to the sources. On our part, living fully our charism, our mission, and leaving traces of our passage, we transmit this heritage to those who follow us.

After Vatican II, the Church asks religious institutes, especially those of more recent foundation, to write their history¹. It is also our case, though much has already been accomplished.

A religious institute is embedded in a long history of cultural developments, ideologies and changes of mentality. We approach this history through scientific methods.

Understanding history is never accomplished once and for all. It is liable to undergo modifications according to the evolution of consciousness, changes in sensitivity and in spiritual, political, social perspectives as well as in the manner of interpreting the past. Today, the media has a big say in these processes.

Every event is situated in a specific cultural context. By carefully studying our history, it is possible to unveil the ecclesial, social and political context that

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¹ Cf VATICAN COUNCIL II, *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, FLANNERY Austin (General Editor). Decree on the up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life: *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 2 (28 octobre 1965), Bombay, St Pauls 1975. Cf also JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996) n. 71, in ID., *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XIX/1. Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1998.

made possible our foundation. It helps us understand the “why” regarding many aspects of our tradition.

Time and space, history and geography interact constantly. Hence the already written history needs to be re-written. All scientific and technical innovations must be employed to complete what has been done in the past, without ever replacing it.

2. The history of our history

First of all, our historians have written the history of our founder Don Bosco and that of his writings and activities.

Much later, during the canonization process, the history of Maria Domenica Mazzarello, our co-foundress, was written.

This work has continued, but biographies alone are not enough. It's essential to define the spirit of the origins, the Preventive System, the Salesian Spirit, Salesian charism, the spirit of Mornese, the concept of Salesian Family, etc. ... which can by no means be said to be completed.

The history of Don Bosco and of Mother Maria Domenica continues to be written and is enriched with fresh nuances derived from the 21st century, from human sciences and the mentalities of different continents.

How were the SDB, the FMA, the Salesian Family, implanted in various parts of the world?

Who are the key persons of these foundations?

How can the Salesian charism be expressed in Asian and African cultures and contexts?

How do these cultures enrich the Salesian charism, the spirit of Mornese?

How and according to what criteria do these young provinces organize their formation, their apostolic involvement?

These and many other themes can be explored if we apply the means at our disposal.

3. Available material required before writing

Our job today is to take care of the documents and information, so as to leave traces for those who come after us to write our history which will become their history. They will search for their roots in our testimony, in our lives. Through what we leave behind we will become for them sources, which they can tap into.

Our history is woven out of our entire environment, our whole experience. Our signature, among other things, is found in:

- The life of the community described in monographs, records of personnel, customs, liturgical practices, written testimonies
- The lists of persons visited by us

- The documents and materials produced for ourselves and for our beneficiaries
- The Regulations of the houses, of our activities, of our community and pastoral projects
- The plans of our buildings, their modifications and extensions
- The correspondence and circulars sent and received
- The newspaper articles that speak of events pertaining to us or important in themselves
- The scholastic, family or religious legislation of the country
- The pastoral projects of the diocese and of the parish
- Valuable objects, cultural goods of any kind
- Evidence of all specific interventions, radio or television broadcasts
- Audio-visual material such as digital photos, web pages, CDs, movies.

4. Our reality

We come from societies which knew their oral history and passed it on from mouth to ear, from generation to generation. In every family someone was adept at explaining the family tree way back in the line of ancestors.

Until now, in our young provinces, writing is not really a concern and the oral transmission is no longer fashionable. Then, how to leave traces?

We are called upon to write and use all the modern means at our disposal.

Where do we now find traces of our e-mail correspondence, blogs, telephone conversations? Do we take time and the pains to record them on paper?

Even more pressing is the invitation to take care of old documents, books with soiled pages smelling of mildew, which are practically no longer useful. To throw them in the trash to make room and to put order, will leave an irreparable void.

5. Growing historical sensibility

The SDB had a first realization of their historical responsibility right from the beginning. Already before the death of Don Bosco, notes relating to him were preserved.

Their historical sensitivity has increased after the Second Vatican Council and has led to the foundation of the “Salesian History Institute”, which offers opportunities for training and for publications, the fruit of their research.

As for the FMA this awareness dawned more slowly. Early biographies of Maria Domenica were written by the Salesians: Fr Lemoyne who lived with her at Mornese and Nizza, and Fr Maccono, the postulator of the process of her beatification.

The writings and research on a large scale, besides those biographical, on Maria Domenica, the spirit of Mornese, the first sisters and communities, the

missionaries, see the light of day after the Second Vatican Council and after the preparation for and the celebration of the centenary of her death in 1981. Today, sisters specialized in the field offer valuable contributions through their research and teaching.

In 1996, the Salesian Family saw the foundation of “ACSSA”, *Association of the Enthusiasts of Salesian History*, which currently has more than one hundred members, and is active at the local level everywhere in the world. They support and sustain the conservation of our documentary heritage, and facilitate a progressive conscientization with regard to the historical dimension.

ACSSA organizes:

- Continental seminars on topics of specific interest
- International Conferences
- Publications resulting from researches locally carried out

ACSSA functions through dialogue with the General Councils of the SDB and FMA. Currently, an FMA is its Chairperson.

SDBs and FMAs in Africa, who are members of ACSSA, are very few.

6. FMA GC XXII

Members of GC XXII of the FMA took stock of the situation and decided to intensify attention to the history of the Institute in all provinces. There is still much to be said and conserved in order to keep alive our memory.

COMMON CONVICTION OF THE CHAPTER MEMBERS: investment of economic and human resources and energy in a venture of this sort is worth it.

GOAL FIXED: setting up an international team responsible for this task².

The Superior General, Mother Yvonne Reungoat, has entrusted Sr Piera Cavaglià with the constitution and functioning of this group till the end of the current six-year term.

7. A work entrusted to everyone

The historical dimension concerns everyone, SDB and FMA, those who live their commitment in a personal, but not private, way. The life of each one has an impact on the history of the Congregation, of the Church and of the world. Each one, voluntarily or involuntarily, is producer of a heritage. Everyone has an inescapable responsibility with regards to documents produced today, in view of the work of historians of tomorrow, and also with regard to the past that has not been destroyed.

² Cf ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Più grande di tutto è l'amore*. Atti del Capitolo Generale XXII. Istituto FMA 2008, p. 56.

“Documenting and writing history is not an activity reserved to certain strong periods, like a centenary or a special commemoration. It is a challenge to assert our creative fidelity to our charism – a challenge to our unity, for us at present as well as for future generations that will always be more and more distant from the origins and increasingly fragmented in their culture, in their sensibility and in the key they use to interpret reality”³.

8. Africa

Our history is too recent, as far as the majority of Provinces are concerned, to be truly written. We have a great wealth to be transmitted.

That it may one day be realized, much remains to be done:

- Acquire and cultivate the sensitivity of all to the history of our congregations, of the Salesian Family
- Train specialists in this field: archivists and those qualified in ecclesiastical and civil history
- Take care of existing documents
- Commit to writing oral traditions, as well as one’s own experience before entering Salesian life
- Set up the historical archives of our Provinces

This venture will call for investments of every sort, but it’s worth it. Attention to history does not mean indulging in the nostalgia of the past, but giving value to and understanding the life of the people of today, whom we FMAs and SDBs are called to serve.

All this is summed up in love for Salesian life.
100 years hence others will see the fruits!

³ FMA Seminar “*Introduzione alla ricerca storica salesiana*”, Turin, 1-2 November 2009. Final statement prepared by Sr Piera Cavaglia (unpublished).