

## I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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*My dear confrères and sons,*

You are already aware of the joyous news that is ours: on the last Sunday of this month (29 Oct.) Don Bosco's first successor, Father Michael Rua, will be declared "Blessed" in St. Peter's, Rome.

The event is assuredly a matter for great rejoicing in our Salesian family as it means so much for us. For this very reason we must not let it degenerate into a mere superficial triumphalism. Don Rua's Beatification and the world-wide celebrations to be held during the coming months must not burn themselves out or disappear like a will-o'-the-wisp — a mere transitory satisfaction. Rather should the holiness of the new Beatus (whose lot it was to be invited to "go halves" with Don Bosco) be for us an invitation and inducement to further commitment. His Beatification should bring to fruition in a realistic way the courageous renewal which the Special General Chapter has commended to us.

It is clear that the surest and most efficacious way to attain this goal is to stop and take a good look at Don Rua as a holy Salesian, as Don Bosco's successor, and as the one who continued Don Bosco's mission in the world. The Church has set him up and proposed him to the faithful, and especially to us, as a practical model of holiness.

Our new Constitutions state that the Church wants "to assure us that the way of life we have chosen is true to the Gospel." (*Art.* 200.) The Beatification of Don Rua is another proof of the Church's will to recognise the Gospel image of our Salesian vocation, and to show forth the Holy Spirit's sanctifying

energy which was given to Don Bosco to ensure the growth of his Salesian family.

To take a good look at Don Rua, then, means to get to know him intimately, so that we can make our own a message he has for us, a message that flowed from a life lived as a “true Salesian of Don Bosco.”

## **THE FAITHFUL SERVANT**

Unfortunately the image of Don Rua has come down to us in many ways strangely falsified: rather the result of personal impressions than of documentation and objective study. Every Salesian therefore must feel it a duty to go to the genuine sources which will afford him authentic knowledge of this great Salesian, who was in a sense the second Father of our Congregation.

It is true that books on Don Rua are not numerous, and almost all are in Italian only. We must make translations into other languages, at least of the more significant works. (Some countries have already done this.) Also I hope it will be possible for new books to be written, taking advantage of the four folio volumes of the canonical processes.

From an accurate and complete knowledge of Don Rua we shall gauge the exceptional and mature qualities of the man destined by Providence to accept and treasure the precious but difficult legacy left him by Don Bosco. We shall realise that Don Rua was a man faithful to the point of heroism. It was indeed his constant preoccupation to hand down intact the message of Don Bosco, and to pledge his whole powerful personality in the portrayal of the ideal Salesian as conceived and lived by our holy Founder.

After Don Bosco's death Don Rua, with that influence everyone acknowledged, carried on with conviction in the style and spirit of his Father. Not for nothing did he kneel by Don

Bosco's remains and feel the urge to spend himself totally in utter fidelity.

He told his Salesians, "I knelt by Don Bosco's remains weeping and praying for a long time. Furthermore, I made a solemn promise to our dear Father. As I saw that I had to accept his inheritance and take charge of the congregation (which was the greatest of his works and cost him so much in labour and sacrifice) I promised him I would stop at nothing to preserve intact, as far as in me lay, his spirit, his teachings and the minutest traditions of his family. Now, nineteen years after that memorable day (he wrote in 1907) I harvest my memories and feel a great comfort in that with God's grace I think I have not broken this promise. And if there had been any danger of forgetting it, Pope Leo XIII would soon have reminded me. Often and energetically he averred that the Salesians must guard jealously the spirit of their Founder. And Pope Pius X spoke in the same vein..." (Don Rua, *circ. letters*, ed. 1965, p. 431).

### **Belief in Don Bosco's sanctity**

Fidelity, like courage, is not something conferred; it must be born of particular circumstances of nature or environment. Don Rua's fidelity was born of his high regard for Don Bosco and the consequent unlimited confidence he had in him: he knew him to be endowed with extraordinary charisms: he knew him to be a man of God.

An heroic band of soldiers or a mighty team of technicians might rally round a leader possessing purely natural gifts; but no matter how remarkable the gifts, they would not hold the loyalty of a religious family through the centuries. Don Bosco was not just a man magnificently endowed: he also had the requisites of an ambassador of God, with well-proven authenticity. To understand the fascination he exercised over his boys and indeed people in general (above all his first Salesians, who dedicated

their lives to him), his character must be measured in the light of the supernatural. Besides very young followers such as Cagliero, Fagnano, Lasagna, Costamagna (who could have been dubbed hero-worshippers of a brilliant and daring leader) we find mature men no less ready to be at his beck and call. Such men were Count Cays, Fr. Alasonatti, Fr. Lemoyne — just as enthusiastic and utterly obedient as the youngest lad.

The real explanation of attachment of this nature (which borders on veneration) is found to be simply this: the holiness of the leader. This is why we cannot examine a Founder in minute detail using purely scientific criteria.

Don Rua in particular believed so completely in the holiness of Don Bosco, and that his educative mission was a mandate guided by God, that towards the end of 1860 he set up a commission of confrères under John Bonetti to record the sayings and deeds of their Father and Founder. In 1874 Don Rua set up a second commission (under Fr. Lemoyne) with the same purpose. This time he obtained the consent of Don Bosco. He knew that Don Bosco “took no step except under the inspiration of God”.

We could indeed say that our new Beatus (as did all the first Salesians) dedicated his fidelity to a Gospel “spirit” which all acknowledged as the gift of God to their Father and friend, Don Bosco.

Today the crisis of fidelity to one’s vocation is often the crisis of appraisal of the Founder. One forgets that he is also a privileged soul on whom the Holy Spirit has lavished his gifts for the building of a heritage of permanent values which will span the centuries.

### **If he were at the helm today**

Every charism is a gift within the Church and for the Church; and the Church is the supreme arbiter of the authenticity of every

project based on the Gospel. The Church has given official approval to our Constitutions; has canonised Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello and Dominic Savio. Now the Church beatifies Don Rua, and has confirmed in a thousand ways the genuineness of the spiritual heritage of Don Bosco. The Church is the treasury and regulator of charisms, and also the authentic guardian of the spirit of every religious family.

Don Rua was aware of this truth; he loved it and it cost him acute suffering. If today he were at the helm of the Congregation, of this we could be certain: he would show exemplary docility to the Church in her request for *aggiornamento* in religious Institutes as regards both Constitutions and living according to the directions of the Second Vatican Council.

And Don Rua would have appreciated the efforts of our Special General Chapter to probe deeply with understanding and fidelity the mission and spirit of Don Bosco; and he would have rejoiced at the new Constitutions, enriched as they are by the “early spirit”, with almost every page enlivened with the name and words of our beloved Founder and Father.

The Church needs fidelity, fidelity in individuals and fidelity in Institutes. Both these facets shine in Don Rua. He desired with every ounce of energy that he as an individual, and the Congregation with him, should live with absolute fidelity to the spirit of Don Bosco. He knew the Church's need of the specific witness proper to every Religious family.

One of the constant sayings of Pope Paul VI to Religious is, “Be yourselves.” We should as Salesians make this motto our very own. It is always the theme of fidelity that should urge us on. Don Rua's beatification does not just repeat this: it shouts it aloud. If anyone has “to his own self been true”, it is Don Rua — from the age of eight years to seventy-three! Always at Don Bosco's side and completely his! Always as the ready for Don Bosco's least word. His sobriquet, “The Living Rule” was no mere rhetorical flourish!

## **Fidelity is relevant**

While on the theme of fidelity, let me continue to delve thoughtfully with reference to our modern times, usually referred to as “times of identity-crisis.” This delving will help us see Don Rua in the cadre of our present modern urgency.

It has been said that fidelity is God’s greatest attribute. (Léon-Dufour). Salvation history is always conditioned by “fidelity to the Covenant.” The People of God (and especially we Salesians) will be judged fundamentally in the light of fidelity to Baptism (which for us implies fidelity to our Religious profession). Heaven indeed is the home of “the faithful servant” insofar as he has been “faithful in little things.”

Fidelity, viewed in the Saints, is constancy in friendship; it is a strict adherence to a Salvation-covenant. As we look at Don Rua, we could say that fidelity entails the knowledge of God as our friend; a union with him in a vocation-covenant; an interior certainty that the values of such an allegiance are permanent and topical; the pledge to defend its integrity and to show it to others by the way we live.

Such fidelity can only be the expression of a strong character, for it imports the unceasing exercise of activities that are most characteristically human: understanding, liberty, love and a rule of life.

To be faithful, we need an understanding that searches out true values; a liberty that knows how to be committed to a basic choice; a love that can blend the permanence of yesterday’s values with the novelties of today’s; and a discipline of life that can apply abstract philosophical principles to the hard realities of life.

It is true that human liberty is characterised by the ability to unsay what it said yesterday, for in every psychological area events and signs of the times can carry with them overwhelming discoveries.

Still, the greatness of a character and the meaning of freedom can never consist in a choice that is indifferent, nor in the ability to be constantly changing decisions.

A man's measure is gauged by his choice of true values and by his commitment to translate them into his life. To keep all possibilities of choice continually open signifies, in fact, to be committed to nothing, never to get to the heart of any true value, to sink blissfully into vague relativism, no longer to believe in making a definitive choice. One can understand such an attitude of indifference a moment before making a decision, but this would never constitute greatness of character or mode of life.

Don Rua's vocation comes to light as a fundamental choice which defines historically his freedom, his fidelity to his chosen project, and his consciousness of belonging to the Congregation. These constitute the measure of grandeur in this great character.

It must be added that this concrete example of Don Rua shows us that fidelity is a daily conquest, and never static or "cut-and-dried"; rather do we see it as a kind of challenge, always lively and new, and needing every effort of the soul, especially when living in a time of change.

Fidelity, indeed, is no mere repetition; it is not a matter of mere doing. To be faithful we must avoid the danger of a materially conservative regression, which substitutes for fidelity a mere "fixism." At the same time we have to know how to avoid the mistake of a superficial progressivism: this only befouls fidelity, feeding it with relativism and naturalism.

In our new Constitutions there is a chapter which helps us reflect on the meaning of our fidelity. It speaks of "a continued effort of renewal"; "a dynamic urge to keep up to date"; "a sharing in the passion of Christ"; and a pledge "to make humble use of the means of defence against our weakness." (*Arts.* 118, 119).

Understanding, liberty, love, discipline are the essential components of a fidelity which sees death as the most expressive

witness that puts the seal conclusively on a life lived true to the "Salvation-pact."

We see Don Rua's death not as a simple chronological coincidence of two things: his permanent Salesian vocation and his last breath! Rather was it the supreme expression (a witnessing, a "martyrdom") of his fundamental choice made in freedom and in love of Jesus Christ in the spirit of Don Bosco.

How true are the words of the new Constitutions: "If we accept sickness and the infirmity of old age with faith, then we exercise our fidelity in a special way" (*Art.* 121); and the hour of death is considered as "the moment... when his consecration will reach its highest fulfilment." (*Art.* 122)

I think, and often with distress, that these days we have special need of the lesson of fidelity so eloquently demonstrated by Don Rua: we need it both as individuals and as communities, so that we can show that fidelity demands the use of spiritual understanding, a loyal choice of "belonging", apostolic love, manly discipline.

God grant that every Salesian confrère identify his perpetual profession with the fundamental choice of his life; please God, let there flourish in every community the awareness that our vocational values are relevant; and let us work busily and vigorously to draw near to God, urged on by our Salesian spirit of sacrifice.

## **HE BELONGED COMPLETELY TO DON BOSCO**

Let me now prove my points by taking some of the more characteristic elements of our Salesian heritage and seeing how Don Rua, the "faithful Salesian," practised them.

### **Pastoral love**

Our new Constitutions tell us: "Pastoral love is at the very heart of our spirit." (*Art.* 40) Don Bosco's whole life is per-



meated with the presence of God: its outlet being a thirst for the salvation of souls, especially the young (“Give me souls...”).

Don Rua had the most thorough understanding of this. In his circular letter of 24 Aug., 1894, he wrote: “Don Bosco never took a step, never uttered a word, never began a task which did not aim at the salvation of the young... The salvation of souls was his heart’s desire; ‘Da mihi animas’ was for Don Bosco not just a matter of words, but of deeds.”

In Don Bosco’s rooms we see framed his two mottoes of Salesian spirituality. They are perhaps the oldest relics of Valdocco. The first was the one that caught the eye of Dominic Savio and formed the subject of the first conversation between master and pupil: “Da mihi animas, caetera tolle”. The second, still over the entrance, says: “One thing is necessary — to save one’s soul”. And Don Bosco succeeded in living these two mottoes, and having his sons live them, too. They were the spring of their apostolic activity during life, and their last and most spontaneous thought when dying. The enormous activity of Don Rua seemed out of place with his frail appearance: the only explanation is in these two mottoes of Don Bosco’s spiritual teaching.

This passion for souls in Don Bosco and Don Rua never became an excuse to neglect man’s material progress. Rather it was the driving force of many initiatives, ways and means to face up to the wants of needy youth, materially, intellectually and socially.

As a son of Don Bosco, Don Rua never forgot that he would prove false to his vocation if it did not embody practical enterprises in education; he did not reduce charity to a mere horizontalism, but insisted, with Don Bosco, that it be very practical and dedicate itself, as the new Constitutions express it, “to help permeate the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel. We must work for the total well-being of all men, especially the young, helping them to become honest citizens and good Christians”. (*Art. 17*).

## **Work and Temperance**

Another characteristic of our Salesian heritage, and called by Don Bosco “our banner”, is expressed clearly and forcefully as “Work and Temperance.”

This is a complete pedagogical program of fidelity: it underlines the regular life; it gives efficacy to our mission, and holiness to our Religious state.

Already the Acts of the XIX General Chapter had emphasised this vision of Salesian work by affirming significantly: “Prayer and work are like two clasped hands, never separated, and certainly never in opposition. Jesus himself exemplified this”.

## **A Worker Saint**

Don Bosco summed up his way of life in this recommendation with Gospel simplicity: “I do not recommend to you penances and disciplines, but work, work, work.” (*M.B.* IV, 216). He himself was a shining example. We know this on his doctor’s authority — he died exhausted with fatigue, worn out by ceaseless work. And his first Salesians did not lag behind him. More than anyone else, Don Rua was in this matter a faithful replica of our Father, Don Bosco.

In 1876 Don Bosco himself said: “Don Rua could certainly be called a victim of hard work.” In that same year Don Rua was Prefect General, Catechist General, Rector of the Oratory, Director of the Salesian Sisters, Spiritual Director of the Barolo Refuge and preacher and ordinary confessor in the church of Mary Help of Christians, not counting various other duties that were given to him from time to time. Already in 1868 he had come near to dying through over-work; it was soon after the celebrations for the consecration of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians. “Dear Don Rua”, Don Bosco had said to him at that time, “I don’t want you to die; you have still a

lot of work to do.” Then he gave him his blessing and added confidently: “Listen, Don Rua: even if you threw yourself out of the window in your present condition, I assure you, you would not die.” (AMADEI, “*Un altro D. Bosco*”, p. 138)

A past pupil, Professor Rinaudo, on the staff of the University of Turin and a member of the Turin City Council, paid the finest of compliments to Don Rua as a hard worker and a saint. When his colleagues, setting aside party distinctions, had convened to honour Don Rua’s remains, he turned to them and said: “Don Rua was the ideal saint, earnestly sought by troubled souls. His faith was crystal-clear, diamond-tough, not lost in mystical contemplation. He was truly the modern-day worker-saint. From 1845 (when for the first time, at eight years of age, he experienced the fatherly love of Don Bosco) right to the day when his stamina exhausted itself and he lay on his death-bed, he did not enjoy a single day of rest: sixty-five years of assiduous and fruitful work!... He was the true figure of a working ascetic.” (AUFFRAY, *B. Mich. Rua*, 1972, p. 174)

## Temperance

And with work, temperance: they go together. Our work is always work by the poor for the poor, with no rest when finished. The Salesian never retires on a pension: this is well known to our many confrères who are advanced in years but still battling away in the front lines. We could translate “work & temperance”, then, by “hard-working poverty”.

Poverty (which is the guarantee of absolute temperance) is the only climate in which our Congregation can live and prosper, especially these days. Of the seventythree circular letters of Don Rua to the Salesians the most striking is assuredly that on Poverty. A witness at the Apostolic Process states: “By his circular on Poverty Don Rua has built for himself a monument of religious asceticism. Without meaning to, he has left us his portrait!” (AUFFRAY, *op. cit.* p. 158)

Don Rua was only too well aware of Don Bosco's serious warning: that our Congregation would have had its day when ease and comfort were found among us.

Also in the Regulations for the Co-operators (he liked to call them "Salesians without vows") he traces out a mode of life having all the austerity of Religious poverty: "Modesty in clothing, frugality at meals, simplicity in furnishings, restraint in conversations, exactness in the duties proper to their state of life." These are the five "comforts" of Salesian life both "inside and outside the walls".

### **Gentleness**

Now I make mention of a virtue in Don Rua I think was not so obvious — but nevertheless rich in values. It has been written that "patience is the most heroic of the virtues, since from no angle does it look heroic". There is much truth in this. It is much easier to work furiously than to be patient: indeed, without patience our most characteristic virtue (kindliness, amiability in speech and bearing) would no longer be a virtue. Only when this kindliness is stable and unchangeable can it be called gentleness and meekness. Even if the splendid and fascinating kindliness of Don Bosco is not obvious in Don Rua, it is there nevertheless — meekness, evenness of character: the fruit of heroic patience.

Experience teaches us this lesson: the stricter a person is with himself, the more generous, understanding and indulgent he is towards others. The saints who were most severe with themselves were never intransigent or hard towards their neighbour. Don Rua went even further. A page on which are written his Retreat resolutions (Lanzo, 1876) ends with this sentence: "I shall never judge anyone, except myself." When his duty obliged him to correct a person regarding the observance of the Rules or Vows, he did not condemn the confrère's transgression:

rather did he remind the confrère of his commitment. In this way he helped his son to do God's will.

### Kindliness

Don Rua's meekness was not only the result of self-control: it embodied also kindliness and true tenderness. We must not be deceived by his lean countenance, his eyes red with tiredness, his controlled gestures; to discover love we must examine the heart, not the features.

It is Don Rua himself who gives us the clearest picture of his heart when he wrote to the confrères in Argentina a few days after the death of Don Bosco, "The immense goodness that characterized the heart of our beloved Don Bosco of Saintly memory has heightened by word and example the spark of love that the dear Lord has placed in my own heart. I feel electrified by Don Bosco's love. I, his successor, do not possess the great virtues of our Founder, but oh indeed I feel God has granted me Don Bosco's love for his spiritual sons".

Moreover, we have a sure gauge for measuring the strength of Don Rua's love: his sufferings, which he enveloped with peaceful resignation and serenity when faced with the sorrows of those about him and the trials of the Salesian family; and in Don Rua's life-time he had many trials — some of them most bitter.

Professor Rinaudo, mentioned above, knew Don Rua intimately; and he could say this about him: "His eyes shone with goodness, meekness, kindness; his speech was both firm and gentle; he possessed the leniency of a mother. No-one ever saw him angry. In the bitterness of his trials his countenance was placid and serene and radiated love, peace and forgiveness." (AUFRAY, *op. cit.*, p. 174)

## Two predilections

The element characterizing our Salesian vocation is our mission for youth and the people. Pastoral charity is our motivating force in a lively love that finds its outlet in education; this in turn prompts us to educative enterprises that are practical in nature, their special scope being needy youth and the missions. Our life and labour is with the “young and the poor” to make them good citizens and upright Christians.

But the highest expression of our apostolate is the spreading of the Gospel. “Don Bosco began his work with a simple catechism. Preaching the Gospel and catechising are fundamental to our mission. As Salesians we are all and at all times educators in the faith.” (*Const.*, Art. 20)

We Salesians must see ourselves as always and everywhere missionaries for youth; we are Christ’s envoys for his “Good News” to the masses.

## Youth first

The birth of a charisma is its most authentic moment; and so the inspirational genius and the peculiar methodology of the Salesian mission among the young are found most robust in the apostolic action of Don Bosco in the Oratory’s first years. It is there that we see the deep preoccupation for evangelizing and catechizing; it is there that everything is based on the “preventive system” of friendship and confidence; it is there that we see with special clarity what is today termed “youth pastoral.”

When we revert to the birth of Don Bosco’s work and speak of the “Oratory,” we do so not in the simple remembrance of something begun within a definite structure; rather do we see it as Don Bosco’s pastoral action at its primal source and brought to its meaningful realisation.

To say that the Oratory is our first love does not mean

that we regard it as a determined “work” of a particular period in history. Rather do we see it as a choice of a particular apostolic style and pastoral attitude that should constitute the very heart and centre of every Salesian foundation or activity.

Certainly in Don Rua’s time the Oratory was a practical continuation of a special type of work. His constant and earnest promotion of the Oratory is precisely what underlines his fidelity to the Salesian mission.

### **His dream: to every Salesian House an Oratory**

In his deeply faithful interpretation of Don Bosco’s mind, Don Rua, in more than twenty circular letters, insisted that it was urgently necessary to open Oratories in all urban centres. His dream was that every Salesian House should have one attached to it and provide it with all the necessary means and personnel. This was his idea of a true guarantee that our work was really geared to the salvation of the young.

Don Rua never forgot that it was as an Oratory boy that he had fallen under the spell of Don Bosco; and that his greatest apostolic satisfaction as a cleric was to go every Sunday to St. Aloysius’ to organize the Oratory with his lively enthusiasm.

Canon Ballesio, who as a young man collaborated with Don Rua at Borgo Vanchiglia (which Don Rua directed for seventeen years) has left us this testimony: “In the long summer days we left Valdocco promptly and got to St. Aloysius’ for an early start. We spent all the morning among the youngsters, either in the church or in the playground. We got back to our Oratory late evening and the boys came with us. They used to gather round Don Rua and tug at his arms and cassock. As they neared their homes they left him, shouting their farewells. We arrived at Valdocco at a late hour and supped as best we could.” (AMADEI, *D. Mich. Rua*, I, 165)

Not haphazardly is the cradle of the Society called, and always will be called, “The Oratory.” This is a perpetual reminder

of the fountain-head of our educative charisma and our most solemn life-pledge. Don Rua's example at Vanchiglia (on the periphery of Turin) is a lesson to us all that souls are to be sought where they actually live, even if a long way from our Houses. We could call them our "Flying Oratories" — catechetical groups in the slums, on the outskirts of the cities. What possibilities and what necessities to be faced up to, especially in the big cities!

True, all this means getting out of a certain routine, and maybe out of our fixed rhythm of work (which perhaps has some of the material comforts of the easy life). Here is where the jolt must be given.

### **He wanted the Congregation to be "missionary"**

Like Don Bosco, Don Rua had a special feeling for the missions. He was anxious to set up mission foundations in every continent. In his twentytwo years as Rector Major he organized more than twenty missionary expeditions, the largest one being two hundred and ninetyfive confrères — a figure that sets one thinking!

With ecclesial insight he insisted on respect for local customs which were not discordant with the Gospel. Indeed, it was his wish that the missionaries should adopt the life and usages of the new countries, renouncing their own. (FRANCESIA, *Don Mic. Rua*, p. 159).

Don Rua's words, and even more so his practical example, confirm what I wrote in my last letter in the "Acts," viz., that the Congregation, to be true to itself ("qualis esse debet") must be in the deepest and widest sense *missionary*. It is precisely from this mission-mindedness (let me hammer this home with my deepest conviction) that the Congregation will fill its lungs with oxygen, life-giving and continuous.



## Solicitude for the Co-operators

Don Rua had very much at heart the growth and organisation of the Salesian Co-operators — who extend the Salesian mission in the world, and are called by Don Bosco “our extern confrères.”

Don Bosco’s initial idea of the Salesian Co-operators was a kind of preview of something between Catholic Action and Secular Institutes. It is hardly to be wondered at then that this “great concept” did not receive approval in its original design, and that even some of his Salesians were rather vague about it.

Don Rua however never had a doubt. His heart and mind were firmly entrenched in this magnificent “foundation” of Don Bosco. Like Don Bosco he had to suffer the bitterness of the “great concept” being misunderstood, in spite of its being spelled out in clear terms.

In his circular letter of 19 February, 1905, Don Rua wrote: “When Don Bosco presented to his sons the Regulations for Co-operators, some ‘men of little faith’ had doubts about the success of the new enterprise. But Don Bosco, in that resolute tone of voice that allowed no objections, told them, ‘I assure you, the Association of the Salesian Co-operators will be the main support of our works.’ This Association cost Don Bosco many sacrifices; but it has received the blessing and encouragement of Supreme Pontiffs; it has been embraced enthusiastically by bishops and cardinals; it will always be the main support of Salesian works. This Association is in our hands, dearest sons; it is our task to make it known, to spread it abroad and to make its harvest plentiful. I wish I had Don Bosco’s oratorical powers to convince you that we must devote all our energy and zeal to develop this crown of Salesian enterprises. If through our negligence it were to decline, it would show that we had not taken to heart the recommendations of our Founder.”

Dear confrères, if this lack of understanding, even among Salesians, of the “grand concept” (so much ahead of its time) was excusable seventy years ago, I do not hesitate to say that

today, in the light of the Special General Chapter, it would be an unpardonable rejection of the wishes of Don Bosco and Don Rua. The renewed pastoral vision of the Church does not allow us to neglect the apostolic involvement of the laity, their direct collaboration, their co-responsible participation in the Salesian mission in the world.

The objections put forth for not getting down to the business of organizing and putting life into the Co-operators really lack validity. I say bluntly, they are the fruit of insensibility to things apostolic and Salesian; the result of a superficial evaluation of the manifold advantages that the Church and the Congregation derive from the renewal of this true vocation, the Salesian Co-operators.

Seventy years ago, in the letter quoted above, Don Rua lamented in his fatherly way: "I confess in all sincerity, I cannot feel happy when I see certain confrères working indefatigably to found and direct other associations, without giving thought to that of the Salesian Co-operators, which is so utterly Salesian."

These days Don Rua would have gone further in expressing his regret: he would have said, "Shed your tears that the Lord's vineyard is short of workers; that our Salesian works are in grave difficulties because of shortage of personnel; meantime you neglect so many elements so ready to live the spirit and mission of Don Bosco in the world."

In some of our houses lay folk work side by side us Salesians, and we have never put to them the ideal of becoming a Co-operator. These conscientious, apostolic, brotherly co-workers would join the ranks of our Co-operators (at least, many of them would). Meantime, through our remissness they too often remain simple "externs," mere workmen.

The Special General Chapter devoted itself in depth to the subject of the Co-operators: we have only to read and put into practice the twenty pages of Document 18. The Special General Chapter maintains convincingly that our Congregation (as Don Bosco said, and Don Rua emphatically repeated) can look to the future with confidence because the Congregation is willed by

God, guided by Mary Help of Christians and “backed up by the Salesian Co-operators.” (And “backed up” does not mean “hand-outs”: it means “co-operating,” “working together”).

Paragraph 730 of the Acts of the Special General Chapter says explicitly, “The Co-operator, as Don Bosco envisaged him, is a true Salesian- in-the-world; i.e., a Christian (be he a layman, lay-Religious or priest) who, even if he has no religious vows, follows a vocation to holiness by offering himself to work for the young in the spirit of Don Bosco, in the service of the local Church and in communion with the Salesian Congregation.”.

I hope that the Special Provincial Chapters will focus their attention on this point. I believe it to be one of the most significant parts of our renewal.

I look forward to the fact that the Provinces, in the light of practical decisions made in this regard, will establish just how right Don Bosco and Don Rua were when they insisted that our trust should be placed, after God and Mary Help of Christians, in the apostolic contribution of the Salesian Co-operators.

### **Love of the past pupils**

In one of the last years of his life, Don Bosco said to the past pupils who had gathered round him for his feast-day, “You cannot image my joy at seeing you here with me. I always love being among the young, but it is a great and ineffable consolation to me to be surrounded by my grown-up children, for they are no longer just my hope, but rather the fruit of my labours and cares”.

It is exactly in fidelity to this spirit of our Founder that Don Rua busied himself in a special way with the Past Pupils. “Let us be convinced,” he said, “that by holding fast to them when they have left us, we shall bring salvation not only to them but also to many of their relations, friends and acquaintances.”

It was Don Rua who was responsible for the first real organizing of this great force for good in the world. He wanted

the Co-operators organized, knowing that it is the bond of union, not mere numbers, that makes for strength.

The recent World Congress of Past Pupils (1970), among other things, realised an ardent wish of Don Rua: they recognized that the Past Pupils should engage in apostolic work. He had dreamed of them as apostles of good, not only in their own families, but also in their social milieu. And the recent Special General Chapter approved this motion, together with another of still greater commitment, feelingly suggested too by Don Rua on many occasions, and in line with Don Bosco's mind: viz., that the Christian past pupils who were involved in apostolic work should be enrolled as Salesian Co-operators. No-one is more prepared to become a "Salesian in the world" than a past pupil.

### **DON RUA'S MESSAGE FOR THE SEVENTIES**

Returning to the imminent beatification of Don Rua: I wish to add a few considerations on the relevance of his message today.

In a former letter I recalled the words of the "Osservatore Cattolico" of Milan, speaking of the sixty-four year old Don Rua. The article ended with a fine summing up: "His goodness cannot be put into words; his activity is extraordinary."

This goodness was not something acquired over the years. He always possessed it—from youth to old age.

When Don Rua was twenty eight and rector at Mirabello, cleric Cerruti had this to say: "I still recall those two years of Don Rua's rectorship at Mirabello. I always remember his untiring labours; his delicate, refined prudence in governing the House; the zeal, not only religious and moral but also intellectual and physical, that he showed for the confrères and youth entrusted to him. Still lively is my recollection of his charity (it seemed not so much fatherly as motherly) with which he encouraged me in my serious illness in May, 1865". (AMADEI, *op. cit.*, I, 175)

### If I had ten Don Ruas!

Don Bosco, who knew Don Rua more closely than anyone else, did not hesitate to make this sweeping statement: "If I had ten Don Ruas, I would go on and conquer the world." (AMADEI, *op. cit.*, II, 251)

Don Cagliero's testimony is on the same lines. In 1879, when he made his first trip back from America, he was asked by Don Bosco for the names of three confrères whom he considered capable of governing the Society on the death of the Founder. Straight away he replied, "Three? Later on, yes. But at the moment there is only one: Don Rua." Don Bosco smiled and added, "There is only one Don Rua: he has always been the right hand of Don Bosco." And Don Cagliero, with his usual impetuous sincerity, rejoined, "Not only arm, but head, mind and heart."

He was possessed of an extraordinary activity yet was habitually serene (following Don Bosco's lead). These qualities were demonstrated in his regular achievements in the expansion of our Society.

His capacity and courage (he had his finger on the pulse of the times and understood them thoroughly) shone in the organization and direction of the six Congresses of the Salesian Co-operators. This he made his own personal responsibility. The Congress of Bologna (1895) opened the series. The *Civiltà Cattolica* wrote: "The International Congress of the Salesian Co-operators at Bologna was a splendid instance of religious activity, perfectly organized. The Salesians deserve highest commendation for appraising the times and suiting their work to these times, having chosen as their apostolate the poor and the working classes." (*Civiltà Cattolica*, May, 1895, p. 485). It was an extraordinary fact for those days that correspondents representing sixty newspapers were present.

After eighty years several reflections arise spontaneously in the face of these initiatives and activities of Don Rua. We should

attend to them in proportion to our responsibility in guiding and encouraging the Congregation. Here is a question that must be asked: "What has been done at the local and Provincial community level to walk the path of Don Rua? What is going to be done to make up for the time and opportunities that perhaps have been lost?"

### **The working classes**

In complete fidelity to the Salesian charism relating to the people, Don Rua was at ease even among the strikers, succeeding in settling the very bitter dispute in the textile industry in Turin, 1906. His interest in the workers was not an isolated happening. In 1889 he was at the railway station of Porta Nuova to welcome two thousand workers on their way to Rome. In the three-quarter-hour stop he conquered the hearts of all, speaking in beautiful French, simple and correct.

In 1891 seven trainloads of workers, organized by Léon Harmel, stopped at Turin to pay homage to Don Bosco's remains before continuing on to Rome. Don Rua was host to the four thousand men at the Valsalice college and ate with them at their meal in the shade of the courtyard trees. Towards the end of the meal he spoke to them and expressed his admiration to them for their social movement, asking them to offer Leo XIII his homage. The assembly accorded him prolonged applause; they recognised in Don Rua an apostle, simple-hearted and fatherly, who had won their hearts from the very first moment. (AUFFRAY, *op. cit.*, p. 122)

### **An invitation in the name of Don Rua**

I wish to end this letter by appealing in the name of Don Rua to each and every one of you, as though in a personal, heart-to-heart chat. I invite you to look to Mary Help of Christians, the true foundress of the Salesian Society. I make this invitation in the name

of Don Rua, who undertook the responsibility for the erection of the Sanctuary of our heavenly mother, and fifty years later arranged her solemn coronation.

It is Our Ladywho, in accordance with God's will, presides over the events of our Congregation. It is she who, in the Beatification of Don Bosco's most faithful disciple, repeats to us the message of fidelity. We need light to understand her message well, and abundant grace to practise what we hear with the same enthusiasm we had when making our first vows.

But for our fidelity to reach this standard, it must, like Don Rua's, be extended to each and every one of the components of the Salesian spirit. These are the same components that guided our Special General Chapter, and which appear vividly and clearly in the two hundred articles of the new Constitutions.

Especially should we read and meditate on Article 119, which is entitled "Our Fidelity." It begins with a statement quite Gospel-like in simplicity and depth, "Fidelity to the commitment made at our Religious Profession is an act of faith in Our Lord who has called us."

The depth of our fidelity is in proportion to the degree of our faith: for our faith regulates our work. St. Francis of Sales describes faith brilliantly when he writes: "It is that heavenly ray that makes us see God in all things, and all things in God".

In the Diocesan Process for Don Rua, Cardinal Cagliero made the following deposition: "In Don Rua there was no grasping egotism; he only sought God" ("In Don Rua non è mai stato esistito nè l'io nè il mio, ma soltanto Dio"). He was the man of perfect faith; and this explains why his fidelity was complete, integral and fruitful.

Dear confrères, at the beginning of this letter I invited you to "look carefully" at Don Rua. I can only conclude with the same recommendation. Let us study Don Bosco's most faithful

lieutenant, following in his footsteps and imitating his example.

His fidelity is for us today a powerful summons to personal renewal and a spur to better understanding of the values of our Salesian vocation; it urges us on to a choice of a more loyal and clear “belonging” to the Congregation; it is a call to a pastoral commitment more in tune with the times and the people; it bids us embrace a rule of life more virile and more constant.

These days our fidelity means an authentic reliving of the same spirit and the same mission but in new situations. It is in this sense that we must follow in the steps of Don Rua. It is in this “imitation” that we shall find the most efficacious and practical way to pay homage to and turn to best account the gift the Church is bestowing on us with the Beatification of Don Rua.

May the Virgin Help of Christians guide and help us to be Salesians as he was.

Father Aloysius Ricceri,  
*Rector Major.*