

I. THE RECTOR MAJOR'S LETTER

Rome, Feast of All Saints, 1971

My dear confrères,

You have had no direct communication from the Rector Major since the special number of the *ACTS* sent at the beginning of the General Chapter. Of course you have received the regular newsbulletins informing you of the progress and development of the work of the Chapter, but I know you expect a word from me also. I am taking advantage therefore of a few days' break in order to fulfil a great desire to speak to you on a subject which is at present very much in the mind of every Salesian throughout the world.

Communion of Spirit

Possibly my silence during these months of the Chapter, when we have been very much absorbed in all the work it involves, may have given some the idea of a certain disjunction between the Centre and the rest of the Congregation. I can assure you that this has not been the case. Here at the Chapter the Congregation and the confrères who are its life and soul have been present in deep and positive communion of spirit. You, dear confrères, are present in our daily prayer and especially in our solemn concelebrations. I would say that at such times we feel ourselves visibly united to you through the representatives here of the whole Congregation. You are present each evening at the Goodnight (which has here necessarily gone beyond its normal limits) when the provincials and delegates of the various worldwide

provinces have told us about your work and problems. You are continually present in a positive way in all the phases of our work. How often indeed the thought and observations made by the confrères at the Special Provincial Chapters are quoted when the various documents are being prepared and discussed, as the new Constitutions and Regulations are being formulated, and as so many problems are being studied. Besides, the Chapter members themselves who are representing you in our Assembly constantly recall that you are standing right behind them.

The Rector Major and the Chapter members therefore all feel strongly united with each Salesian no matter where he lives and works. Acting on your mandate we are at an extremely important and delicate phase of our work of forwarding the interests of the Congregation, and hence you yourselves should feel more than ever united to the Society and to ourselves, who are here seeking to fulfil the Church's behest to show forth a Congregation renewed above all in spirit and in its mission as Don Bosco would wish to have it today.

A reasonable demand

But at this stage I imagine you would like to say to me: « Tell us something definite and precise about the progress of the work. » This is a very reasonable request, especially since you feel that you, no less than ourselves, have a particular interest in the Special Chapter. Its prolongation and perhaps also the spreading about here and there of certain « information » totally devoid of foundation and the sheer fruit of pure fantasy may have given rise to a certain impatience or to a sense of weariness, perplexity or real preoccupation. Let me set your minds at rest.

Slow but constructive work

Regarding the length of the Chapter I would ask you to

reflect that the amount of work involved is immense. One has only to think of the « Schemes » or documents to be drawn up and the many problems and topics that have to be studied, debated, confronted and solved. Consider too the profound revision of the Constitutions and Regulations firmly required by the Council and by post-Council directives. Reflect also that our Assembly consists of two hundred members, each with his own sensibilities, experience and mentality.

Given all this, one can easily understand how such a vast and complex task confided to two hundred persons requires much time, so that by means of the necessarily slow ripening of ideas and various viewpoints one can arrive at a balanced convergence of decisions to be made by the Chapter. It is a matter, then, of work that is far from easy and which by its very nature cannot be speedy.

Certainly, looking back, we can see now that various mistakes could have been avoided. Unfortunately, however, it is much easier to acknowledge this afterwards but at the actual time the causes were not so easily recognizable. However, I can tell you with satisfaction that at last one can see and begin to gather the fruits of the rich and complex work already accomplished. We are now, we might say, at harvesting stage. The work is going on with intense rhythm and day by day one can see results and progress. I am only sorry I cannot reproduce here for you a large diagram we have which indicates graphically the daily progress of our work, for it would convince you of what I say.

Personally, I feel that at this rate we shall be able to have the election of the Superiors of the Council about mid-November, but I cannot predict when the Chapter will actually end, beyond repeating that matters are speeding up towards it.

Assiduous common research

Feeling sure you will be pleased at what I have just said, I would like to tell you something definite and explicit about certain very positive factors that have become increasingly evident during these months. For you too, as for myself and all here at the Chapter, they will give cause for reassurance and confidence.

Referring back to the necessarily gradual maturing of ideas that I mentioned before, I can say that our assembly has reached and shown a very marked sensibility to the needs of the times, as well as an unqualified decisiveness in the treatment of problems. At the same time a dominant and increasingly clear feature among the Chapter members has been a realistic love for the Congregation and for its true renewal. This love has shown itself very strongly in spite of personal or group differences of opinion. Sincere and factual, it has enabled us to work together for so many long months (even during the almost tropical heat of this past Roman summer) in order to come to grips with situations which were in some ways sometimes unpleasant and painful, not to mention a natural weariness and temptation to discouragement.

Our assembly has been aware of two facts that cannot be ignored, and firstly the great dissimilarities between various situations existing in the Congregation. This fact brings about differences in mentality. These, however, have been faced up to, not as points of disintegration but, by means of a true and dynamic fidelity to Don Bosco, as effects of an authentic inclusion of the Congregation in the actual environment in which the Salesian has to fulfil his mission.

Bound up with this recognition of diversity of situations in the Congregation is the demand for a decentralization that will provide a renewed sense of responsibility and of impetus to the provincial community, but with a deep, decisive and positive

awareness of the Congregation's intensified unity in the Salesians working in every corner of the globe.

To this end the principle of solidarity has been reinforced, developed and, in a certain sense, institutionalized as a practical application of the principle of unity. Moreover, the principle of subsidiarity and of co-responsibility has been widely and constantly applied at various levels in so many aspects of our life as Salesians consecrated to the mission confided to us by Providence.

In due course you will find all these elements present in the various Chapter documents.

Premise for renewal

I would like to draw your attention to one factor that has come to light in the treatment of so many of the « Schemes » and on which there has been complete agreement.

Renewal in any sphere of the Congregation is conditioned by the personal reanimation of each of us Salesians. Nothing could be more true than that. And renewal for the Salesian means above all a true, deep and sometimes radical conversion to a life that is really faithful to the Gospel, to the counsels professed, and to the specific vocation we have embraced. This means therefore a life that is above all permeated with prayer in the truest sense of the word. Without this we cannot seriously and worthily live each our own consecration nor carry out fruitfully the mission confided to us by Providence through Don Bosco.

This urgent and inescapable need for personal renewal as an irreplaceable premise for any sort of efficacious reanimation of the Congregation has been brought home to us by various eminent persons who have visited our Chapter, e.g. by Cardinal Garrone, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Education, and by Bishop Pironio, Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference for Latin

America. The very fact of this convergence of ideas and appeals invites us to reflect, and we can proclaim most clearly that even if the Chapter can produce very fine and exalted directives and prepare satisfactorily updated Constitutions according to the instructions of the Church and in perfect fidelity to Don Bosco, all this would be useless if the Salesian himself is not reanimated in the working out of his own personal conversion. This must certainly be the case from now onwards.

It is true that from the Chapter will come forth directives and helps towards a courageous renewal of life in the Congregation, but surely no one could think that the Chapter will encourage a life of mere worldliness or laxity — quite the contrary. We do want a Congregation that is courageously open-minded, but certainly not one that is over-indulgent or in any way aligned with what is today called « the permissive society ».

Precisely because it is committed to show forth a Congregation youthfully reanimated in its perennial mission, the Chapter desires above all an authentic and profound renewal in the life of the actual members of the Society. The Congregation of tomorrow will not be ready to accept a form of Salesian life that is a mere compromise, or a form of consecration that is a dead weight of counter-witnessing to the values it claims to practise.

Our times demand principles of decision that are coherent and men who have the courage to make them and to live them honestly. Only in this way can the Congregation give adequate reply to the appeals of today and of the future that are far more urgent than those of the past.

Chapter documents

I should say something also about the actual « Schemes » or Chapter documents. These have a doctrinal and pastoral part,

elucidating and as it were placing a basis for the Constitutions and General Regulations that follow. In certain cases there are also working directives which have particular importance in that they serve towards practical application of the norms of Renewal in each document. I shall limit myself here to quoting some in advance, but necessarily without comment on specific content.

The documents drawn up so far are doctrinally sound and even courageous, logically reflecting an assembly that is integrated but of diverse mentalities. It is obvious, however, that the courage of the Congregation at its various levels should measure up to this in translating them into action. In them you will find a clear perception and an interesting explanation of the innermost secret of the Salesian vocation in the Church. In this regard the document on « The Salesian Spirit » and on our effective mission among poor youth and the working classes deserves special mention.

Of particular importance is the part on « The Salesian Family » which opens up promising horizons for us in regard to spurring on the laity. Another very positive aspect is the insistence on the missionary impetus that should animate all our communities towards the better realization of our Congregation's own mandate of evangelization and towards overcoming the danger of worldliness in Salesians and in communities.

Updated Constitutions

The most important and compelling expression and synthesis of all the long and complex work not only of the Special Chapter but also of the whole Congregation, which so widely participated in its various stages of preparation, will certainly be the updated Constitutions and the relative General Regulations. The material for these has already been prepared and partly arranged. All that is lacking now is their final definition and official approbation.

As you will notice when you receive them, the Constitutions obey the norms of *Ecclesiae Sanctae* in their rich ascetical, theological and scriptural content. Hence they are not mere meagre standards of religious life but offer profound motivation for the principles of an ever more conscious and convinced life of consecration.

It is well to mention also that the new Constitutions will be impregnated with salesianity, Don Bosco always expressly present. In this way we can be sure that far from alienating us from our Father they will bind us more intimately to him and to the Congregation which the Holy Spirit inspired him to found and which he developed with the visible aid of the Help of Christians.

We can affirm moreover that the Constitutions which will come forth from the Special Chapter will actuate the directives of the Church that correspond to modern needs. At the same time they will be permeated with that spirit of Salesian holiness towards which our Father and his successors have constantly spurred on the members of the Congregation. You will see in fact that in their modern form and style the new Constitutions aim at helping the Salesian of the world of today to live his vocation more intensely and with deeper awareness. The matter and substance of the old Constitutions remain but the presentation now corresponds to the needs indicated to us by the Church.

Our commitment

It is possible that some may be disappointed in not discovering in the Constitutions or in the documents all that they personally hoped to find there. However, it is a matter of obvious commonsense that any legislation which is the fruit of collegial work and synthesis cannot be expected to include the requests of every single person. Given its mandate and authority by the Church

and by the Congregation itself, the Special Chapter has had to study long and hard; it has prayed so much too, looking ever to Don Bosco; and now it will give us positive results, confiding their fulfilment and practice to our goodwill.

It is up to us therefore to accept its conclusions not only with docility but also with firm decision, translating them into practice in our lives. I feel I can say that at this delicate moment in our history this is the one way for us to express our personal and productive attachment to Don Bosco and to our beloved Congregation. Any other attitude, no matter how one may try to justify it, can only be negative and can in no way contribute towards the true renewal of the Congregation, since it will only create harmful obstacles.

The early Salesians

In 1874 Don Bosco came to Rome to seek the approbation of the Constitutions of the Congregation. At Valdocco prayers were most fervent as our confreres awaited our Father's return with the anxiously expected news. What was the attitude of those first Salesians? We can find it in the *Biographical Memoirs*. Briefly, this was the combined sentiment of the confrères at Valdocco: « When the Constitutions arrive approved by the Holy See, we shall be happy to practise them, for they will show us the safest means to follow out our Salesian vocation ».

So too should it be today in the Congregation, not merely at Valdocco but throughout the world. Today, a century later, by means of the legislative body provided by Don Bosco himself, namely the General Chapter, the Church equips us with the instruments for infusing new life into the Congregation. The most essential of these are certainly the Constitutions and Regulations. Just as our confreres of old felt so happy and enthusiastically ready

to accept the first Constitutions, so too we Salesians of this day and age — bristling with difficulties but also rich in stimulation and in marvellous opportunities for our mission — should be ready to accept joyfully all the decisions of the Special Chapter, and in the first place the Constitutions, with firm will to practise them. Let us seek to enter into them with reanimated spirit in faithful accord with the demands of our Salesian vocation.

This will be the sure sign not only of our fidelity but also of true love for our Father, for how can we ever forget his last message: « If you have loved me in my lifetime, continue to love me after my death by the observance of the Constitutions ».

Intensified prayer

I know that you are praying much for the Chapter and I thank you also on behalf of its members. I can tell you that various confreres have offered up their lives for the happy outcome of our Chapter. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Don Bosco Volunteers and the Cooperators, as well as so many other good souls, are also praying for us. Whilst thanking all very sincerely, I invite you again to remain united to us and to intensify your valued prayers during this very important and delicate phase of our work. Join us in interceding with the Virgin Help of Christians, especially by means of the rosary, recalling that we are in the centenary of the Battle of Lepanto. We feel so deeply the need of light from above, especially at certain moments. Help us.

In the meantime continue your work in the provinces, enriching them by generous fidelity to your consecration, by lively fraternal charity in our communities. In this way your activities will always be increasingly apostolic and rich in good for souls.

Recall also our dear deceased confreres, especially during this month of November.

To each and all of you I bring not only my own personal affectionate greetings but also those of the Chapter members and in particular those of your own Provincials and Delegates. More than ever in these days we feel solidly united and we seal this fraternal Salesian communion in the daily eucharistic sacrifice.

D.M.H.C. Centenary

Before ending this letter I would like to mention, even if briefly, the centenary of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to be celebrated in 1972. The Mother General has sent me the interesting and practical programme of events. We can truly call this a family event, for it concerns us also because of our strong and common link as children of the same Father, in the same Spirit and in that fraternal collaboration which has hitherto been so strong and which will certainly become more intense in the near future.

Whilst asking you to do all you can wherever possible to give your helpful collaboration in the various celebrations, I feel sure that you will unite with me in prayers of thanksgiving to God for all the good accomplished during the past hundred years. Let us unite also in our fervent good wishes that the century ahead will see Don Bosco's Second Family reanimated in fidelity to our common Father, giving of itself generously and with Salesian zeal in the fulfilment of its specific mission, which is today even more pressing than in the past.

Once again I greet you one and all.

Affectionately,

Fr. L. Ricceri
Rector Major