

THE RECTOR MAJOR'S OPENING ADDRESS AT THE SPECIAL GENERAL CHAPTER

My dear confreres,

It is difficult to hide the many feelings that move me deeply at this moment. There is the sentiment of joy at seeing confreres from the most diverse and distant regions all present here with the same ideal, moved by the same spirit in the name of our common Father. There is a feeling of satisfaction because your presence in this hall is a visible manifestation of the crowning act of the long and laborious plan of preparations for this Chapter. I experience too a lively and solid feeling of confidence that by the grace of God, *viribus et cordibus unitis*, we shall happily find the way to fulfil the truly exceptional mandate entrusted to us by the Congregation in compliance with the Church's desire.

Unfortunately we have to note with deep sorrow that some confreres who are particularly dear to all of us are absent from this assembly, not permitted to live with us during these days of fraternal, Salesian and constructive charity. They suffer intensely on account of this enforced absence but at the same time they find in their love for the Congregation the strength needed to transform their suffering into a holocaust of prayer for all of us and for our labours.

Together with this invaluable form of prayer they offer the Congregation the no less precious gift of their fidelity. Let me quote from a recent letter from behind the Iron Curtain:

« Believe us when we say that we never loved our vocation more than we loved it under tribulation... We assure you of our fidelity, promising our humble but fervent prayers that the General Chapter may bring about a salutary renewal and a betterment of life in the great family of Don Bosco ».

Our affectionate thoughts of admiration and gratitude go out to all these dear brethren, wherever they are and in whatever way they are restricted in exercising their rights as free men. From them too we

take warning and example regarding that fidelity to the Congregation which is all the more tangible and generous when bedewed with tears and suffering.

« The Lord be with you! »

Officially announcing the opening of the Special General Chapter in accordance with article 138 of our Constitutions, I can find no better and more pleasant greeting than this: « *The Lord be with you!* ». Jesus our Lord has assured us: « Wherever two or three are gathered together in My name, I am in the midst of them ». I had already written those words when I thought of consulting the *Biographical Memoirs* to see what our Father said to our confreres gathered together at Lanzo on 5 September 1877 for the *First Chapter* of the Congregation. Here are his words:

« Our Divine Saviour says in the holy Gospel that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there one can find Him in the midst of them. We have no other purpose in this meeting than the greater glory of God and the good of souls redeemed by the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ. We can therefore be certain that Our Lord is in our midst and He will guide things in such a way that everything will redound to His greater glory ».

As you see, there is a coincidence of thought and feeling which incites us to accept and live intensely that greeting which comes not so much from myself as from our Father: « The Lord be with you! ».

Ours is an extraordinary service

Our Lord has brought us together here along the mysterious ways of His Providence. Why? The reason is a simple one.

We have been called here to render an extraordinary service to our beloved Congregation. Certainly, taking part in a General Chapter is always an exceptional task, but participating in this particular General Chapter we feel that ours is a truly extraordinary and in fact unique service. As we all know, this Chapter is quite different from all the others. It is a « special » Chapter called for by the Church, which has laid down norms, directives and standards for its preparation and realisation. Moreover, the Church has also clearly indicated its purposes and objectives. Following in our Father's footsteps we are fundamentally

committed to the faithful carrying out of the Church's desire.

The preparation has been extraordinary: it went on for three years; the extent of consultation was vast so as to get to know the mind of all the confreres in the Congregation concerning its numerous problems; vast too the participation and study contribution of individual confreres, groups and communities; the two Provincial Chapters (as also this General Chapter itself) had an increased number of members. But that is not all.

It is only right to mention the excellent work done at the two Provincial Chapters and by their respective study-commissions in an atmosphere of liberty, respect and dialogue, as also the intelligent, patient, generous and self-sacrificing work accomplished by the various Central Commissions. I would like particularly to mention also the general gratitude of all towards those splendid confreres who worked indefatigably for several months at Villa Tuscolana, near Rome. In an atmosphere of Salesian brotherliness and exemplary community prayer they dedicated themselves to the truly exceptional and laborious task of patiently drawing up the basic or guide-line documents you have already received. To them and to all those who, in whatever mode or measure, have given their contribution to the preparatory work, and to Fr. Scrivo, the Regulator, who animated and coordinated all this immense labour, we extend our own thanks and those of the whole Congregation for the invaluable service rendered.

The venue

Speaking of the special preparations involved, we cannot pass over in silence the technical matter of the buildings. After the XIX General Chapter decided that the Generalate be transferred to Rome, the possibility of its being used for General Chapters was gone into. However, to accomodate two hundred and fifty or more people and provide all the necessary services was no simple matter. The solution seemed to be to have two places: the Generalate and a house for retreats and meetings. With an act of trust in Providence the work was begun.

It must be confessed that more than once we had cause to worry. Unforeseen obstacles and difficulties arose which hampered the timely completion of the buildings and equipment needed for the Chapter members and for the functioning of the whole organizing complex of

the Chapter itself. We can say in fact that quite a record has been set in that, notwithstanding numerous and huge difficulties, at least the essential services are now ready in the twofold complex of the Generalate and the adjoining house for retreats and meetings. I am sure I voice your feelings in here expressing a well-merited vote of thanks to our Economer General, Fr. Pilla, who allowed himself no rest in battling against obstacles of every kind, determined to overcome them at any cost. Our thanks also to his immediate and valuable collaborators.

True, not everything is as yet perfect in either the Generalate or the other house but your spirit of understanding, adaptation and sacrifice will know how to make up for whatever is lacking.

Our fundamental and special task

This being stated, it is extremely important that we all be fully conscious of the mandate confided to us by the Church and the Congregation.

The basic task of each Chapter member is this: we have been called here as legislators for the whole Congregation, with the mandate to search for and find what is best for the common good of the Society as a whole. The duty is incumbent upon each of us to secure that common good, if necessary by sacrificing our own particular interests. This, it seems to me, is the spirit that should animate each capitular legislator who respects this absorbing mandate of universal character.

The scope of this Chapter makes it something really special because, as you know, its purpose is to actuate an « appropriate renewal » adapted to the religious life of our Congregation. Those two words contain an enormous programme involving huge and complex problems which we are called upon to study and resolve. It is enough to read article 3 of *Perfectae Caritatis* to see how vast and even universal is the scope given to the General Chapter in the matter of renewal:

« The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological condition of today's religious and also, to the extent required by the nature of each community, to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories.

« The way in which communities are governed should also be re-examined in the light of these same standards.

« For this reason constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies, and similar compilations are to be suitably revised and brought into harmony with the documents of this sacred Synod. This task will require the suppression of outmoded regulations » (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 3).

That compendious enumeration alone could, as experience has shown, give rise to a certain reaction: Must everything be changed? Must nothing of our past remain? It is wise then to go back to the substantial root meaning of the word « renewal » itself. It is not a matter of destroying the Congregation or substituting it by another, nor does it demand a new foundation. We are not here to form a new Congregation, for we have neither the charism nor the mandate to do so. It is the same identical Congregation that is called upon to reanimate itself whilst remaining essentially what Don Bosco wished it to be according to heavenly inspiration and as it has developed along the lines of sound tradition.

It is question here of the delicate operation of rejuvenation. Precisely on account of this it requires extreme attention and maximum respect since a scalpel must be applied to the actual living body which has generated us. Those who gird themselves to undertake this operation must, as it were, put on new clothes and be imbued with the charismatic spirit of our Father. Let us at least undertake this task with a delicacy composed especially of humility and deep respect, filially intent on interpreting the mind of our Father without falling into the temptation of substituting ourselves for him.

Duce Ecclesia! We shall tread on solid ground by relying constantly on the Church's guidance, for she offers all those helps that facilitate the clarification of our mandate as legislators of the renewal of the Congregation.

A secure guide in the magisterium

The first help it provides is simultaneously a guarantee of well-founded work. This is to be found in the conciliar and postconciliar documents and then in the papal and hierarchical magisterium. For the rest, the Church itself in calling for the renewal of religious insti-

tutes clearly points out that this must be inspired by the Council, the whole Council as understood and represented by the words of Paul VI: « a spirit that is at once renovating and innovating ». Needless to say, among the conciliar and postconciliar documents we should primarily give constant and deep attention to those that concern us directly. However, it is obvious that we should not restrict our continuous attention merely to those statements. Through its documents we must be aware of the whole Council as completed especially by the Pontifical Magisterium which has in recent years been rich in its teachings and in its constant up-to-date recommendations, especially regarding renewal. It would be a grave sin of omission and a sign of infidelity to our Father, who was so filially attentive to the words of the pope, were we to ignore that authoritative and magisterial word which includes all the interesting and renovating literature dealing with the renewal of the religious life on authentic conciliar lines.

As Chapter members we shall also find an indispensable help in Salesian literature. I appreciate that there will not be time for everything but still we should be able to read up on so many essentially Salesian matters. We cannot take up definite positions on even basic problems without such good support. To this end the programme of work will certainly be organized in such a way as to allow at least a minimum of time for such necessary study.

We are dealing with God's affairs

At this stage I feel it is necessary that we should once more take deep and clear cognizance of our task, for from this there will flow consequences that are essential to the success of the enterprise in which we are engaged.

Dear confreres, I do not presume to posture as a master before you but the heavy responsibility imposed on my shoulders as the successor of Don Bosco obliges me to recall first to myself and then to you the words of the Apostle: *Videte quod tractatis* — « Pay heed to what you are doing ».

Ours is not a gathering of shareholders in a firm; it is not a political assembly with contrasting economic interests, prestige and ambitions. Here we are the Church, or better an assembly of consecrated men, re-united in God's name, vowed totally to a supernatural ideal; we

feel we are men of faith whose concerns are deeply rooted in that faith and whose activities, including those of the here and now, are fully enlightened, animated and motivated by faith.

We are not here because of any mere human concerns; ours are the interests of God, of His Kingdom, of His Church. We are here primarily concerned with the souls of our confreres and those confided to our care. Even if we have to discuss questions of organization and economy, this will be only in so far as they are necessary instruments in our mission. All the sociological, statistical, historical and philosophical sciences which we make use of are merely utensils in carrying out the mission to which we are consecrated — a spiritual, supernatural mission. If we do actually realize that we are here to treat of God's affairs, of souls, then we shall not need to convince ourselves that all the many human means which we can put to use will be of little value in fulfilling our mandate if we are not on God's wavelength — more explicitly, on a supernatural level and outlook.

Renewal and holiness

Certain obvious and useful considerations follow upon this. Regarding the General Chapter the word « renewal » has suffered much abuse. However, not even the most perfect plan of renewal would be successful if it were not to be set in motion in the actual life of the individual members. This actual living of all the valuable implications of renewal has a name: holiness. It must be clearly stated that as consecrated people our specific and professional vocation is and always will be to aim at sanctity more earnestly than the ordinary baptized Christian. The Church, the Council and the postconciliar period have all reminded us of this fact.

But our own Don Bosco did not weary in repeating the same fact to our predecessors. In a circular letter on 9 June 1867 he wrote firmly: « The first object of our Society is the sanctification of its members. Let each one impress this well on his mind and heart, starting with the Superior General and right down to the last member: no one is necessary in the Society; God alone is the Head and the absolutely necessary Master » (Ceria, *Epistolario di S. G. Bosco*, Letter 559).

The very foundation of our Congregation demonstrates the need

and desire for this deep renewal summed up in the word « holiness ». Straight off then let us ask ourselves with extreme honesty and a sense of responsibility: How does the Salesian of today respond to this categorical commitment and need? How can he be faithful to this engagement in the new situation and climate created in the world in which he has to live and work today? Does our Salesian entity, as it exists and functions today, succeed in giving each confrere that supernatural status of which he has absolute need? How can we succeed in producing and in communicating the genuine apostolic vitality which in the past so stimulated the Salesian? Is our Salesian organism suffering from a certain lassitude? It is true that one notices in communities a certain attitude and mentality tending towards a worldly, secularized and materialistic life, towards a christianity that is « easy, without sacrifices, without duties, without renunciation, without superiors, without pain » — all of this alien in word and deed to the demands of a consecrated and Salesian life. What are the reasons, all the reasons, for such a situation? And then let us ask ourselves if the ways and means offered by the Congregation to the Salesian today to help him towards holiness are proving adequate to the new situations of our times. How are they being utilized? Is it not perhaps necessary to substitute them with other efficacious resources still inspired towards great zeal for sanctity and perfection?

Truly Salesian renewal

The same questions should be asked regarding apostolate, authentic apostolate primarily among the young and especially among the poor, the needy and abandoned. In his message to our Chapter the Holy Father reminds us of this authoritatively, saying: « When one thinks of the enormous burden of the world problem of youth, the turbulence which possesses and agitates them, the seeming futility attributed to traditional pedagogical methods, and the need that is widely felt and experienced for new educational techniques, one cannot help being aware of the immense problems that have to be brought to the consideration of the Chapter Fathers... ».

The Provincial Chapters showed that these very elemental and basic problems are to be found in a wide variety of shades in the whole Congregation.

I repeat, the Congregation must and wants to recondition itself, above all in its religious, spiritual and apostolic life — and you understand what a range of values is contained in these words. But I would like to add at once that such values must be renewed on Salesian lines and for the Salesian himself, taking into account his spirit, his mission and his particular make-up (which is different from that of the Little Brothers of Jesus, the Jesuits, Opus Dei, etc.). Let us be realistic then, neither closing our eyes to our deficiencies and weak points nor lingering upon them except to eliminate them.

« *Recta sapere* »

Such being our problems, it is not merely evident but absolutely necessary that we unite our hearts in prayer as the Apostles did in the Cenacle.

As the Special General Chapter drew near, all sections of our multiple family felt more intensely committed to prayer, convinced of the absolute need of divine help. From all over the world I have received assurances and evidence of this immense chorus of prayer and I have in mind especially those souls who have offered up to God not only their sufferings but even their very lives. Grateful for such charity, we today feel comforted and full of hope. But obviously we cannot delegate to others our own duty of prayer consequent upon the special responsibilities awaiting us.

The philosopher Peter Wust at the end of his life left his disciples this message: « With absolute certainty I have discovered the key, the magic key of Wisdom: it is prayer ». At our present great task we too require the wisdom that comes from God, and therefore all the greater is our need for the key of prayer.

Our Lord has said: « The Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who pray ». And what is the Holy Spirit if not the infinite Wisdom of God? Let us therefore have recourse to Him day by day so that, enriched by His wisdom, we may understand aright (*recta sapere*), i.e. see clearly in order to judge wisely and hence come to right decisions. We have besides the good fortune of living these extraordinary days together and our community encounter with God will unite us even more than our work, for Our Lord has assured us that our prayer will thus be tremendously enriched and exalted.

But there is even more: each day we shall be united around the eucharistic table. For us it will not be just a more or less meaningful drama but rather the re-living of the mystery of Holy Thursday with the same faith as the disciples. United with, in and through Christ, nourished by the same food and drink, we shall feel encompassed by His solidarity. Having brought our problems and doubts and our daily life to the eucharistic table we shall take away from it that strength and health (*robur et auxilium*) which we so greatly need.

But even our personal and community prayer and the Eucharist itself would be hampered in their divine effect were we to present ourselves to God without that humility which is the *sine qua non* for the reception of His grace: *Resistit superbis, humilibus dat gratiam*, says Our Lord.

Humility: premise for construction

Precisely because we are convinced of this law of humility, we must be careful in defending ourselves against the *ego* of self-love which is ever prompt to nudge other things aside, camouflaging itself eloquently and persuasively.

Speaking to bishops, cardinals and to the Pope himself on retreat, Fr. Voillaume in commenting on the words of Jesus, « Unless you receive the kingdom of God as a little child, you will not enter therein », explained that those words implied complete humility of intellect and poverty of heart. And that is precisely the attitude and spirit which each of us must bring to the Chapter.

It is necessary to draw attention to the fact that dialogue, which is so important and irreplaceable for the efficacious study of problems, is founded above all on humility and hence on respect for one another and on mutual trust. It will be fruitful if no one considers himself omniscient or to have a monopoly of truth, and it cannot consist in expecting the unconditional surrender of the other side. This implies therefore that the mind of each one should be charitably disposed not merely to hear but above all to listen to the others.

Still on the subject of humility, I would like to add another word: with our own personal humility let us also bring to the Chapter what we may call a collective or collegial humility. On account of his approaching Beatification it gives me great pleasure to quote Don Rua,

who wrote thus to the Salesians in a circular letter dated 29 January 1894: « It is certain that when we examine the actual state of our Pious Society we shall easily perceive many imperfections, but God permits this so as to keep us in holy humility ». One can hardly say that Don Rua was a triumphalist!

But what of ourselves? With that « holy humility » we must be loyal and frank in recognizing the deficiencies, infidelities and miseries to be found in the Congregation, shunning the pre-conceived and basically proud notions of those who do not wish to face up to less pleasant realities. This does not mean that we are to set ourselves up as judges to condemn the men and concerns of the Congregation. Rather it should mean for all of us an examination of conscience prompted by our love for the Society which we desire to be *sine macula et sine ruga*.

Fidelity

I would say that fidelity is consequent upon the humility which ought to guide our activities in the Chapter. It urges us to raise our minds to, or better still to adhere with firm and unhesitant confidence to what is important: God, the Church, the Congregation. In doing so we must renounce our own selves, our own affairs, our own views.

This word « fidelity » is going to recur frequently in our Chapter work, just as it did in the preparatory documents. « Fidelity », it has been written, « is the endeavour to keep contact with the rock from which we have sprung forth, simultaneously as we strive to reach the goal we are aiming at ». Fidelity therefore is the continual re-discovery of the profound and inseparable link that unites these two pivots. Fidelity means penetration beyond the smoky veil of superficiality into the very *raison d'être* of what we accept and profess. Briefly, it is a law of life. The meaning of fidelity therefore must not be confused with customary practice or immobility, for it demands a restraining attitude of awareness that is animated by the light of experience.

It is important that each of us here persuade himself that in times of renewal such as we are living and working in, fidelity is an essentially positive and dynamic attitude. It is not and must not become a mere passive acquiescence to whatever has been inherited or has become part of our patrimony, but rather it should be an active care

to use it and bring it to maximum expansion. Fidelity is in no way related to jealous immobility or timid traditionalism; rather it is intertwined with activity, reflection and meditation. Basically, fidelity is the expression of love (in our case love for Don Bosco and the Congregation), a true love that is intelligent and genuine and which is anxious that the person or thing loved should not become a mere archeological specimen but rather remain itself, vigorous with a life that is active, dynamic and fruitful.

But we must also convince ourselves that fidelity cannot have any connection either with a certain type of inadvisable progressivism which desires novelty for novelty's sake; which unconsciously leads to confusion; which credits and accepts every hypothesis as proven or provable; which, in the name of open-mindedness empties and laicizes both the Salesian and his mission.

Having said that, I appreciate that in practice discussion is always something very delicate, just as the positive situations to which these principles must be applied are likewise delicate and complex. But precisely on that account we must go ahead with a great sense of responsibility so as to avoid extremes at either end.

One sole heart

Dear sons, at the beginning of my talk I invited you to make of our fine big family here a cenacle that is alive and active, but it cannot be such without that fervent brotherly charity which constitutes its soul. The principal nourishing source of our fraternity will certainly be the eucharistic celebration diligently and fruitfully lived. But many other spiritual and even human elements will contribute towards keeping alive amongst us the atmosphere of that charity which unites hearts in understanding, forbearance, collaboration and joy.

We have one specific and particularly interesting motive for making all of us constructors of our cenacle of charity. In a book on renewal I read these unforgettable words which come from a person of vast experience of religious life and of General Chapters: « Renewal cannot be accomplished without charity. Renewal in fact signifies greater love and then better structures so as to give impulse to this greater love ». How greatly misguided are those who think that love for reform justifies the violation of charity.

We believe in charity and wish to adhere to it in its fullest sense even though we hail from every corner of the world and belong to so many different cultures, civilizations and customs. Our age-range is rather wide, our ideas and points of view will not always coincide, but all this can be overcome by our spirit of brotherliness. Not for nothing do we say and feel that we are sons of the same Father.

Unity through combined strength

The most precious and coveted fruit of our cenacle of charity will be the fulfilment of Christ's prayerful testament: *Ut unum sint*, words that have re-echoed from our Father's lips since the very origin of the Congregation. Hardly had Don Bosco received from Rome in 1869 the longed for approbation of the Congregation than he called our first confreres together and held a long conference on the theme *Vivere in unum*, enlarging on the many motives and aspects of living as one (*M.B.*, IX, p. 571 seq.). Here and now I feel I must repeat the grave words of our Father: Let us live and work with a will towards unity — let us create a true communion of hearts.

I realise that we each carry in our hearts the disturbances, tensions, entreaties, the impatience and the numerous aspects of crisis that are upsetting the Church and human society and our own Congregation. As I said before, we bring with us here a combination of causes, mentalities, sensibilities and worries that are often quite diverse. But our very diversity will prove a providential asset if we act on the higher level of truly genuine communion.

Nevertheless no one should think of, still less desire, a preconceived, we might almost say a prefabricated unity, an artificial unanimity worth nothing. Let us rather consider and aim at a unity that is secure because it is sincerely desired, sought after and even gained by suffering — and I say this deliberately. On opening the great Catholic Synod of Federal Germany Cardinal Doepfner appealed for unity, quoting the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians: « Be zealous in preserving the unity given by the Spirit ». But he also pointed out that just before that the Apostle had invited those Christians to bear with one another in fraternal love, to accept one another. « Those words », said the Cardinal, « presuppose conflicts, divergence of ideas, controversies,

points of friction ». As we know, all that is in the ordinary run of things, which would not be normal otherwise.

But if we are animated by true and positive fraternal love, and especially by a pure and sincere love for Don Bosco and the Congregation, the mutual toil and suffering in search of truth will make us accept one another and find a point of contact and identification even in such great problems; together then we shall seek for the best solution, which will be the happy outcome of the integration of the diverse and invaluable energies present at this Chapter.

Courage and confidence

Dear Chapter members, I trust you will forgive this long discourse. I hope that its length has not been detrimental to the utility of the things I have said with brotherly heart for the sole purpose of doing my own dutiful service to our common Mother, the Congregation.

And now, to work — with courage and confidence! In a spirit free from all triumphalism or over-simplification let us confront the problems that await us. Let there be no fear in facing up to those problems, mountainous though they may seem, nor let there be any discouragement or pessimistic defeatism. Our Chapter should proceed along the lines of realism and courage. But what kind of courage? Let it be the fearlessness which is a virtue, the virtue of the strong and wise, that true fortitude which cannot be separated from wisdom. The result therefore of fortitude and wisdom happily united, this courage cannot be confused with the blustering rashness that rushes into the unknown. Ours then must be above all the courage of strong men who think before venturing. But there is more to it than that. We feel that Our Lord's words to the apostles apply also to us: « Fear not, it is I! » And let us remember, as Fr. de Foucauld wrote, that « Jesus is master of the impossible », with command over people and things, one who gives to those who abandon themselves to Him a sense of security and peace amidst the waves. « Let nothing disturb you! ».

Reason for trust

Rightly too have I recommended confidence. We have many and strong forces in the Congregation, in all categories, at all levels, of

all ages, in every corner of the earth. You become aware of this when you get to know the Congregation, the whole Congregation in all its component parts.

I would like especially to point out that in the Congregation we have a section of youth with ideas, attitudes, needs and sensibilities which are often very different from those of the preceding generations. Sometimes youth is the victim of insecurity, of an exasperated and problematic situation, of a secularism which obscures or wipes out the supernatural. Nevertheless among these young people there are also some elements which are splendid in every way: they live their consecration with generosity, they sincerely love Don Bosco and the Congregation even though they see the defects and inefficiencies; they are ready to give themselves to the point of sacrifice; they have a solid and convinced piety; they are our hopes for the Congregation of tomorrow. Let me continue.

The Church has confidence in our Congregation, a trust that emanates from one who knows us on what we might call a universal plane, a confidence that sometimes makes me almost afraid. In the last audience granted me, once again Paul VI used expressions that embarrassed me when I thought of our many deficiencies, but he wanted to confirm his own great confidence and that of the Church in our Congregation.

When I speak to the Generals of other orders and congregations I am able to re-assess that judgment in the light of reality, including all those deficiencies that we must not ignore or underestimate. Among other things I can see that we are all struggling with very similar difficulties. But we Salesians still have reasons for confidence that are both familiar and altogether special. Perhaps the fact is unique that in the origins of our Congregation there is an unquestionably exceptional supernatural presence. Speaking of the Congregation, its birth and development, Don Bosco said verbatim: « One can say that there has been nothing that was not known beforehand. I took no step in the Congregation until some supernatural fact counselled it; no change or improvement or obstacle occurred which was not preceded by an order from Our Lord. From this fact I think it well not to consider the man... What does it matter to me if people speak well or badly about this? What do I care when men judge me in one way or another?

All that is necessary is that the works of the Lord be made manifest! » (*M.B.* XII, p. 69).

The following impressive statement by Don Bosco will therefore cause no surprise: « Among all the religious congregations and orders perhaps ours has more of the word of God » (*M.B.* XVI, p. 305).

That being so, how can we possibly suspect that God will forsake the Congregation at the very moment it is being called to renewal by the Church and therefore by Don Bosco, that He will leave it without that presence of inspiration and guidance which He gave it so generously at its origin? We have every right to count upon God's help: *Adiutorium nostrum in nomine Domini!*

Mary our guide

We must seek to deserve that help but we shall secure it more easily through the Virgin Help of Christians. In the life and mission of Don Bosco, even if for different reasons, two figures are inseparable: youth and Mary. On the morning of the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1887 Don Bosco seemed to be looking back upon the difficult pathway of his life. Then he said to his deeply moved Salesians: « We have walked securely: we cannot go wrong. It is Mary who guides us! » (*M.B.* XVII, p. 439). Don Bosco repeated this truth frequently, for it was confirmed over and over again: « Mary was always my guide! ».

If that was so for our Father, surely Mary will be a guide to us also who, in unconditional fidelity to Don Bosco, wish to work during these months so that the Congregation may emerge from this Chapter *qualis esse debet*.

With unlimited trust in our Father and in Mary, with all the fervour of the apostles in the Upper Room, let us gather about her as we repeat with filial and humble hearts: « O Mary, you were our Father's secure guide at the birth and development of our Family. Be so to us also who are aware of our weakness and insecurity as we tread the path traced out by Providence to bring our beloved Congregation to that true and faithful renewal which will be for it the revival of spring! ».