

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome, October 1973

My dear confrères and sons,

I greet you with two items of family news that I know will bring you much pleasure. You will recall that the Councillor for Youth Apostolate, Father Castillo, was appointed coadjutor bishop of Trujillo, Venezuela, some time ago. In accord with the Superior Council I have now appointed his successor. I believe it was no surprise to the Provincials that Father Juvenal Dho, vice-Rector Magnificus of the PAS (Rome) was the one to be elected to the Superior Council. His accomplishments in this field of activity are indeed considerable; and with Salesian simplicity he has accepted the position and will place his excellent scientific preparation and practical experience at the service of the Congregation. I ask the prayers and collaboration of all confrères for Father Dho in his new responsibilities.

And now to the Special Provincial Chapters. The Superior Council has put in three very busy months and at the time of writing has almost finished studying the SPC's for approval. With the many deficiencies inherent in human nature, the task has nevertheless been carried out seriously and diligently.

The highway of post-capitular renewal

We must first of all express our deep gratitude to the Regional Concillors and the members of the various Commissions, who have worked without stint and made a fine contribution to the analysis of each document received.

Speaking personally, the contact I made with the Provincial Chapters gave me much food for thought. I saw these Provincial communities (so vastly different) all engaged in a common task, surmounting peculiar local problems and applying to their regions the impressive renewal programme of the SGC.

I felt that God was in our midst: there was such an abundance of goodwill, practical proposals, brave decisions for renewal and fidelity to Don Bosco coupled with the acceptance of today's difficulties. Naturally, other problems were inevitably manifest, and there were cases of uncertainty, misunderstanding and puzzlement.

But every document gave clear indications of fundamental loyalty to the SGC and an indisputable love for Don Bosco and the Congregation. This makes us confident that, if we unite our efforts, we shall succeed in carrying out the behests of the SGC, despite the difficulties and obstacles that come with modern times and circumstances.

The approval of the SPC deliberations has indeed marked out in a practical and detailed way the highway we have to follow in translating the SGC into reality; and I am confident that every Province will accept this as a deeply responsible duty and will also bear in mind any adjustments made by the Superior Council.

These are our preliminary steps, and, together with the experiences of other Religious Institutes and of the Church itself in these post-conciliar times, they make us aware that we are treading a delicate path indeed.

The process of decentralization

When I reflect on my task as Rector Major at this point in our history, I am conscious of the grave responsibility I have of carrying our article 129 of the new Constitutions. I always read it with a sense of fear: « The Rector Major is the successor

of Don Bosco and the father and centre of unity for the whole Salesian Family ».

I reflect deeply and often on these words; I discuss them with other superiors and people who can shed light on them so that I may realise all the vast implications, the responsibilities and the problems they entail.

For this purpose, while setting the wheels of renewal rolling in all the Provinces of the Congregation, I want you to ponder with me on the responsibility that weighs so heavily on me and the Superior Council.

We are on the point of beginning our process of decentralization as directed by the SGC. On the other hand the same SGC was well aware of the grave dangers that would accompany a decentralization that was not well understood and not in harmony with the life-giving energies contained in those things that unite the Congregation; and so it stated, « Government at world level ensures the overall unity of the Society in its work and action ».(1)

My dear confrères, you see plainly how important, nay fundamental, it is to give full and adequate treatment to this delicate and urgent matter; we are all involved in it: indeed the very life and existence of our Congregation depend on it. So my subject is: —

DECENTRALIZATION AND UNITY IN THE CONGREGATION TODAY

I have said that we are all involved; and so I beg every Salesian to peruse these pages carefully. Especially do I appeal to those who are directly and immediately responsible for translating the directives into practice. What follows now will clarify in a concrete way how far the renewal required by the SGC is inti-

(1) Const. 124.

mately bound up with (indeed subordinated to) the balance and harmony of the two components: decentralization and unity.

To really get to grips with the subject it would be well to re-read the Acts of SGC nos. 138, 636, and especially 713-725; and also the new Constitutions, articles 123-127.

I want to make it clear that it is not a matter of treating unity and decentralization separately, as though they were mutually opposed. This is certainly not the case! We need to be convinced that one implies the other: lively unity in the Congregation finds its fulfilment these days in decentralization; just as genuine decentralization implies a unifying effort that is explicit and practical.

The will of the SGC is that the Congregation be vitally one in its decentralization. It directs that the decentralization be a pluralistic realization of its mission: « The Province is responsible for structures to maintain unity with the centre and within its own confines, and also those structures which will make it possible to fulfil our Salesian mission in a way which meets local needs ».(2)

It is plain that this matter requires serious treatment and doctrinal reflection; and some confrères may find this rather difficult. Nevertheless I believe the problem demands this sort of approach, and it will throw light on the difficulties the times impose on the Congregation.

1. UNITY IN THE CONGREGATION

To clarify this matter it would be well to examine into the nature of our Congregation.

To consider unity and decentralization as simply sociological and juridical is just not good enough. Our assessment must be based on faith: we have to consider the Salesian vocation-identity in the Church.

(2) ASGC 139.

A propos of this we need to ponder a number of basic principles as set down by the SGC. They will constitute the platform for our reflections. These fundamental principles contain a wealth of doctrine. My letter is hardly the place for dwelling on and dilating in depth—which is a task for experts; but I feel I ought to touch briefly on a number of points, not only because they are basic, but also because they will be of considerable help in viewing the problem of our unity and decentralization in proper perspective.

Our Society is an ecclesial reality

This is a most important principle. The Society of St. Francis of Sales is not just an « institutional organization » at the sociological level; it is a living part of the Church and shares its nature.

Now the Church, as described by the Council, (3) is a reality with a « sacramental » character. It is a living « organism » made up of two elements that cannot be separated: a divine element, animating and unifying, and a human element with a social dimension. The human element is naturally dependent on changing times; but it is inseparably linked with the divine element and cannot be reduced to any of the purely human institutional forms.

This sacramental reality needs to be stressed these days because the intense process of secularization that is taking place is imperilling the realization of what constitutes the peculiar « nature » of the Church. Present day cultural changes make certain revisions in the human elements of the Church inevitable, and this is especially so in the sociological field. We have to accept that the anthropological sciences have progressed and require criticism that is truly objective. But it would be naive to overlook the main characteristic of the « nature » of the Church, its « vital

(3) Cf. Lumen Gentium n. 8.

principle » and the specifically « sacramental » manner whereby it is involved in the social plans.

Our overall vision becomes falsified and obscured and lifeless if we are not convinced of the operating presence of Jesus Christ and the enlivening influence of his Holy Spirit who make the Church the Mystical Body of the Lord.

Now our humble Society is a small living part of the Church's sacramental reality. Hence it is correct to state that it has a charismatic nature whereby its institutional and social aspect is organically linked to the presence of Jesus and the influence of his Spirit. This is well put by the first article of our new Constitutions: « With humble gratitude we believe that the Salesian Society came into being not only by human agency but by the providence of God. It is this active presence of the Spirit which is the firm basis of our hope and it urges us to fidelity ».

At the base of our common vocation there is the very real gift of God, the lively presence of the Spirit; and this is the origin and explanation of the unity of the Congregation. The bonds of our communion go far deeper than simple human friendship; they certainly do not exclude it—indeed they favour it and are benefited by its presence. But one must delve deeper still: communion is a gift that comes from the Holy Spirit. To quote an eminent theologian in support of this asseveration: « From the Christian angle we can go in search of « communion » only because it has already been bestowed beforehand by God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit who imbues us. Every desire for union demands a permanent state of being-already-united; and this does not depend on us; it is not due to our natural capacity to open up to others; it is because God has made us his children and co-heirs of his Son. The gift of unity is beyond our powers of disposal: it derives from God, is perfected in God, and one cannot dispose of God ».(4)

(4) Von Balthasar: *Communio: un programma su « Communio »*, n. 1, 1972, p. 6.

This basic aspect of our « communion of unity » is duly emphasised by our SGC.

In the Constitutions Salesians are defined as « a community of the baptized », (5) « united by the bond of charity and simple vows », hence with « one heart and one soul in supporting one another and in loving and serving God ». Our whole consecrated life is viewed in this light; it is a means to « greatly favour such communion ». (6) In the profession formula the Salesian engages to live in the Salesian Society, one in spirit and in action with his brothers. (7)

So to our first basic principle: we have to consider unity and decentralization in the light of the true nature of the Congregation as an institution of Religious Life in the Church—to treat it as a gift of God and so avoid the deviations that result from « horizontalism ». As changes come about we must strive to show forth this presence of the Spirit in us and « in our own Salesian way try to become signs of and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are the poorest and most in need ». (8)

Our Society has its own proper and special charism

Why is our humble Society to be considered a living part of the Church? A thoughtful and practical answer to this is to be found in the first document of the SGC.

When we speak of our proper charism we are not saying that Don Bosco was a thinking genius discovering new theological and anthropological dimensions; we do not claim he was an Augustine of Hippo or a modern anthropologist; but we do see

(5) Const. 2.

(6) Const. 51.

(7) Const. 74.

(8) Const. 2.

in him the original qualities of a Founder—the amazingly fruitful collaboration whereby he used the gifts bestowed on him by the Holy Spirit, multiplying his talents and spreading them throughout the world for the salvation of the young.

These gifts exhibit a great variety. Taken together as a whole they constitute our vocation-identity—they are the components of the vital unity in our Society. The SGC lists them and defines them clearly and thoroughly. Here are the main ones.

— The Lord and his Spirit are actively present among us urging us to apply to today's needs the permanent gift bestowed on Don Bosco.(9)

— The « mission » given us by the Church.(10)

— What constitutes the « Salesian Spirit ».(11)

— Our own special way of living the Gospel.(12)

— Our way of providing an apostolic presence: the Preventive System.(13)

— Our particular community life and its family spirit.(14)

When we refer to the Congregation's proper charism we are touching on an aspect that is closely linked with its « divine element »; it constitutes its identity and is indispensable for its existence. This set-up means that if the Congregation is not united it ceases to exist.

It is to the book of our Constitutions we must turn for our authentic and proper charism—its definition, its component parts and the way we put it into practice.

« Outlining for us the essential features of our vocation it offers us a way of life, ready to reach the fullness of love: "I

(9) ASGC 1-22.

(10) ASGC 23-57.

(11) ASGC 85-105.

(12) ASGC 106-127.

(13) ASGC 58-84, 93, 360, 365; Const. 25.

(14) Cfr. ASGC 84, 481-503.

will run the way of your commands; you will give freedom to my heart.” » (15)

The Constitutions are the official key to our particular vocation; the principles they contain have received the Church's authoritative confirmation. We find in them « the spiritual riches of our Salesian traditions and the basic norms for the life of our Society ». They thus « give direction to our profession and shed a radiance on our fidelity », and they assure us « that the way of life we have chosen is true to the Gospel ».(16)

It follows that the Constitutions are our point of reference par excellence when dealing with our religious life and its characteristic aims; they are the greatest criterion of unity the Congregation possesses.

Another basic principle: Decentralization cannot ignore or tamper with the component parts of our particular charism as defined in the Constitutions. Rather it must translate them into concrete situations. The reason is of course that decentralization implies greater participation and responsibility, caring for and furthering the spiritual riches that make up our vocation. Hence unity and decentralization necessarily and basically mean that every Province must improve its understanding of the characteristic properties of our spirit and know, study and practise the Constitutions. If this is lacking, the very fabric that constitutes the life and unity of the Congregation will fall apart.

The Salesian Society is a genuine Religious Congregation

A further step in our argument: The Society of St. Francis of Sales (as an institution) is not simply a mighty apostolic workforce; it is not at all a mere spiritual brotherhood. Before the SGC maybe some thought along these lines, perhaps even suggesting that our Congregation should have evolved into a

(15) Const.: Foreword.

(16) Const. 200.

Secular Institute. But the SGC has clarified also this facet of our vocation-identity. It formally declared that the Society of St. Francis of Sales is a « Religious Congregation », specifically distinct from a « Secular Institute ». Hence to consider such a change seriously (even hypothetically) would make one guilty of an arbitrary and inadmissible tampering with our identity.

There is not the slightest doubt that today the signs of the times urgently require us to evolve and adapt ourselves, with the many social and cultural changes this entails; but we have always to respect the requirements of our identity in the « form » of our life as set out explicitly by the Constitutions. The early history of our Society makes it abundantly clear that Don Bosco wanted his closest collaborators to live in a Religious Congregation, albeit with maximum flexibility.(17)

Don Bosco wrote to the Vicar Capitular of Turin, « I aim to set up a Society in which the members retain all their civil rights as far as the governing authorities are concerned, yet at the same time constitute a genuine moral body in the eyes of the Church ».(18)

His first collaborators were not at all attracted by the idea of being « Religious » (« *frati* » (19) was the popular expression); but they understood very clearly that that was what Don Bosco wanted of them; and John Cagliero was quoted as saying, « “Frate” or not, I shall not leave Don Bosco ».(20)

With a canonical clarity that is no accident the new Constitutions affirm, « Our Society is made up of clerical and lay religious who live in community and make public profession of the evangelical counsels. Within the Church it is a Pontifical Institute of exempt religious living an active life embracing different rites ».(21)

(17) ASGC 128-180.

(18) MB VII 563.

(19) MB III 547; Annali I pp. 12 & 31.

(20) MB VI 334-335.

(21) Const. 3.

The Secular Institutes (such as the Volunteers of Don Bosco) carry out their vocation in another form of life: « without a life in common but immersed in the world's structures ».(22)

« Life in common », in the best meaning of the phrase, is what distinguishes Religious Congregations from Secular Institutes. The Conciliar Decree on Religious Life speaks of the foundation of « common life », drawing its inspiration from the early Christian communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles: « Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they all had everything in common ».(23)

In « Perfectae Caritatis » a number of practical consequences are listed, such as: community life of authentic brotherliness; prayer in common; the unity of members in the same spirit as a source of energy for the apostolate.(24)

Our SGC spoke clearly of the local Salesian community as a group of « members who are attached to the same canonically erected house; they live a common life in unity of spirit with the superior, and carry out with common responsibility their apostolic activity ».(25)

It is worth repeating that any member who wants to direct the redimensioning and decentralization towards a Secular Institute would be harming the Congregation's identity, and with it the common vocation of the whole Salesian Family. Certainly the Congregation may be flanked by one or more male or female Institutes; but this does not take from the Congregation the very identity by which it carries out a particular mission towards other groups of the Family.

And here we arrive at another important basic principle:

(22) ASGC 168.

(23) ASGC 4, 32.

(24) cf. Perfectae Caritatis 15.

(25) Const. 181.

Loyalty to his vocation requires that each confrère sincerely choose to *belong* to the Congregation as such, according to the kind of Gospel-life it envisages. To forage round for novel norms of religious life, to reject the « choice of belonging » would be a facile path to deviations; the consequences can easily be imagined.

The Salesian Society operates at world level

The SGC reminds us that our Congregation is not a federation of independent communities; it is one single Society « made up of provincial communities, and these in turn of local communities ».(26)

The Constitutions say, « The Rector Major, as superior of the Salesian Society, exercises full authority over it. He has ordinary jurisdiction over all the provinces, houses and members in spiritual matters... and is the official representative of the Society ».(27)

These words are not quoted in a foolish anxiety to emphasise a constitutional right which no one disputes, and which today is to be exercised in a new sense of service and collegiality. I quote them to recall one of the aspects of our Congregation's identity: we are not a federation of independant communities, but a single Society, a genuine world-community!

Assuredly in this single Society we have to renew and strengthen the lively sense of « communion » and also show respect for proper autonomy; but « communion » and « autonomy » are not in opposition to unity—they are part of it. In fact, communion presupposes diversity and this autonomy (which does not mean independence) assures respect for « diversity in the harmony of communion ».

(26) Const. 124.

(27) Const. 130.

This consideration has no small bearing on the way we think out and actuate our decentralization—it must be effected without severing our important world unity, for this gives a special characteristic world witness to our Salesian vocation and an organizational efficiency in service and availability for the Church.(28)

Don Bosco spoke of this matter in the First General Chapter, stating clearly: « We are still taking our first steps; our numbers are not yet very great; and up to now all have looked to the Oratory as their centre. And as we forge ahead we must study all ways of keeping these ties firm; otherwise before long we shall be pursuing divergent paths and losing our close bonds of union. We must do our utmost to remain united in one spirit ».(29)

Authority at the service of others

These critical times prompt me to make mention of the Rector Major, the Superior Council and the Provincials with their respective Councils; these constitute an important and sensitive means of preserving world unity. The service they render (or better, their ministry of authority) must be exercised in the Congregation « at every level... in Christ's name, in imitation of him, and in the spirit of Don Bosco »; it is « a service rendered to brothers », it « aims at fostering charity among the members, co-ordinating common efforts, animating, orientating, making right decisions and correcting wrong ones, to realiste our mission ».(30) « At the different levels (local, provincial and worldwide) the centre which in Don Bosco's mind guarantees unity is the respective superior ».(31) The central government must « ensure the overall unity of the Society in its work and action ».(32)

(28) ASGC: various pages, esp. 713-722 (very important).

(29) MB XIII 286.

(30) Const. 125.

(31) ASGC 720.

(32) Const. 124.

The Rector Major's main preoccupation is « to promote in the members a constant and renewed fidelity to their Salesian vocation ».(33) This is why the Regulations state clearly that the Rector Major should « keep in active contact with provinces, houses and members », and on their part the members are reminded of their duty of « keeping united with the Rector Major and accepting his directives ».(34)

It is in this robustly unifying sense that the ministry of authority is considered in its source(35) and in its practice: « Superiors at all levels share in one and the same authority and exercise it in communion with the Rector Major for the good of the whole Society. Thus, while promoting the good of their own communities, they are concerned with the unity, growth, and the development of the entire Society ».(36)

One of the main tasks of the Superior Council is to « promote fraternal union between the different Provinces ».(37) « It is the task of the Regional Councillors to further in a special way an active and positive sense of brotherhood and family spirit in the relationships between confrères, between the provinces and the Rector Major and his Council, and between the Provincials themselves ».(38)

The Provincial « exercises a service of charity and pastoral zeal in the building up of the provincial community in brotherly love ».(39) and « he fulfils his office in union with the Rector Major ».(40)

It is plain that the world-unity of the Society is not just a matter of tactics or organization, a means of getting the best

(33) Const. 129.

(34) Reg. 95.

(35) ASGC 721.

(36) Const. 131.

(37) Const. 134.

(38) Reg. 128 (1).

(39) Const. 167.

(40) Const. 169.

out of our labours, a strengthening of the framework of the Congregation to ensure its solidity: it has a far deeper value. When we say, for instance, that the Rector Major is the « centre of unity » for the whole Congregation, we do not refer to mere organization, but to our charismatic communion. Indeed insofar as the Superior represents Christ, he is the fosterer of unity and the principle of communion. This is an inescapable point of reference.

An obvious earnest of the world dimension of the Congregation in the General Chapter. Its *raison d'être* and its internal dynamic and juridical form convincingly express such a dimension. It has no similarity to a political parliament. Its level is charismatic, it deals with the unity of the Congregation—a unity that already exists but which is diligently pursued by means of dialogue, community reflection, and in the wealth of diversity found in each provincial community.

Our world unity is a reality, but it is not like a castle built once and for all in which we are permanently established. It is something active, a reality that grows and evolves; but unfortunately it can drag its feet, it can wither, and it is subject to rifts and crises. It is the goal towards which we labour with difficulty. Sometimes it seems merely an ideal; but we must keep seeking it untiringly and with purity of intention, with humility and courage; fidelity to Don Bosco and his spirit must be our driving force.

Our next basic principle: We are a world community. This implies real bonds of communion that transcend the confines of the Province. In this communion we should bear in mind the privileged service enjoyed by the General Chapter and the Rector Major. « The General Chapter is the principal sign in the Society of unity and diversity ». « All members shall readily accept its

deliberations, which become of obligation as soon as they are promulgated by the Rector Major ».(42)

And the Rector Major is « the successor of Don Bosco », the « father and centre of unity », the focal point of the whole Congregation, the source whence flow genuine incitements to unity. To pursue this train of thought further: the Congregation draws its sustenance from him, and in union with him and the Superior Council it finds evident expression, the effective communion of the Provinces in the concrete unity of a single reality that operates on a world-wide scale.

2. HOW DECENTRALIZATION WORKS

So far we have tried to establish a number of basic principles on the grounds that the future changes and the evolving of the Congregation must be in keeping with its vocation-identity. Any transformation that damages the real essence of the Society of St. Francis of Sales (as Don Bosco wanted it and as the Church approved it) would not be a process of growth—it would be a suicidal deviation.

Now let us strive to understand in depth just how we must set about our decentralization and unification.

The provincial community in the world community

The SGC views the provincial community in a new light; and if we are to understand properly what is involved in the present process of the Congregation's decentralization, we must grasp this well.(43)

(42) Const. 151, 152.

(43) ASGC 139, 185, 506, 512.

Normally and technically a Province is a projection of the Congregation that, in some area of the world, translates into practice the concept of the « Particular Salesian Community », decentralized and autonomous. « The Province unites the various local communities into a larger community. It is canonically erected when the necessary and sufficient conditions exist for the effective carrying out of the life and mission of the Congregation in a specific juridical area with the autonomy that belongs to a Province according to the Constitutions ».(44) It is the main job of decentralization to perfect the structure of the Provincial community and the relations between its houses.

A practical example would be a Province in a region that has its own peculiar social and cultural characteristics. Straight away the dynamics of the Salesian vocation would be influenced by two preoccupations: spiritually—how to remain faithful to the identity of the Congregation founded by Don Bosco; and socially—how to become truly involved in the culture and needs of the locality.

It is in this double action of union that is centripetal, and diversification that is centrifugal, that we illustrate clearly our post-capitular striving for decentralization in unity.

There is only one Salesian Congregation in the Church, but the cultures and human situations within which it is called to work vary according to times and places. This calls for an active diversification; the Congregation's unity must eschew uniformity and be both cohesive and differentiated, as becomes a world-wide organization.

However, to attain an harmonious diversity it is necessary that differences of pluralism be drawn together concordantly by the centripetal force of unity. In essence every Province must be the Congregation insofar as it practises the one Salesian vocation.

The world community and the provincial community must be mutually integrated, for the former incorporates the latter.

(44) Const. 162.

This is not just some conventional inclusion—it derives from the very nature of things. The communion of a federation of independent communities is attained through a juridical act, external and subsequent. It is quite a different case with provincial communities and the world community: their relationships are those of living members in a single living body.

To arrive at this kind of integration, this close incorporation, it is not enough to indulge in wishful thinking, or occasional official reports, whether on grounds of expediency, bureaucracy or even diplomacy. We need to be continually engrossed in the communion that belongs to our vocation, a permanently purposeful attitude prompted by our fidelity to Don Bosco.

A Province cannot be a genuine « Particular Salesian Community » if it does not achieve the vocation-identity of the whole Congregation. Indeed no Province is loyal to its members if it does not lead them beyond the Province into the unity of the World Congregation.

Tensions and dangers

We are all aware that if the centripetal and centrifugal forces clash there will be tensions; and every tension can degenerate into a conflict if one of the opposing forces prevails over the other to the detriment of the latter.

Unfortunately we have all come up against rather serious problems on both sides. What follows will help clarify our line of argument.

On the side of unity there is the danger of falling into uniformity, a « centralism » that ignores topographical differences and disregards the various cultural and social needs and the principle of subsidiarity; it fails to give the necessary emphasis to the new dimensions of co-responsibility and dialogue.

On the other hand we are witnessing in these years a veritable chain reaction against every kind of uniformity. And the

impetus of this reaction is such that not only does it aim to destroy the serious fault of « centralism », but even the very centre itself.

Action that is prompted solely by reaction is fraught with dangers. The consequences of such an attitude are evident and hardly need to be instanced. The Rector Major, with his Council, has a real need of frank and regular dialogue with all, to continue and increase his effort to be the « centre of unity », whilst making every effort to eschew the defects that may arise from centralism.

Please help us all to increase our constant service, our important and indispensable « central » duty of guarding the vital identity of the Congregation while avoiding the pitfalls of uniformity.

Decentralization, too, can be short-sighted and shut itself up in painfully narrow confines, giving undue emphasis to the local scene.

These days the following dangers in the Congregation are not imaginary: religious and ecclesiastical nationalism, cultural « superiority complexes », exaggerated social democracy, ignoring of the central authority, and weakening of the bonds of world co-responsibility.

The SGC wants us to be involved in the local apostolate; (45) it has pointed out the possibility of Salesian service outside the Congregation; (46) it has formulated new norms for formation; (47) All this is good and vitalizing only if put into practice in the light of what our identity requires; otherwise it sunders the bonds with the Centre, and attacks the vital value of our unity.

It is not out of the question to speak of the danger of schism for certain groups because of sociological and cultural reasons. Father Congar says, « The place where schism enters the Church, the equivocal danger-point, is reached when the bonds

(45) ASGC 185.

(46) ASGC 392.

(47) Const. 106.

are drawn too tightly between Christianity and a culture, a national interest, an enterprise that is human, personal, and above all social ».(48)

The need for constant striving for balance

The tension between the two goals is not resolved by one prevailing over the other: there is need of a constant effort to strike a balance.

In a living organism this balance is not achieved once and for all; nor is it a situation that can be solved by a formula. It is the free and responsible gathering together of living forces; hence it requires patient attention and constant effort to stimulate, modify, correct and initiate. Indeed this balance needs daily construction and maintenance. Thus the various governing levels, especially the Rector Major and the Superior Council, must do all they can to achieve this balance, encouraging, urging, foreseeing situations, respecting limits, filling the gaps.

Taking stock of the Congregation in its post-capitular travail, we have to acknowledge that various decentralized structures of co-responsibility are not yet running smoothly, and divergence and change are the cases most in evidence.

We all see that pluralism is a reality throughout the Congregation: it hardly needs further encouragement. What it does need is guidance and balance in the light of fidelity to our vocation-identity. (Pluralism does not mean that in the Congregation these days « any old thing goes »!) The structures of co-responsibility have urgent need to be set up and functioning at the local level. (Formation is an example.)

In achieving a proper balance the Rector Major and the Superior Council have the duty of emphasising the components

of unity: indeed this is precisely the specific ministry of the central government (the SGC calls this a « structure of unity »).(49)

The « Practical Directives » of the first capitular document stress the importance of renewal in greater availability for Salesian pastoral activity on behalf of the local Church (and all the world-wide variety this entails). It then goes on to state clearly, « But this legitimate pluralism requires more effort on our part to preserve unity, e.g., in fostering a sense of mission and common spirit, and in frequent and fraternal exchanges with other provincial communities and with the Rector Major who is the visible sign of unity ».(50)

Taking on new responsibilities

My dear confrères, let us take a good hard look at the fact that we have not yet got down to the practicalities of organization in our process of decentralization.

I referred above to the structures of decentralized co-responsibility; and indeed the new Constitutions have this to say about the principle of subsidiarity: « Authority of any kind and at every level must leave to lower levels and to individuals whatever can be done and decided by them. All this presupposes a just distribution of power between the different organs of government ».(51)

Every provincial community should examine itself in this area; for if « leaving to the lower organs what can be done by them » (52) means that they, through indolence or lack of initiative or false interpretations, do not get round to doing what they should, then the Congregation runs a real risk of sailing

(49) ASGC 720.

(50) ASGC 185.

(51) Const. 127.

(52) ASGC 720.

without a rudder. This specious decentralization would open the door in more than one place to a situation of disorder and decay.

Here are a few items for self-examination on our organizational responsibilities, especially at the provincial level:

— The Provincial and his Council have greater powers regarding the appointment of Rectors and Novicemasters.(53)

— The Provincial Chapter is more important and possesses a new function.(54)

— The method of formation and the programme of studies are established by the Provinces.(55)

— Consultations are held for the appointment of Provincials, Provincial Councillors and Rectors.(56)

— Structures of government in the Houses may be altered.(57)

— Assemblies of members have important functions.(58)

Following this letter is an appendix with a list of decentralization items decided on by the SGC. Even if it be incomplete, it presents much matter for self-examination. It shows how important it is for all concerned to face up to these responsibilities seriously and efficiently.

Take for instance the consultations all confrères are asked to participate in. If every member answered with serenity, with only the welfare of the community in mind, he would make a valuable contribution to the choice of suitable confrères for the various « services » to the community. There should be no taking the easy way out by abstention; no personal feelings that are purely human or factious.

(53) Const. 112, 183, 187.

(54) Const. 117, 180, 193.

(55) Const. 106.

(56) Const. 169, 174, 183.

(57) Const. 187, 189.

(58) Const. 194.

Then there is the vital matter of our personnel in formation. A lack of confrères capable of giving them genuine training; a set-up that takes no account of the special needs of our men-in-training, neglecting the very fundamentals of Salesian formation—these are real and fatal vacuums, and the result will be a lamentable decline in our mission and a distortion of our image and identity.

The same tragedy would result if the novitiate (through place, personnel or programme) were deprived of its important function. And one could add other instances.

The SGC has passed on many tasks to the intermediate structures. You will naturally appreciate how hard we must strive, at the various levels, to make sure that they are carried out according to the spirit and the reasons for which they were requested. This is the way to make decentralization efficient and give a real fillip to that unity which is our quickening element.

Turning intermediate structures to best account

Another important matter to be organized as part of our decentralization has to do with certain intermediate structures such as Provincial Conferences and Groups of Provinces. These are not just nominal get-togethers; they must form a genuine nexus in decentralization and should be fostered, encouraged and exploited with enthusiasm, sacrifice and capable personnel.(59)

Similarities, affinities and cultural conditions do not necessarily coincide with the confines of a Salesian Province; indeed sometimes the opposite is the case. Hence every Province should study local human needs and consult other Provinces with similar problems. It is for this purpose that the last few years have seen the setting up of these Provincial Conferences and Groups of Provinces. They are still in their early stages but they have a

great potential. For instance they could do much regarding the confrères' initial and ongoing formation.

We could well ask ourselves if we are giving them the importance they deserve.

3. TOWARDS A CAMPAIGN OF FIDELITY

Let us get down to practicalities and work out a campaign for all — each according to his own particular function in the Congregation.

We have to tune in to one another and combine our forces, and make our plans in fidelity to our common vocation in the Church. The work we do and our mental outlook will draw each individual to one pole rather than the other; but we must all join forces and achieve a balance between the two.

I repeat what I said at the beginning of this theme: we must not approach this matter with the idea that decentralization and unity are mutually opposed. As we weigh the requirements of each, our attitude should be favourable and positive, without bias or polemics. When faced with either of the errors (even if only potential) of schism or stifling centralism, we must not ignore the dangers I have mentioned—but neither should we assume an attitude of attack. Our duty lies rather in working together in harmony so as to foster the values inherent in both unity and decentralization.

Indeed a campaign of fidelity implies an energetic initiative and a keen sense of evaluation that will balance out the « forces in tension », promptly close any breaches and get to the heart of the problem. This means hard work: observing, thinking, gathering information, making contacts, engaging in dialogue and achieving a long-sighted view of wide horizons that will make our organizing enlightened and efficient. This is a grand work, especially for those invested with the ministry of authority, no matter at what level.

Tension and charity

It will help to remember that the « unity-decentralization tension » is part of the « sacramental » nature of the Church—and also, by analogy, of our Congregation. This is where docility to the Holy Spirit comes in; for this tension is basically a « spiritual fact », and not a sort of fashionable concession. For this reason it must live in the aura of charity, which means putting the spiritual perspective before any technique or human vision. Therefore: the Eucharist must be the centre of our lives; (60) we must pray fervently for God's action in the Congregation; (61) we must foster and defend the love of God in our Houses and Provinces as the source and manner of our Salesian brotherliness.

My dear confrères, once again I repeat: there is only one way to build a fruitful unity with efficiency—it is a spiritual way that corresponds to the nature of our vocation, which is a « spiritual fact ». Any other way means sterility, emptiness, decay.

In this regard Blessed Michael Rua cited article 7 of the then Constitutions: « All the members shall live together in common, bound only by the chain of brotherly love and the simple vows, a chain which unites them in such a manner as to make them one in heart and soul in order to love and serve God ».(62) Then he added, « These words come from the heart of Don Bosco burning with charity. They show us that while charity is the essence of Christian life, even more is it the soul of the Religious life ».

« These few lines sound the characteristic note of our Society. Without mutual affection, without being united in the same spirit, Salesians would eke out a wretched and unhappy existence. Living together in such numbers they would still be isolated and their work would bear no fruit.

« All the efforts of our Superiors are brought to bear to avert

(60) Const. 61

(61) Const. 58.

(62) Const. (new) 51.

so great an evil. Visits, conferences and rendicontos have as their purpose to unite us in one heart and soul. This is the reason why I write circular letters to you several times each year ».(63)

As the SGC gauges the situation

The SGC documents may have their human shortcomings; but it is essential to consider them as the focal point for all confrères if we wish to attain this harmony and unity in our decentralization during these days of divergent thought and opinions.

The Constitutions define the General Chapter as a fraternal assembly of Salesians and « the principal sign in the Society of unity and diversity ».(64) The deliberations of the SGC were the fruit of much preparation, study and hardship; they involved the worldwide participation of our confrères; they must be for every one of us the point of convergence par excellence. They form the common ground we stand on—love for Don Bosco. Here is our common meeting-place for young and old, no matter how varied ideological differences may be, for « under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the entire Society, through its General Chapter, seeks to ascertain at a given moment of history, the will of the heavenly Father so as to serve the Church better ».(65)

It is the important duty of every Province and local Community to see that all changes are constantly verified and checked against the components of our Salesian identity as set out by the Chapter, viz., the sense of the presence of God among us, our mission, our Salesian spirit, our own style of religious life, the family spirit in our common life, our preventive system, and so on.

When communities measure their activities against the norms of the Chapter, they should not leave the task entirely in the

(63) Don Rua: Circular Letters, p. 446 et seq.

(64) Const. 151.

(65) Const. 151.

hands of a particular or private group, for this would run the risk of being subjective; the process should be put on an official and community level so as to ensure that the findings are reliable and objective. The studies and opinions of experts are certainly useful; but they always require (especially in certain cases and situations) the judgement of the Rector Major and his Council. This is the only way to be definitely sure of the authentic validity of any change; it is the criterion of identity for certain pluralistic situations.

The SGC has put in the spade work; but our checking and comparing is not therefore a cut and dried affair, for it is a case of constant measuring against vital realities in rapid evolution, against local and personal situations that bring to light our « two poles » in a new dimension. Detailed and careful examination must be carried out in a positive manner and with spiritual vision. This will prevent us from adopting a legalistic and « go-by-the-book » attitude, and our work will be thoughtful and stimulating, leading to the rediscovery of the magnificent values of Salesianity, its attractive and enthusing aspects, its elements so full of promise. It will ensure that the process of change will acquire the quickening realization and development of the special identity given us by God and manifested in Don Bosco.

Fostering unity

Our campaign of fidelity requires a new dedication that is more aware and energetic so as to quicken and activate our Salesian identity. Here are a few pointers that should be of practical help. They will strengthen the unity that is born of the harmonious development of the two poles and so it is essential that they function well. Their importance is emphasised by the number of times the SGC returned to them.

— There should be « frequent and fraternal exchanges with other provincial communities and with the Rector Major ».(66)

— « This unity should be maintained and advanced by means of suitable and efficient structures of co-responsibility, formation, communication, government and exchange ».(67)

— « This communion is increased by our spirit of solidarity with one another, participation in the apostolic interests of the Society, communication and the exchange of information regarding the work of the confrères, and our union with the Rector Major and his Council ».(68)

— « The Rector Major will keep in active contact with provinces, houses and members. He shall seek the collaboration of all, promote meetings, spread knowledge of the apostolic work of the Congregation ».(69)

We find the documents of the SGC constantly concerned with the need to foster and strengthen the contacts and exchanges between the periphery and the centre—in all sorts of suitable ways. No matter where we are, we must feel *and really be* a Congregation, a community of men who live and work in vastly different lands but who are conscious of being an integral part of the one body, sharing, giving, receiving its life-giving Salesian values.

Meetings and gatherings

Regarding the many different kinds of meetings to be arranged by the Rector Major and his Council, we are working out a general plan, integrated and gradual. This will be discussed in good time with the people concerned so that the gatherings will meet the needs of all parties concerned.

We know from experience just how useful a meeting can be when well prepared, with good practical agenda and in which specified problems are proposed for examination, discussion and solution. And there are other advantages too. Much good comes

(67) ASGC 137.

(68) Const. 56.

(69) Reg. 95.

from personal contacts, living in community, praying together, exchanging experiences; and dialogue is always fruitful when carried out in a spirit of communion that tries to fathom and respect those values that sustain and enliven our vocation and enrich our mission.

Similarly in the case of Provincial Conferences and Groups of Provinces, meetings arranged between different sections are very helpful.

As is the case with all our activities, these initiatives require discretion and a sense of proportion. We do not want to develop « meeting-itis », holding meeting after meeting on every conceivable theme. This only wastes time and money, and the meagre results are not worth the trouble.

But it would be wrong and harmful to neglect those properly organized meetings which experience tells us are fruitful and irreplaceable.

Circulation of Salesian news

The SGC more than once insisted on the need for communication and information as efficacious and necessary means for unity in the Congregation—after all, to share such knowledge is elementary and basic. We are scattered over five continents and our family tradition clamours for family news: the joys, sorrows, initiatives, trials, problems, achievements. We want to know what is going on in that great and complex family which is the Congregation.

The Salesian, like any other person these days, is continually bombarded with all sorts of information from the varied and complicated instruments of the mass media—news that is put over with technical finesse and that demands his attention, often disturbing and distracting.

The consequences for the religious life are often more serious than would appear. It has been said that the TV permits us to know what is happening on the other side of the world and

prevents us from knowing what is going on under our very noses. The mass media inundate us with a flood of news from everywhere, so that we run the risk of finding our interests outside the house and becoming indifferent to our own community; we are ignorant of the very things that should be nearest our hearts—what is happening among our own confrères.

If this became our sad lot, then the image of the Congregation would blur, we should lose our esteem for the Salesian mission, and our bonds with Don Bosco and the Church would weaken.

On the other hand, a regular and stimulating flow of news about our Congregation will enliven our Salesian ideals, help us « to belong », and strengthen the communion and unity of our Society.

Hence local Superiors must take to heart the matter of Salesian news. It is their task to see that the news channels are open and efficient; they should widen and multiply them. And especially should they see that there is a place for « Salesian news sessions ». Not very long ago, when the mass media were not so well developed and all-pervading as today, these « Salesian news sessions » had their proper place in the personal and common lives of Salesians. I wonder if we can say the same today!

There are many causes why a Salesian might fall away or even leave the Society: it would be a pity if one of them were the lack of a binding fraternal spirit and its resultant loss of the sense of belonging to the Congregation.

Let us then see that Salesian news is duly circulated. (It is obvious that charity or prudence may counsel some exceptions, of course.) This circulation demands communion among the confrères, i.e., a give and take in brotherly trust and family spirit, bearing in mind that all must be for the building up of the Body of Christ and the good of the Congregation. Even the inevitable unpleasant things that happen can be turned to good account as warnings and hence a spur to charity.

The Acts of the Superior Council

There is another important facet to our communications. Our Congregation has its own spirit, its own style and mission, and it is plain that those who carry the primary responsibility for not wasting these riches and keeping them vital and active always and everywhere, should use the most fitting means in their duty to reach everybody.

One of the main means of informing the confrères and passing on directives that circumstances dictate for the fostering of community spirit and unity is the Acts of the Superior Council.

Admittedly the Acts are still a long way from being the perfect article; but they are a valuable and irreplaceable service which we have tried hard to improve. The translation into the principal languages of the Congregation is a step forward, and progress has been made in their timing and punctuality. While there is room for improvement in the content there is surely matter in every issue that is of interest to a Salesian. We shall welcome any useful suggestions that would make the Acts more interesting and vital.

However it must be added that all efforts to improve the Acts are useless if they are not read. Unfortunately one hears from time to time that they do not reach the confrères or the community. This means Salesians are being deprived of a very important source of family information, with all the negative consequences I have spoken of.

My dear confrères, I am sure you must agree that any Salesian news is worth our special attention—indeed our preference. Basically it is a matter of love for our own spiritual family, our mother the Congregation. The more we know about it the greater the love we have for it. But we cannot love what is unknown to us.

It is only to be expected that to care nothing about what goes on in the Society must weaken our attachment and esteem for the Congregation and its interests, our sense of communion

(which is the source of our vital energy), and finally our sense of vocation-identity.

While inviting every confrère to read the Acts, I must also insist with Provincials and Rectors to take practical steps that they be read in our communities, and certain parts of particular interest or importance commented upon. The Spiritual Reading period prescribed by the Regulations would be an excellent time for this.

Provincial newsletters

At this point it seems natural to put in a plea that information be sent to the Generalate fairly frequently. We heed these contacts, letters, etc. News is thus passed round, ideas penetrate; and these things make an organization like ours (working in all continents in such diverse ways) feel and work as one single body in its spirit and its methods. And here I must congratulate and thank the many Provinces who send us their news letters. It is pleasing to see the constant effort to improve them.

You will have noticed that the Acts have added a new section for the news letters, inserting excerpts that seem especially interesting for other Provinces.

Some have tried out the idea of enlarging the horizons of their news letters to include Salesian matters of general interest—an excellent idea.

Brotherly Solidarity

A most efficacious and practical expression of our family's universal communion is Brotherly Solidarity—brothers helping less fortunate brothers, materially or otherwise.

This kind of giving is particularly valuable when it is regularly the fruit of renunciation and sacrifice, zealous enterprise, services, etc., on the part of confrères who wish to realise and share the needs of others.

Our well-known Solidarity Campaign has been running for some years, and many Provinces have given more than material help to those in need. Unfortunately not every request can be met adequately, and this is all the more distressing when the need is great.

A striking fact about the Solidarity Fund is that quite a few of the poorer Provincial communities have made considerable personal sacrifices to help others. It is quite moving to receive their contributions and to read of the sacrifices entailed. These confrères live in extreme poverty; and in gratitude for what help they have received from the Solidarity Campaign, they are humbly desirous in their turn to do something for their more needy brothers. Truly, the greater the poverty, the greater the sympathy for others in need.

The fund is always open, and I do not need to insist that all Provinces take part in contributing. These pages record my thanks to those many Provinces who have already planned their spiritual (especially Lenten) and charitable help; and I hope no Province will fail to participate. It is not a request for alms: it is a conscious act of giving and receiving whereby we create and strengthen a practical bond of charity throughout the Congregation—all of us are the richer for it. It would be worth while reading what Don Rua wrote about the « fraternal charity drive » he organized in 1898 to help the house in Concepcion, Chile.(70) Its ideas and sentiments are valid even today.

Knowing Don Bosco better

Returning to our beginnings will re-engender our enthusiasm; (71) and this will be greatly aided by the « Institute of Salesian Spirituality » and the « Don Bosco Study Centre » which

(70) Don Rua: Circular Letters, p. 305.

(71) ASGC. 186-187.

will normally function at the PAS beginning this present academic year. There is a lot of ground to cover before Don Bosco is really and completely known: it is an activity to be organized gradually and methodically, stirring up the interest of the younger generations especially, and setting up the most efficient means.

The person of Don Bosco, his work and his words, when studied devotedly, have the power to attract and unite. Unfortunately many Salesians, especially the younger confrères, have a lot of headway to make up—possibly due to a reaction (understandable in its way, but by now quite anachronistic) and maybe also to lack of adequate and suitable opportunities. Meantime those concerned should ask themselves what is being planned to make sure our novices and young men really get to know Don Bosco—not a mere superficial knowledge, not just his biography, but his thinking, his spirit, his methods, etc. I realise the many problems in actuating such a programme; but it is a fundamental matter for the life of the Congregation, so difficulties must not deter us: practical solutions just must be found. From the Generalate we shall try to help in every way we can. We must move promptly to restore this knowledge and enthuse the confrères, for one cannot value the unknown. Knowing Don Bosco is a key to unity, one of its basic elements.

Love for the Congregation

The expansion and cohesion of the Congregation in its golden era were mainly due to the esteem, dedication and filial love the members had for it. Basically, true love of Don Bosco cannot be separated from love of the Congregation—for taken all in all, the Congregation is the projection and continuance of Don Bosco in the world.

This two-fold love for Don Bosco and the Congregation was clearly manifest, and it encouraged many vocations, helped overcome difficult problems, welded the family into a solid unity, and

was the driving force for great undertakings. Despite a kind of superficial aspect which was understandable in those days (today it is called « triumphalism »), we are dealing with something of no small value, and it still exists. In the last analysis it boils down to love for the Spirit of the Lord who unites us, gives us our mission and helps us achieve it.

However this attitude is not an inborn sentiment; it does not come to us automatically with our religious profession; in some places nowadays it is not even fashionable. So it needs to be patiently inculcated and increased right from the beginning of our Salesian formation.

To this end it will greatly help to cultivate with serenity and fidelity what could be called the « magisterium » of the Congregation. Members should be invited and urged to integrate their acceptance of this magisterium by a personal study that prepares the ground for the official teaching to be carried out and assimilated.

Today when there is question of any kind of teaching that stems from authority, we are faced with resistance or reluctance. We must waste no time in discovering ways and means to render it acceptable — for it contains the principle of a greater guarantee of truth, a kind of ordinary hierarchical magisterium.

In Religion we school ourselves in the service of God: so contact with the Master, both ecclesial and religious, is necessary for life, for progress, for perfection. Those appointed for the purpose have the right and duty to clarify, expound and spread the magnificent ideas and essential principles that make for unity and imbue us with the Salesian spirit. If Superiors are « sanctifiers » first and foremost, they must logically also be « masters ».

Unity in our Superiors

We have from Don Bosco's own lips how concerned he was for unity when he thought of superiors in the future who would not have lived by his side and would not have enjoyed his

close personal friendship and the fidelity that went naturally with it.(72) In the history of the Society, this bond of affection between the Superiors and the Rector Major has always been a potent vehicle of unity and a means of battling through many difficult situations.(73) Today we need to renew these ties, especially on the part of the Provincials, their Councils, and Provincial Conferences. This will make for a strong and effective union of hearts, minds and wills ready to tackle our serious post-capitular problems and the risks involved in decentralization, so that the solid framework of the Congregation will not be damaged.

My dear confrères, this has been a long letter; but the theme is vast and involves the vital interests of the Congregation. For this reason I renew my request that you give your attention to these pages, re-reading, if need be, those parts that will be of practical help. We are faced with a problem that is far greater than mere « reorganization »; it is a case of ecclesial fidelity and spiritual docility to the Lord. The Congregation, the provincial community, unity and decentralization, centre and periphery, centripetal and centrifugal energies—these are all facets of a single reality which is at the heart of our very vocation.

Our belief involves all these things. Fidelity to Don Bosco these times is a daily challenge of initiative and deep faith. The future of the Congregation truly depends on the « sweat of our brow » and our loyal and irrevocable « choice to belong ».

May Mary Help of Christians attain for us the grace necessary to achieve this goal.

Let us be united in the Breaking of Bread.

Affectionately yours in Don Bosco,

Father LOUIS RICCERI,
Rector Major

(72) MB XIII, 885.

(73) Don Rua: Circular Letters, pp. 95, 182; and Don Ricaldone: Fidelity to St. John Bosco, p. 79 et seq.