

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

My dear confrères and sons,

The long drawn out postal strikes in Italy have certainly disrupted our mutual correspondence and caused all sorts of upsets and inconveniences, as you are only too well aware. Now that things are back to normal we hope to resume the regular communications that the smooth running of the Congregation requires.

My first word is one of gratitude to all who sent me Easter greetings. They arrived very late because of the postal strike, but were nonetheless most gratifying. Indeed they were a comforting earnest of the deep sentiments that unite us in sincere brotherly and spiritual communion. Your kind wishes are an expression of that bond of charity that unites us all, through Don Bosco, to Christ our Head; and for this very reason I want to assure you in return that I will spend myself completely in the service of each confrère and our beloved Congregation.

Good news and sad news

You have heard of the happy news regarding *Father Castillo*, our Councillor General for Youth Apostolate. Last April the Holy Father appointed him coadjutor bishop of the diocese of Trujillo in Venezuela. Quite a few of you wrote to express your sincere "reactions" to this appointment; and there was a unanimous insistence that the Superior Council stood to lose a capable member, one who had much to contribute in theory and practice to both the Commission and the Council.

This is all very true; and while we accept the sacrifice with that faith in the Holy Father taught us by Don Bosco, we hope that for this very reason the good Lord will bless with particular efficacy the work Father Castillo will be doing for his diocese and the Church in Venezuela. And we pray that God will reward our sacrifice by giving us light and guidance in the choice of a successor.

And now the sad news. The end of May brought the announcement of the death of *Father Peter Garnero* in Campinas, Brazil. He was making good progress after a heart operation, but complications occurred which caused his death in a matter of days. Father Garnero was widely known, especially in Latin America and Italy. He did magnificent work for the Congregation in many responsible positions; but this letter is not the place to go into details. He was a Salesian of tough fibre, a man of deep spirituality; his love for Don Bosco was enlightened and practical; and his charity extended to all who were suffering or in need.

A few days later I received a phone call announcing the sudden death of *Father Francis Burger*, Provincial of Munich, Germany. He had laboured solidly for his Province for six years and was looking forward to a little respite. However, God called him to the reward so richly deserved by this good, generous and optimistic Salesian, who never spared himself in working for his confrères and his Province.

Let us show our gratitude to these two worthy confrères by remembering them in our prayers.

Now I wish to touch on a matter that I consider of special importance in this post-capitular period.

OUR CARE FOR THE CO-OPERATORS

Two years ago I presented to you the Acts of the Special General Chapter. In them I noted under five headings the main avenues of renewal that were to guide us in the years following

the Chapter. I followed this up by reminding you in my recent letters of two of these matters: firstly, the lively sense of the presence of God that calls for the steady growth of our faith particularly by means of our community and personal prayer; and secondly, the renewal of our vocation by becoming dynamically mission-minded (a duty that will bear abundant fruit). In this present letter I wish to treat of a matter that has great bearing on renewal: the relaunching and turning to best account of that branch of the Salesian family which Don Bosco called "most important" — the Salesian Co-operators.

The Special General Council (SGC) gave its particular attention to this matter; and it is closely connected with the other two matters I have dealt with. Indeed it depends on our "sense of Salesian mission", and in turn is an indispensable factor today in strengthening and energizing our apostolic initiatives.

The SCG drew up two documents on the subject and they are under study with a view to practical application. Rather than indulge in a doctrinal discourse, I prefer to set before you, however summarily, the findings and decisions of the Provincial Chapters in this field. This will give you a bird's-eye-view of what has been decided in order to carry out the directives of the SGC. It will make pleasing, enlightening and stimulating reading for us all. I shall outline the results of the delicate and complex study undertaken to sort out what should be done in drawing up practical programmes. Over the past months the Congregation has been very busy with these things, applying the SGC decisions to local conditions.

1. INFORMATION ON THE PRESENT SITUATION

It was a great joy for us members of the Superior Council to read through the promising prospects opened up by so many Special Provincial Councils (SPC) by their choices and decisions. It is a pleasure for me to run through a list of these: they are positive and full of encouragement.

Promising post-capitular features

** The teaching and deliberations of the SGC regarding the Co-operators have stirred up the confrères to a sincere appreciation: there is the will to vitalise the Co-operators along the lines drawn up by Don Bosco and resumed by the SGC. A great number of SPC's made reference to No. 730 of the Acts of the Special General Chapter and emphasised the urgency of the "radical change of outlook" required of us all if we wish to view consistently the ideal of the Co-operator as described by the SGC according to Don Bosco's thinking.

** A number of SPC's expressed the conviction that decisions in this area had an important bearing on the actual renewal of the Province. Accordingly they drew up complete documents with concrete and detailed plans of action. I shall refer to these later on. Others went further and put the relationship between Salesians and Co-operators on the plane of understanding brotherly collaboration in educative and apostolic enterprises.

** I would like to particularize certain decisions made by a number of Provinces, especially in areas experiencing hardship and difficulty. They have been greatly concerned at the problems presented by lay-helpers, and have drawn up programmes of research, formation and collaboration with a view to incorporating them more efficiently into their work.

Attempts to gauge the situation

The drawing up of realistic plans obviously required a knowledge of the conditions, problems and possibilities of the Provinces concerned. An examination was made to gauge exactly how the Co-operators and collaborators stood in relation to the local communities.

** In many cases this work was facilitated by studies carried out by the provincial and local delegates in collaboration with the

Co-operators themselves, and enriched with practical and pertinent directives on the renewal of the whole area.

** In various Provinces groups of Salesians and Co-operators have been formed to make a joint study of a *development strategy* — that is, times, ways and means to effect an increase in the number and quality of dedicated collaborators; also better organization.

** In some countries the Co-operators, with their national, provincial and local delegates, are making a *check on the enrolled members*, not to exclude or discourage those who are only capable of a minimal contribution, but to discover those who are better trained and more available, and use their services in a more enlightened and efficient manner.

Other enterprises for the Co-operators

I wish to point out certain significant facts in this post-capitular period.

** Several reports give *precise indications about the Salesian personnel* to be assigned to this work; and a good number of Provincials have already chosen capable and trained priests and brothers to attend to the spiritual and apostolic care of the Co-operators.

** The SGC has promised to give priority to the Salesian and apostolic *formation of the Co-operators* (SGC 735-744). The SPC's have done much fine work along these lines. Some have planned regular courses, conventions and meetings for the Co-operators; these will be held at provincial and inter-provincial levels; the scope will be formative and pedagogical.

** The Salesian Bulletin will carry *articles of a formative nature* for the Co-operators. It is expected that the Co-operators themselves will also contribute.

** Some Provinces have founded *centres of Salesian spirituality* open to all members of the Salesian family, and well stocked with books and reviews for their use.

** Other praiseworthy initiatives plan to make a study of the Salesian family, and particularly the Co-operators: the survey will be historical, theological, spiritual and formative. There will be study meetings and pastoral discussions at national and international levels, and publications of various kinds.

Areas of darkness

A careful study of the SPC reports has also revealed the other side of the coin — the side with various gradations of darkness, some already known, some new. In balancing the past against the present, nearly all the SPC's have pointed out these dark areas: defects, gaps, zones of omission, and in general many situations that have to be examined.

We may find it useful, and perhaps necessary, to ponder these things, without over- or under-playing them. There is no desire to concentrate unduly on the defects, and certainly no wish to undermine confidence or encourage pessimism; nor should we become in any way resigned to situations that are painful and difficult. The purpose of our examination is to look into these problems and make a united effort to sort out the various ways and means that will help in eliminating them. (This is exactly what the SPC's have endeavoured to do.)

Dark areas for the Salesians

Here are certain data that have direct reference to us Salesians.

** Some Provinces point out that various confrères lack a true or sufficient understanding of the thinking of Don Bosco in regard to Salesian co-operation, and (more specifically) the Co-

operators and their history. There are still confrères who confuse Co-operators with the friends, sympathizers and benefactors of our works. Others have difficulty in viewing the Co-operators in the light of the SGC documents (which are based on Don Bosco's thinking); they baulk at accepting the Co-operators as apostolically dedicated Christians, imbued with our spirit and committed to our same mission. Others again do not see the wonderful possibilities latent in this apostolic project of Don Bosco. And there are some who feel dubious about the thought of having to work with enterprising and trained layfolk, and fear the possible risks involved.

** Many Provinces admitted that their Co-operators and collaborators received no encouragement or help from their communities. The Salesian personnel in charge of the Association was often untrained and got no help or support. In the face of new, modern responsibilities, there was a dearth of adequately trained confrères.

Dark areas for the Co-operators

Other problems brought to light have a more direct bearing on the position of our Co-operators and their organization. These are exemplified by a number of sincere SPC statements.

"In the past we have not given sufficient importance to certain sectors, and today we are faced with a situation that is sadly lacking in many ways: in numbers, quality organization and apostolic impact."

"We have been more interested in numbers than in formation (especially Salesian formation); and now we are reaping the results of this mistake."

"In our Province the Co-operators have never flourished and at present they do not exist as an association."

"We have to admit sadly that at at times the Co-operators are only a list of names."

"We have given little importance to the Co-operators."

Various SPC's have stated: "We have catechists, lay-teachers, pupils' parents and leaders, all of whom would make fine Co-operators. But we have failed to give them apostolic and Salesian encouragement".

Omissions in the SPC reports

The above data may perhaps explain the limitations and omissions in some of the SPC reports.

Some documents are limited to a theoretical generic acceptance of the capitular deliberations and make no attempt to get down to practical details at the local level. Other Acts merely mention the Co-operators and their delegates but give no practical programme of activities. In other cases confrères have made no effort to seriously rethink the rôle of the laity in terms of Vatican II and the SGC and to apply this to their province and community. The reason lies in the unfortunate fact that confrères are not au fait with the thinking of Don Bosco, the teaching of his successors and the various General Chapters; and the Co-operators are regarded as something useless and outmoded.

It should be added that the feeling and urgency of the Salesian mission seem to be on the wane. People do not realise that to achieve this mission we need (today more than ever before) the co-operation of trained and available laymen. We must take practical steps to overcome the inevitable difficulties.

These crucial and less positive aspects of our post-capitular period have come to light in the SPC reports. To forestall any false interpretation I repeat that I have listed them because they constitute our everyday problems and so it behoves us to make a special effort to search out the most suitable ways and means

to remedy the situation. This is precisely what so many of the SPC's have done.

2. OBJECTIVES TO BE ACHIEVED

At this point it would be useful and stimulating for us all to recall certain important ideas and facts; they are to be found in the documents of the SGC and have been taken up by quite a few SPC's. By duly heeding and appreciating them we are taking the first necessary step in tackling our task with the courage that is needed.

Salesian co-operation is a matter of faith

From the beginning of the Oratory to the formulation of the 1876 Regulations for the Co-operators, and later in the decisions of the successive General Chapters, Don Bosco had envisaged his mission for youth and the people as including the co-operation and collaboration of the laity. Indeed he practised the principle before he formulated it. This must not be viewed as a mere historical fact. According to the explicit pronouncements of the SGC (nos. 153, 154), it revealed God's intervention and was an indication of the charism given Don Bosco by the Holy Spirit in view of the founding of his apostolic family.

Article 5 of our new Constitutions makes this very clear: "The Holy Spirit has raised up other groups of baptised persons who, living the Salesian spirit, fulfil the mission of Don Bosco in their different vocations. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) and the Co-operators were founded by Don Bosco himself. Later, other institutes were established, and more may yet come into being. Together with us these groups form the Salesian Family for which the members of the Society have the special responsibility..."

These statements are simple and compelling. They cannot

be understood or accepted except with the eyes of a faith that makes us aware of the active and generous presence of God in our Father and Founder yesterday, and in the mission of his family today.

Not to understand this, or worse, to care nothing about it, to refuse to accept it, would be equivalent to not recognizing the signs given us by God in the life, thought and work of our holy Founder. It would mean restricting Don Bosco's charisma — hence mutilating our vocation and mission given to us by God for the good of the Church and society.

Today this becomes more serious: for Vatican II has urged the idea of co-operation between the various members of the People of God and between the different ministries in the local and universal Church. The Council has pointed out this co-operation between apostolic religious, diocesan priests and dedicated Christians as something essential to the whole Church; and much hard work is going into the achieving of this principle in our post-conciliar age. This was the concept that our Founder had thought out and realised in the specific field of his work for youth and the people (albeit within the limitations of his century). To carry out this idea of Don Bosco's — Salesians working together with people who have received apostolic and Salesian training — this is a pressing duty for us, as indicated expressly in nos. 728, 734, 738 and 739 of the Acts of the SGC.

This renewal concept of our SGC has been enthusiastically understood and received by many Salesians. But it is plain that to be efficiently and universally accepted, there has to be a delicate process involving a change of mind. This is something that is urgent; and many SPC's saw it as such. I appeal to those confrères (young and old, and especially those in positions of authority) who are hesitating and perhaps are not quite convinced about this line of renewal. I earnestly invite them to be courageous in overcoming these attitudes, which are after all only negative and non-constructive, and show a lack of faith in our mission.

New ways of co-operation

The SGC has presented us with a second objective. Salesian co-operation (that is, the participation of Co-operators and lay helpers in our common mission) must today assume new forms in theory and practice. These forms are to exploit the true value of Don Bosco's thinking and all that a century of history has proved valid; they are to face up to the changes that have occurred in the Church, in society, in our Congregation; they are to be sensitive to the needs and possibilities of co-operation in today's world.

The deliberations of many SPC's bring this out very clearly. We read the following extracts.

"It is urgent and indispensable that we have able and well-trained collaborators to back us in our enterprises and to stand in for us in so many places where there is need of Salesian activity."

"We must see to it that the teachers and other Christian people who help in our houses and educative activities are aware of the nature of their participation (in different ways) in our Salesian mission; that they be imbued with the spirit of Don Bosco, and be in reality responsible, convinced co-workers with us, not under us."

"We propose to encourage our collaborators who show greater aptitudes and availability to become full-time Co-operators."

So much for the quotes. Now it is our task to waste no time, but to encourage such people to work among our university groups, in our youth centres, our schools, parishes, missions and working-class areas. They will be groups or individual co-workers from the ranks of laity and clergy; they will share our vocation and mission; they will be imbued with our spirit and duly trained according to their talents, competence and availability. Integrated with us they will work in the Salesian mission and be an earnest

to the Church and modern society of an efficacious Salesian presence according to local needs.

Here too the importance of the spirit of faith is obvious: we must believe that God is generous in supplying vocations like these; we must be utterly convinced that Don Bosco's educative and apostolic mission and his spirit have much to offer to the local and universal Church. When it is duly in evidence, it presents itself as even more relevant today than in the past.

This way of thinking is basic and decisive and should help get rid of certain difficulties and objections we hear among us from time to time.

“Side by side with us”

Another important objective expressly mentioned by the SGC (nos. 743, 744) received the attention of various SPC deliberations; with shades of difference according to local circumstances that emphasise its importance. It is plain that Salesian co-operation today is of vital interest in all the areas of our mission: evangelization, catechesis, youth apostolate and vocations, work in parishes and on the missions. Interesting statements were made by a number of Provinces.

“We must bear mind that in the present situation of our schools, oratories, youth centres, etc., the efficient help of trained Salesian Co-operators is absolutely indispensable, and in many cases is a decisive factor in making evangelization and catechesis relevant to local areas.”

“Today the problem of priestly, religious and lay vocations is the task of the entire local Church; it is not a fragmented problem but universal. The contribution that individual Co-operators or groups of lay collaborators can offer us in research and in the the perseverance and maturing of Salesian vocations is irreplaceable.”

Some SPC reports added that it was the only hope for the future of their Provinces.

For the Youth Apostolate many SPC's stressed "the importance and urgency of having mature and capable layfolk, imbued with our spirit, to help us in our parish activities and especially in our parish councils. The absence of such people, or their inadequacy or lack of training, definitely slows up the apostolic efficiency of the parish, prevents stagnant situations from being remedied and impedes the « Salesianity content » of the local ecclesial community".

In a special way, in those regions where there is a battle for justice and the integration and betterment of youth, the SPC reports have declared that "the incisive presence of lay collaborators, imbued with the spirit of Don Bosco (such as our Co-operators) is absolutely essential".

These findings stress an important basic principle: these situations require effective collaboration; hence we cannot be content with groups of Co-operators after the manner of pious associations, often composed of people of a certain age and who seem rather to be the subjects of our pastoral care than collaborators side by side with us (even though these people deserve our highest respect and recognition for what they have done and continue to do).

These groups should not be neglected, but enriched with other layfolk, including men and women, teachers, professionals, workers and ordinary people, all of whom possess characteristics of the Salesian Co-operator as envisaged in Don Bosco's 1876 Regulations and as updated by our General Chapter.

This requires that we earnestly seek out and select Co-operators; then engage in their Christian, Salesian and apostolic training.

Many SPC's have made serious decisions to do exactly this. May their example stimulate and encourage other Provinces to practical efforts along the avenues I shall now try to indicate.

3. PASTORAL TACTICS

To avoid damaging misunderstandings, let me point out a danger. All the initiatives and proposals that follow are obviously not suited to every province or community; this would be going to extremes and get us nowhere. Rather is it a case of making a correct and proper appraisal of what other Provinces have planned and are planning, and deciding what can be imitated in one's own Province and local community. One needs to be sanely realistic and practical; but also courageous and enterprising.

Training Salesians

The first group of decisions refers to *the confrères in our houses*. These should be brought to a better understanding of what Salesian co-operation signifies today. They need to be stimulated to change their ideas and to assimilate the directives of the SGC.

For this reason many SPC's have directed that in every house there should be conferences about the Co-operators based on the capitular documents and the Salesian literature on the subject.

Quite a few SPC's decided to call periodic meetings of Salesians and Co-operators for the purpose of reflection, brotherly understanding and prayer. The aim is a mutual change of outlook. Other Provinces have counselled their confrères to participate in the study sessions organized by the Co-operators at provincial and national levels.

The second group of decisions is directed mainly at the *young Salesians*. For instance, it was decided by many that during the various phases of formation (novitiate, philosophy, tirocinium, theology, up-dating courses) the history of the Salesian family should form an integral part of their training, or at any rate should be dealt with adequately. It would include the origins, development and mission of the Co-operators, and the secular Salesian spirituality proper to our lay collaborators.

In some Provinces a study has been made on how to put to better use the contribution that well-trained and enterprising individual Co-operators can offer to our young Salesians in the different phases of their formation.

Those who promote the Co-operators

A notable number of SPC's took the more explicit SGC directives (nos. 736-744) and insisted that it was the task of the community as such to look after the Co-operators and establish the bonds of union with them. In all this the Rector has the special responsibility of giving encouragement to both community and individual members (Const. 54).

In the community the local and provincial delegates assume rôles much more important than in the past. This is because of their talents and the theoretical and practical training they need to possess, and also because of the new tasks they are called on to perform both in the community and among the Co-operators. Many SPC documents descend to precise details on the matter.

"The Delegate should be chosen by the community and be presented to the Provincial for appointment; he should be a member of the house council; he should be given suitable time, place, means and Salesian helpers to assist him in carrying out his activities."

"In the general set-up of the various Co-operator activities (e.g., periodic "stock-taking"; making important changes), the Delegate should proceed in accord with his community; he should keep them posted regarding developments so that all confrères feel a responsibility and encouragement to lend their own generous collaboration."

As regards the Provincial Delegate, he should be chosen from among the Salesians who are really capable and well-trained for this kind of work. He should co-ordinate initiatives at the Provincial level and make regular reports to the Province.

Finally, the delegates should meet regularly to pool their experiences so that they may work in unity and coherence at the provincial and national levels and all may help one another.

Recruiting new Co-operators

In finding new members it is interesting to consider developments regarding the *Young Co-operators*.

Don Bosco's 1876 Regulations required the minimum age of sixteen years. No Province can afford to overlook this very significant fact.

In this regard some very courageous decisions are in evidence. A great number of Provinces intend to extend the entire youth apostolate of their schools, centres and various works to undertake the task of apostolic training of the young, giving them enlightened guidance in their choice of vocation, and addressing themselves especially to the senior pupils and the more promising youths who have the necessary qualities, with a view to making them Co-operators in the fullest sense of the word.

The efforts made in this field deserve the greatest encouragement; all the more so since the experiences of the last few years in various Provinces have proved most promising.

Regarding other collaborators, I add some practical deliberations of many Provinces.

** In choosing Co-operators according to the ideal of the SGC, we should forage first of all among those who already help in our works (schools, clubs, hostels, parishes), or whose presence shows their interest in these activities. The normal and expected avenues of choice would include our lecturers, teachers, catechists, voluntary workers, apostolically minded past pupils, the parents of our pupils who show signs of our vocation, are imbued with the spirit of Don Bosco, and intend to work with us in the many ways required by our Salesian service to youth and the people.

** Suggestions for recruiting lay vocations not connected with our works could be: sermons, conferences, conventions, the Salesian press (especially the Bulletin) and other means of communication.

How to engage the Co-operators in our enterprises

The SGC in its message to the Co-operators assured them as follows: "We shall take steps that your activities be more fully directed, according to your own possibilities, preparation, and the demands of our own educational work; we shall also study how best to entrust to you other apostolic activities that are more in keeping with the lay nature of your association » (SGC 736).

In fulfilment of this directive, some Provinces, whose schools include a great number of extern personnel have decided "to arrange that as far as possible this staff be made up of persons who (in addition to their specific professional competence) will share responsibility in our various activities, especially in the fields of education and the apostolate and will be prepared to become our true co-operators, fully aware of the significance of their work. They will thus become real Salesian apostles, inspired and encouraged by the group of confrères engaged in that particular enterprise".

There are other Provinces, however, whose works are run almost exclusively by confrères. They have decided on a gradual increase of Co-operators in their work-force. Times and methods will be studied in accordance with particular cases. Of course account will be taken of the professional qualifications and educational and apostolic talents of the Co-operators concerned.

Finally, many SPC's have decided "to admit capable Co-operators as members of their various councils: they will play the part of consultants, experts, helping in planning, achieving and checking on that area of the apostolate they share with the community".

Co-operators, "the soul of the Congregation"

To conclude. I have deliberately put before you ideas, directives and decisions which have come from your own Provinces. They are patently in agreement with the charismatic concept of Don Bosco regarding his Salesian Co-operators. Today, because of an agglomeration of grave motives that have been maturing and becoming obvious, it is urgent that this "concept" be put into practice efficiently and methodically — even if gradually.

In some respects it does not seem an exaggeration to say that putting these principles into practice is a vital matter for the achievement of our mission: both as a natural complement and also to overcome today's vocation problems.

I hope we are equal to facing up to this reality; if so, we shall find ways of acting accordingly

As I have said, it is not a case of doing everything in a day; nor of attempting all the suggestions of the various Provinces. Rather is it a matter of clear ideas and determination and of course prudently progressing according to individual circumstances.

It is important to be convinced that the Congregation invites us to engage in this activity; it is not a luxury, a will o' the wisp or something superfluous: it is a very relevant and constructive reply to the Congregation's vital needs of today; and it is in accord with the will of the Church and the Council.

The Superior Council (and more specifically the competent Commission) will do their best to encourage and help. A great number of persons directly interested have almost completed the work of studying, revising and up-dating the Co-operators' Regulations; and it is planned to hold a Congress of Co-operators on the occasion of our missionary centenary, which should bear much fruit.

My dear Provincials, Rectors and confrères, our renewal will suffer seriously by default if these decisions are not put into practice. Their realisation will depend for the most part on you.

I am well aware of the various problems you will have to

face. But we are dealing with apostolic affairs of such importance that they are altogether "top priority". By overcoming the obstacles and promoting the cause of the Co-operators methodically, courageously and adroitly, we shall have resolved many other problems.

Let us forge ahead then, after the example of our holy Founder. Let us always keep his words in mind, "The Salesian Co-operators' Association is of the utmost importance for us; it is the soul of our Congregation" (I Gen. Chapter, 1877).

My affectionate greetings to you all. Those who will be making their Retreat have my good wishes that they will profit by recollection and prayer and attain that light that brings security and comfort, and hence the strength to live in joyous fidelity to our Salesian vocation.

Please remember me too.

Father LOUIS RICCERI
Rector Major