

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Turin, 28th March 1972

My dear confreres and sons,

A little more than two months after the conclusion of our Special General Chapter I am glad to be able to resume our meetings to consider together through the medium of these pages matters that concern all the members of our Family, and so foster that unity which is its fundamental source of vitality.

I think that by this time every province will have received, at least in the official Italian edition, the new Constitutions and related General Regulations, and also the Acts of the Special General Chapter.

I know that translations have already been made in many provinces and that the individual confreres and communities are studying all this rich material with great interest; I learn too that nearly everywhere serious work has already started on the preparation of the provincial chapters.

We are all convinced that because of its new role this chapter is of the greatest importance; in fact on its deliberations depends the concrete realization of the renewal of both the local and provincial communities. I shall not therefore repeat what I said in the introduction to the Acts of the Special General Chapter; I only invite you to keep in mind what is said in those pages.

From confreres' letters

In connection with the Constitutions and the Acts, letters are already reaching me from confreres of all ages and every continent, in which they give me their impressions after a first reading. I quote some extracts which are representative of the opinions of many.

« After a careful reading of the whole of the new Constitutions I

feel I must write and tell you that they seem to me to be excellent and to meet the deepest and most lively expectations of the confreres. It is clear from the chronicle that the General Chapter had its moments of difficulty and tension, and this was only to be expected. But the desired results, to which all the difficulties and discussions undoubtedly contributed, rise above any clashes. I really think that Don Bosco had a hand in the work and guided it to a successful conclusion. A conclusion indeed, but it is merely the point of departure for the desired renewal, because of which we now have to roll up our sleeves from a salesian point of view ».

A young priest writes: « The wonderful riches I discovered made me exclaim: « hic digitus Dei est! », and I felt again the joy of my first profession: the desire to re-ignite my enthusiasm for Don Bosco who is still vibrant with life, and to renew my pledge of fidelity and work. It is wonderful to think that in the Congregation there is room for all men of good will who want to truly love God in the service of their fellow men... I bless divine providence for having let me experience this re-birth of our Congregation and I assure and promise you that from this very day there begins for me a time of action, performance and accomplishment, in the joyful obligation of being a salesian... ».

In this spirit and in conscious adherence and fidelity to the renewal of the Congregation, both confreres and communities have renewed their consecration using the new formula found in the Constitutions; this is what makes one feel a son of Don Bosco at the present day.

Attitude of the true son of Don Bosco

I am not unaware that here and there are some who, although they start from quite opposite points of view, adopt a completely negative attitude or one of criticism in respect of the conclusions of the General Chapter. I shall not repeat what I have already said and written in this connection, especially in the presentation of the Constitutions and the Acts. I ask you to read those pages carefully; but I think it well to make two comments concerning such attitudes and especially concerning their different motivations.

In the first place those who now claim that they are presented with

something completely different from what they originally professed should remember that the Constitutions have always given to the General Chapter the right to change articles, always provided that such changes were in harmony with the spirit of the Constitutions themselves (cf. art. 125 of the Constns of 1966). This is what the recent Chapter has done, in obedience to the clear norms of the Church.

We must convince ourselves that to be good salesians we must follow the line of the Chapter, unless we want to be guilty of the same error as those who call themselves catholics but oppose the Pope and the Council over certain norms and changes which do not correspond with their own point of view. What it means in fact is that such people find themselves in agreement with those on the other side, who refuse to recognise lawful authority at all.

This last group find their expectations disappointed in so far as the General Chapter did not, in their opinion, go far enough. I should like to remind them that in any society when the supreme representative and legislative organ (like our own General Chapter), after lengthy study, discussions, etc. makes decisions, all those belonging to the society are obliged to accept and observe them; this is obvious and a matter of social common sense.

These reflections are based on arguments at an essentially human level. One could say a lot more at the religious and salesian level. I think that at the present time the attitude of a true son of Don Bosco could only be one of sincere and concrete acceptance of the Special General Chapter.

But while I invite each one to be quite clear about the obligations inherent in the Renewal it calls for, it is my duty to remind you that before all else the Chapter unequivocally demands of each of us that we react and, if necessary, put resolutely aside every form of compromise in our life of consecrated apostolate. If this were not done, how could we speak seriously of renewal of the congregation? Renewal, unless we want to reduce it to something purely technical and external, implies for each one, and hence also for the community, a mode of life and behaviour which provides a consistent and authentic testimony to our fidelity to our vocation, with the firm exclusion of every suggestion of compromise.

As I have already said, the work of studying the capitular documents in depth is going ahead in every province, the new Constitutions are

being presented at appropriate meetings of the community, and intensive preparations are being made for the provincial chapters, and all this provides an efficacious means of making fruitful the tremendous work of the Chapter. Each one, whatever position of responsibility he may hold, should take an active part in these operations, especially by an attentive study of the documents and then by promoting in himself and in others that process of assimilation, and more particularly of the spirit by which they are permeated, which is a necessary prerequisite for that comprehensive implementation which must give to our communities a style of life, and hence a physiognomy, renewed from both a religious and salesian point of view.

The Superiors elected by the 20th General Chapter

But one of my objects in this letter is to discharge a duty which as yet remains unfulfilled: to give official notification of the names of the Superiors elected by the Chapter. It is true that through news-bulletins and other means you are already aware of the results of the elections, but the official intimation called for by art. 121 of the General Regulations has not yet been made.

Here then are the names of those elected, with their respective offices:

- Fr. Cajetan SCRIVO, Vicar General
- Fr. Egidius VIGANO, Councillor for Formation
- Fr. Rosalio CASTILLO, Councillor for the Youth Apostolate
- Fr. John RAINERI, Councillor for the Adult Apostolate
- Fr. Bernard TOHILL, Councillor for the Missions
- Fr. Roger PILLA, Economist General
- Fr. Aloysius FIORA, Regional Councillor for Italy and the Middle East
- Fr. Joseph GOTTARDI, Regional Councillor for Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay (1)
- Fr. Joseph HENRIQUEZ, Regional Councillor for the Antilles, Bolivia, Central America, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela
- Fr. Anthony MELIDA, Regional Councillor for Spain and Portugal

(1) Cf. important note at end of this letter.

Fr. John TER SCHURE, Regional Councillor for Austria, Belgium, Central Africa, France, Germany, Holland, Jugoslavia
Fr. George WILLIAMS, Regional Councillor for Australia, China, England, India, Ireland, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, U.S.A.

For Poland, as you already know, the Rector Major will make provision; this will be done as soon as possible.

We are all at the service of the Congregation

I ought now to speak of myself — but I would rather be dispensed from the obligation.

You know how things turned out. I am continuing to carry this cross because it seemed to me that the wish expressed by the members of the Chapter was an indication of the will of God who, despite all my shortcomings, was inviting me to continue this service to our beloved Congregation and to you all, and hence also to the Church.

I do not think it superfluous to repeat to you what I said to the Chapter members: « Don't leave me on my own! » Go on helping me by your prayers; give me the support of your willing collaboration, and of your affectionate understanding and sympathy.

The daily problems we have to deal with are endless, and they are often anything but simple.

Superiors and confreres, we all have the same ideals and interests; let us therefore take as addressed to ourselves the words which our Father used to repeat to the first members: Live and work « in unum »! Our « communion » will enable us to overcome so many difficulties. For my own part I repeat that all my energies are and will continue to be dedicated to the service of the Congregation, and of each one of you: I shall be happy whenever I am able to give some help or comfort to a confrere.

And in this the other Superiors are perfectly at one with me. Convinced as we are of our responsibility for the carrying out of the renewal of the Congregation desired by the Chapter, we intend to fulfil the duties confided to us in the manner and spirit clearly indicated in the Constitutions and all the documents of the General Chapter.

In this connection there are some articles of the Constitutions (e.g.

Nos. 93, 125, 126, 127, but not only these) which we need to meditate on and study in depth, whether we be called upon to give our service in posts of authority or collaborate with that authority for the well-being of the community.

Love of the confreres, the first duty of the Superior

Allow me now to say a word to those who have the responsibility of serving the community in the exercise of authority, extending my remarks in the nature of the case to other confreres as well.

It seems to me that to love the confreres is the first duty of a Superior. Art. 125 of the Constitutions says that his «service» is aimed at fostering charity amongst the members. Such a task clearly supposes that he gives the example himself, i.e. that he loves the confreres and loves them as they are, with all their defects. Don Bosco tells us that for such love to be efficacious it must be shown in some concrete manner; it must be felt by the confrere, who remains always a man with his ever-present human sensitivity and a heart that needs to feel itself loved. There is no need for the Superior to go looking for opportunities to show this love for the confrere; they occur continuously in community life; it is sufficient to grasp them as they arise. In such an atmosphere even correction, which is always a duty of service prompted and inspired by love, will be more willingly accepted and rendered efficacious.

It is by love that the Superior will show the esteem he has for the confreres and the trust he has in them. Don Bosco is our master also in this, as is recalled in Document 12 of the Acts of the Chapter. By the confidence he placed in men who were not always over-gifted he got incredibly high results from them, as well as a dedication without limit.

But it must be remembered that to trust on the part of the Superior there must correspond sincerity and fidelity on the part of the confrere. The man to whom is entrusted the financial administration of an estate can hardly expect to continue to enjoy the same trust if he stoops to embezzlement.

Finally it must never be forgotten that authority is received and exercised to promote the good of the members, and not their weak-

ness or unfaithfulness. Anyone who exercises authority at any level must be prompted by charity, humility and understanding, but all this must not be confused with its abdication in order to pander to those whom authority is called upon to guide. Silence and inaction in the face of evident abuses, arbitrary actions and wrong ideas, would be to connive at them. This might temporarily create a halo of popularity and win a certain amount of support for the one in authority, but at what a price for the true interests of the community! It would not be long before they felt the bitter fruits of such an abdication; experience teaches!

To serve the good of the community

Art. 54 of the new Constitutions presents a truly happy synthesis of the tasks which devolve upon the Superior in his « service » of the community in an evangelical, conciliar and salesian spirit.

Whilst leaving it to you to meditate on this article, I should like to underline here some of the essential points that emerge from it.

« The Superior's first duty is towards the community as such ». This idea was emphasized repeatedly during the Chapter. The Superior is not primarily the great organiser; he is not an expert on technical matters or on schools; he is not the skilled administrator or a genius at building; the Superior has been placed by the Congregation at the head of that community because he is before all else its shepherd. The lengthy list of his duties, contained in art. 54, in respect of both individuals and the community provides confirmation of this desire of the Congregation, a desire that corresponds to an absolute necessity. Amongst all these various tasks I should like to emphasize that which is usually called the teaching-role of the Superior.

The Constitutions (art. 54) call him a « mentor and spiritual guide » — and as such « he guides and prompts the consciences of all towards fidelity to the Rule ». But how could he be such with individuals and with the community, especially at the present day, if he did not exercise that teaching-role which is one of the most important aspects of the use of authority? How could he help the confreres « to an ever better realisation of their own vocation » (art. 54) if he were to deprive them of this irreplaceable and precious service?

It is obvious that in order to fulfil this task the Superior must be assiduous and systematic in keeping himself up to date by means of a deep and serious contact with at least those spiritual, religious and salesian writings which no community can do without.

It hardly needs to be said that this updating can be achieved by recourse not to those sources which provide only a bitter outflow, but to those from which there flows, directly or indirectly, the pure doctrine either of the Church or the Congregation.

I must confess that if a Superior does not follow this line I do not know how he can feel himself to be truly at the service of renewal in the community.

Again it goes without saying that the teaching of a Superior would be all in vain were it not in harmony with his life and example and his whole being. A shepherd (and a Superior is always such in respect of his confreres) cannot restrict himself to pointing out the path, but must clear the way by leading his sheep along it.

Again in art. 54, and in connection with the service which the Superior is called upon to render to the community, we find another passage which will repay careful meditation. The Superior « is at the centre of the community, a brother among brothers, coordinating the endeavours of all and keeping in mind the rights, duties and capacities of each one ».

There is therefore no question of a simple coordination or organization of work, but of something much deeper and more precious. It has been written: «Without unity it is vain to hope of serving Christ fully and courageously ». And to the Superior belongs the difficult but wonderful task of promoting this unity, or in other words the communion which has its roots deep in charity, and which thus counteracts the effects of that disrupting individualism which springs up so easily in man and arrests the progress of the community.

Confreres and Superiors in communion

If this communion requires on the part of the Superior a constant effort, animated by a supernatural spirit and interwoven with patience, humility and discretion, it demands no less from every confrere that

he should adopt a serene and objective outlook in assessing his relationship with his Superior on a supernatural plane. An attitude of hostility, of opposition, or even of vindication; the desire to impose one's own point of view as being best; paying little heed to the corrections and instructions of the Superior; all these are weapons, and efficacious ones at that, of putting asunder what should be united, of knocking down instead of building up.

One of the most efficacious means of promoting and fostering unity is to use the individual confreres to their best advantage, considering them always as adults. Another means is that of consulting the council frequently and giving due weight to its opinions, without being unduly disturbed if these are sometimes conflicting; it will be the Superior's duty to evaluate them and then make opportune decisions. A third means is to keep the community interested and properly informed about the many problems which in the last analysis are the concern of all the confreres and cannot be considered « forbidden territory ». This is the way co-responsibility is created, and with it the communion which is the source of peace, harmony, order and tranquillity. And it is precisely in the exercise of this co-responsibility that the confreres are able to find a training ground for the right use of authority.

Naturally it belongs not only to the Superior but to all the members of the community to contribute to the creation of this atmosphere. As adult and consecrated brethren they will understand the difficult task that the Lord has confided to the Superior, and the anxieties and difficulties that are inseparable from it, and they will bear with his possible defects; in a word they will love him, and this not only for his human qualities, which could easily lead to negative consequences, but especially for the « sacrament » of which he is the bearer in the community.

It is no mystery that at the present day many find difficulty, often insurmountable, in accepting the exercise of authority, whilst others seek to be freed from this burden. Such a situation provides food for thought for us all.

On the one hand no one can desert a post of responsibility to which the Lord has called him, albeit through human means, for the simple fact that today the service of authority is particularly beset with difficulties. And on the other hand for this very reason

every Salesian should feel a special obligation, in a spirit of loving brotherhood, to lighten the often truly heavy burden of the hard task which the Superior has to carry out in the community.

The Superior creator of unity in the Congregation

In connection with unity, it still remains to be said that this is something that concerns not only the local community, nor even the provincial community, but the entire Congregation.

In art. 56 of the Constitutions it is stated that we all form a living part of the world-wide community which is the Congregation, participating in that « communion of spirit, witness and service that the Congregation offers to the Church ». This communion is increased « by our spirit of solidarity with one another, by communication and the exchange of information, and by our union with the Rector Major and his Council ».

This is a great reality which must be lived by every member of the Congregation: it cannot remain a simple affirmation, no matter how sublime. Now those who, in the provincial or local community, exercise authority in some way are certainly primarily and most directly responsible for this communion which is made affective through the four great forces of solidarity, communion, information and interconnection; these enable us to enjoy the riches and apostolic fertility of this community which is none the less real for being so big. This communion must be the more intense in the light of the principle of subsidiarity and decentralization which has to be implemented, a principle which in so far as it assigns new responsibilities to provincial and local communities and to their respective superiors, puts a double obligation on them. On the one hand the new tasks must not lead to a lack or misuse of power which could be prejudicial, and even gravely so, to the good of the respective communities. On the other hand subsidiarity and decentralization require, for balance and harmony in a real and living provincial and world community, that those who exercise authority at different levels should cooperate in the construction of that ideal bridge which will make solidarity, communion, information and interconnection concretely effective and fruitful. This is of vital importance at this moment of evolution in

the general plan and in the style and manner of our whole community life.

It is easy to understand what an irreplaceable role is played in all this by those who exercise authority. I am confident that in the consciousness of their responsibility they will not seek to evade it but will promote and encourage every effort to foster and stabilise unity in the Congregation.

The divine will, meeting place of superiors and confreres

What has been said to Superiors recalling them to their responsibilities leads naturally to a reflection on the relation between authority and obedience. Document 12 on obedience, in line with the best ecclesial and conciliar doctrine and following the tradition and teaching of our Father, sheds light on our argument and harmonises two values which at the present day, with its too one-sided approach to matters, tend to be put in opposition.

I know very well that it is not popular nowadays to talk about authority and it needs courage to do so, but I like to think that none of you would want to align himself with a conformism which, according to Maritain, is often the fruit of « defective understanding », and would prefer to hear with a cool and open objectivity ideas, explanations and comments which shed light on the problem.

I do not intend therefore to undertake a defence of the office of authority, but I only want to put before you some useful points for reflection on the subject, on the same lines of a well understood renewal as were followed by our Special General Chapter.

Let us begin by saying, following some strong observations of P. De Lubac, that « the opposition between authority and liberty, authority and obedience, as between charism and institution, unity and pluralism, etc., rather than being sententious denotes a mode of thinking born of reaction, of resentment, one might say of the adoption of a fixed position because of some feeling possibly not even adverted to. When one thus becomes dissociated from reality, especially in matters of the spiritual life, one of the terms is misrepresented in order to get rid of it; in this case even the other term that one wishes to retain and endorse is inevitably misunderstood ». But we have to

remember that « all of life is a synthesis, and the life of the christian mystery is a synthesis par excellence. It is always an equilibrium of plenitude ».

In reality, precisely because of this synthesis and amplitude of balance, both the Superior and the simple confrere find themselves in a position of obedience to the will of God to which both of them are called. It would make no sense therefore, especially at the present day, for a Superior to say: « I'm the boss! ». No, authority is the exercise of obedience and not of power. Only God commands! Subject and Superior both obey the will of God: the Superior obeys as he tries to discern it so as to be able to make it known, as his duty demands, to the subject; and in so doing he will pay no heed to his own desires.

The subject will accept it through this mediation which, of its very nature, must be free of all emotion and every form of selfishness; it must be exercised in sincere humility and, in order to be the expression of the will of God who is love, it must always be inspired and accompanied by fraternal charity.

But if this limpid purity of mind and intention is required of the Superior in the performance of his tremendous duty of being the interpreter and medium through which the will of God reaches the confrere, the latter has the no less serious duty of not opposing it and not substituting his own will, for all the reasons that can be thought up by a narrow selfishness (even thought it be disguised by better motives), for the will of God. And this is a danger which, especially at the present day, can be very deceptive and lead to totally negative consequences.

Authority and the protection of liberty

Here one can speak at length about dialogue in relation to obedience, a dialogue which must find both parties resolved in sincere humility to discover what God wants, not for the exclusive good of the individual but with respect to the community into which the individual is consciously integrated and of which he forms a living cell.

«We must be obedient, so let's take heart and go ahead!» This is the wise and constructive attitude that authority, every authority,

and also the confrere (whoever he may be) must adopt in common.

But on investigation, opposition to authority is found to have a double explanation. On the one hand there is the respect for the person, for participation and co-responsibility, felt so keenly today but unfortunately subject to easy distortion; and on the other hand there are all the mistakes and even abuses which have been committed by those in authority, and which perhaps they are still committing in its exercise. We cannot close our eyes to this fact, and it leads us to make a serious examination of conscience. But we must recognize that very often such opposition arises from a confusion of authority with authoritarianism which is a distortion of it. In brief, authoritarianism becomes identified with authority, and this gives rise to all the broadsides against the latter. It would be like attacking justice because there are corrupt judges, or the practice of medicine because there are ignorant or negligent doctors, etc.

But what are the consequences of opposition to authority (I do not say to authoritarianism), expressed in various ways from sharp and violent criticism to resistance, disobedience and revolt?

A sociologist of Berkeley, Thomas Farber, in connection with the demonstrations of young people in America which seem to betray a certain weariness, recently made this telling pronouncement: « The death of authority has created the curse of uncertainty ». And then he adds more explicitly: « Without rules there is no way of saying “no”; and what is worse, there is no way of saying “yes” either ». And in simple terms this means something like paralysis of society.

Besides, everyone knows from his own greater or less experience that in any environment, including that of the religious life, the lack of effective authority leads automatically to arbitrary action and abuses prejudicial to the fundamental norms of collaboration and of society, to the violation of the freedom of those who want to remain faithful to the obligation of a mandate or vocation, and thus leads to the deadening, the derangement and the disorganization of common forces which, if they were properly directed and guided by competent authority in their respective spheres, could be constructive and beneficial for the common good. How right Chesterton was when he declared that « authority is the safeguard of freedom ».

If we do not want to be linked with certain conformist attitudes of the present day we must accept, with Maritain, that authority and

freedom are « really twin sisters, and you cannot have one without the other ».

Authority therefore, not in a distorted form but understood and practised according to the teaching of the Council, which was followed by our Chapter in drawing up its clear directives as we are bound to admit, is not only something necessary, but a source of good for all.

Authority, to adopt a phrase from the Council which has been used so often (even outside the Church) that it is in danger of becoming a commonplace, is an indispensable service rendered to the community, to every community.

I say « service », and the rich and profound meaning of this word should not be in any way distorted or played down. It is a service which has as its source and object faith and charity; for this reason whoever exercises authority devotes himself to the good of his brethren. This is a noble concept that comes to us from the gospel, from Christ in person. And we might add that this evangelical lesson and example has been faithfully interpreted by our own Don Bosco.

Superiors responsible for renewal

And now to conclude. Taking a broad view of all that I have said so far, it will be evident to everyone what part Superiors have to play in the gradual implementation of all the directives and norms of the 20th General Chapter.

It has been said more than once, and it was repeated during the Chapter discussions, that the decisions of the 19th General Chapter, positive and courageous though they were, had never got off the ground at all or had been misinterpreted. If this is true, as it would seem to be, it should serve as a warning for all Salesians but especially for Superiors, whether at the centre, in the provinces or in the individual communities. Renewal will become a reality if those especially who bear the responsibility of government are convinced about it and promote it methodically. A lukewarm attitude, a lack of enthusiasm or a semblance of discouragement, would be fatal. To this end, I say again, it is essential that Superiors, even more than other Salesians, should have absorbed by diligent study the whole of the spirit which animates the Chapter documents.

This is something we must all do, and we shall do it with attention, with determination, with confidence and especially with a sincere love of the Congregation which needs this transfusion of new blood, this new breeze which, in fidelity to our Father, will renew it and impress on it the enthusiasm of our origins for meeting the needs of the present day.

My dear confreres, I have set before you « in sinceritate cordis » some reflections that came to my mind as the new Superior Council gets down to work after the great event of the Special General Chapter.

The willing reception that I am sure you will accord them will contribute efficaciously to the work of renewal of which we are all called to be convinced architects and eager agents in the post-Chapter period.

To work then, shoulder to shoulder; and may Mary Help of Christians bless your work in Don Bosco's name.

Affectionately,

Fr. Aloysius Ricceri
Rector Major

Important note

A few days after Fr. Joseph Gottardi had reached Turin and taken up his work on the Superior Council the news was announced of his nomination as Auxiliary Bishop of Mercedes (Uruguay).

It therefore became necessary to provide a replacement for him, in accordance with art. 147 of the Constitutions. The new Regional Councillor for the Atlantic zone of South America is Fr. John Vecchi, who was a delegate of the Province of Bahia Blanca at the Special General Chapter.

To the new Bishop, who has been called upon to undertake the delicate and important mission of a Shepherd, and to Fr. Vecchi who will work with us in the service of the Congregation go our best wishes and prayers.