

## I. LETTER OF RECTOR MAJOR

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Rome, January 1974

*My dear confrères and sons,*

I write to you still full of vivid memories of my recent travels abroad. The opportunity of meeting hundreds of confrères was indeed a great comfort to me.

You know of course that I attended the highly successful Latin-American Congress of Past Pupils; and took advantage of the occasion (with various members of my Council) to meet the Provincials of the Pacific-Caribbean zone.

The agenda had been drawn up by the Provincials themselves from current problems shared by all, and although it was a tiring week it was a fruitful one. A comforting feature remarked on by everybody was the spirit of Salesian brotherliness, calm frankness, and the all-pervading community prayer that inspired us throughout.

Without going into details I can certainly say that the meeting was of great benefit to all and will produce excellent results for the provinces concerned. It is worth adding that the experience of this kind of gathering is particularly important for the Superior Council for planning the general set-up and organization of similar meetings scheduled for the future.

### **Confrères in three continents**

My travels took in provinces in three continents: Latin-America and The United States (where I opened the large tech-

nical school at Boston); Australia (closing the celebrations for fifty years of Salesian work); and Thailand and Vietnam.

In all places I was able to meet great numbers of confrères gathered together for the occasion, provincial councils and rectors, and many other groups belonging to our Salesian Family.

It would not be possible to detail in these pages all that happened in each province (and for such information I refer you to our news channels). But I think certain points of very special interest should be noted here.

I was deeply moved and consoled when I visited the Mexican mission. Salesian confrères and Sisters, under the gallant leadership of our Bishop Braulio are sacrificing themselves in an apostolate that is rich in results. The Christian communities are indeed making a grand response.

When I went to Managua (you will recall that a year ago it was almost totally destroyed by an earthquake) I was able to see for myself not only the magnitude of the tragedy, but also the many human and social problems that have resulted therefrom. I could see how the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had promptly hastened to the aid of the many thousands of victims; and I witnessed their present intelligent and efficient efforts, as instanced by the professional training given to young men and women up to thirty years of age, whose only hope (destitute as they are) lies in the work of their hands.

In Vietnam I officially opened the new house of formation for our students of philosophy and theology. You will not miss the significance of this. While in various parts of the world seminaries and houses of formation are almost empty, this stricken country needs a new one! And many wonderful people have helped the Salesians to build it. Vocations are many. In 1952 the Salesians were two in number (confrères from China). They now number 112 and are practically all Vietnamese. And the numbers keep growing: there are nineteen

novices this year. The average age of the confrères is less than thirty years.

I wanted my presence to be an earnest of the recognition the Congregation has for the older confrères, nearly all of whom came from the Chinese Province years ago. They are pioneers — men of great faith. With untold sacrifices and with God's help they have created this extraordinary and consoling wonder. I also wanted to encourage the fervent young band of Vietnamese Salesians, whose training treads the path of their elder confrères.

You can realise how these visits have comforted me and brought me new hope. Of course I am also aware of the many difficult problems. One of these stands out in a special way and I want to devote this letter to it. I am more than ever confirmed in my belief (not that I ever really needed convincing) that this matter is urgent and involves the whole Congregation: the problem of the « workers in the vineyard ».

### **« Send us more Salesians »**

The joy I had in meeting so many Salesians was nearly always blurred by the fact that their numbers were so inadequate for the urgent needs of the moment and the vast development and consolidation the apostolate envisaged.

The plain fact is that, in the face of the work needing to be done, there is a depressing shortage of men, often to an extent that is overwhelmingly discouraging. My ears still ring with the sad request so often made: "We are short of men: send us more Salesians."

When I think of these dear confrères, often advanced in years and run-down in health yet so generously multiplying their efforts, I cannot allow their cry to go unheeded — both for their sake and the sake of the multitude of souls depending on them.

I hope many of you will offer your services right here

and now to our men on the missions. True, many provinces have not great numbers of confrères; but we know from experience that practical gestures of solidarity towards more needy provinces always bear fruit. There are confrères who entered the Congregation because they were attracted by the missionary ideal. Surely it would do good to all to help them realise their goal. I feel sure my invitation will be taken up by some generous and feeling souls — both on the part of the confrères who volunteer and the local superiors who must face losing good men.

The centenary celebrations of our missions are close on us. Surely our best way to celebrate would be to reawaken our missionary fervour and translate it into practical action. The Special General Chapter lists this as a most important element in our renewal.

However, the problem of the missions, viewed broadly, will not be solved by volunteers answering the Rector Major's call. Its roots go much deeper: it is, in the final analysis, the vital question of vocations — a distress the Congregation shares with the Church herself.

### **Tidings sad and joyous**

Before developing this theme I wish to recommend to your prayers two of our Salesian bishops who died recently: Bishop Borgatti of Viedma (Argentina) and Bishop Boric of Punta Arenas (Chile). I hope to be able to send you their mortuary letters soon. For the moment I must limit myself to begging your good prayers for these two worthy sons of Don Bosco who served their dioceses so faithfully.

Now the joyful tidings: two new Salesian bishops — Bishop Abraham Alangimattathil for the new diocese of Kohima-Impal (India); and Bishop Matthew Baroi for the diocese of Krishnagar, where he was already Administrator Apostolic. Their burdens are not light, so let us renew our good wishes and prayers.

And now the theme that lies so close to the hearts of all of us.

## THE CRUCIAL PROBLEM OF VOCATIONS

Many reasons urge me to speak of this matter, and they all come to the same thing. What follows is said in frank sincerity: I speak as a father to his grown-up sons and brothers.

It is no secret to any of us that the Church and the Congregation are suffering a dearth of vocations that is very noticeable and often frightening. Here are some facts regarding our Congregation. Since 1967 our novice intake has steadily diminished. This current year, when measured against our peak year shows a drop of 50% — and even these low numbers are mainly bolstered by the contributions of a few particular provinces only. Our annual statistics show that various other provinces are well down in novices — and some have none at all. This state of affairs cannot leave us at ease or indifferent.

True, this is something that is happening everywhere, and the causes (which do not all depend on us) are varied and complex. But, as Cardinal Garrone has said, the matter is one of life and death; so we cannot shrug our shoulders and say it can't be helped.

### Remedy-searching with the Church

During the last days of November the "International Vocation-Congress" was held at Rome. It was the result of four years of practical researching and consultation carried out in every part of the world; and it included specialists, delegates from episcopal conferences and Superiors General (men and women). In the light of extensive findings and experiences of the episcopal conferences, the members pooled their ideas in a profound study of the serious problem of vocations.

All this goes to show exactly what the Holy Father and the Congress both affirmed: the Church has no intention to sit back thumb-twiddling as though nothing can be done. On the contrary, it rejects out of hand any attitude of acquiescence. Accepting today's realities and using the experience of the last few years, the Church now offers us well-studied and efficient methods (being quite prepared to break new ground) for the fostering and developing of new vocations.

This must be our line of action too — for various and obvious reasons.

Above all we must be convinced that the Holy Spirit will assist the Church to find the vocations she stands in need of. (And the Congregation, being a living part of the Church, naturally shares her life.)

It is worth remembering too that Don Bosco had to contend with times and circumstances that were far from favourable to vocations. Yet he was able to inspire and develop no end of vocations for the diocese and other institutes. To the objection that today things are far more difficult than in Don Bosco's time one could reply that even in these days generous youngsters are to be found who are apostolic and deeply spiritual. And indeed there are several religious institutes, especially missionaries, who are getting many excellent vocations, and in places where we maintain they are not to be had.

### **We get the vocations we deserve**

If these findings and considerations ring true (and I myself believe they do), then it behoves us all to tackle the problem with complete intellectual honesty. We must not limit our examination to external family and social reasons (these are too often merely negative); rather, our first concern must be a courageous appraisal of ourselves as individual Salesians and as Salesian communities. We have to eschew the facile phrase, the com-

monplace argument, that is so full of excuses and dulls our personal and community conscience. The problem is one that interests and involves every one of us, as individuals and as communities, no matter what our status. My own lengthy and extensive experience has crystallized in recent years and leads me to pretty well agree with the statement that a community gets the vocations it deserves. My reason is that, although a vocation is not man's work, nevertheless grace acts by means of man. We see this happening every day.

Here I must make a preliminary clarification. Our diminution is not, and cannot be, the only motive prompting this letter — that would be an extremely short-sighted approach. The vocation apostolate constitutes for us an essential part of our renewal programme and our fidelity to our Salesianity and mission.

These motives urge me to dilate somewhat on certain notions that derive from the Church's magisterium, from the SGC and from our genuine long-standing traditions. We shall consider today's thinking on "vocation apostolate"; the close bond between the Salesian mission and vocational activity; the role of the aspirantate in vocation development, and possible corresponding (or "parallel") ways.

It is plain that the vocation problem engages our attention and efforts certainly because of our critical need, but even more so because of our mission to youth and our responsibility as Salesian educators according to the spirit of Don Bosco.

It is my sincere hope that these ideas will contribute to the renewal programme we are pledged to, according to the guidelines of the Special General Chapter.

## **1. THE VOCATION APOSTOLATE TODAY**

Our mission binds us to a total service that "covers all the true requirements and real needs of youth, in body, heart and soul. An integral formation requires as much as possible an

integral service” (1) that will guide the young person to Christian and human maturity so that he may continually increase his self-donation to God and his neighbour, and achieve “an ideal that constitutes the best expression of self-giving either in family life or a closer service of God” (2).

This “integral service to the young” is the very purpose of our mission.

I wanted to draw attention to this principle to make it clear right at the outset that the vocation apostolate (in its own right) has a place in our mission. One could go further and say that it *is* our mission, for it cannot be separated from our work for youth. As the Special General Chapter says, “This is the crown of all pastoral work among the young.” (3)

Today it is self-evident that the apostolate is either vocational or it is nothing.

It is indeed an important and delicate requirement in our educative mission.

### *Our education inadequate*

One may ask why there is the present vocation crisis in nearly every country. There are many causes, theological, psychological — all generally valid and not to be ignored; but I shall not go into them just now. Rather shall I adduce a cause that seems to get to the heart of the matter: our youth education has been inadequate; it has not been an integral education, at all levels, human, religious, Christian and social; we have not given our youngsters that help and direction necessary for the development of their whole personality while they are pursuing their life’s aim according to the will of God and their own proper talents.

(1) SGC n. 353.

(2) *Ibid.*, n. 354.

(3) *Ibid.*, n. 374.

Let us forget for the moment the responsibilities of other people (I refer to social changes, special circumstances, new customs, ideologies, etc.) and concentrate on where we Salesian educators have been found wanting. This may be painful: but it will show us where the remedy is to be applied.

There is but one conclusion: we have to be seriously, consistently, utterly faithful to our mission so as to achieve what Don Bosco wants of us — education with all its Salesian overtones.

### **The meaning of vocation apostolate**

All the foregoing makes it clear that when I speak of vocation promotion or apostolate, and when I urge that you put your heart into it, I certainly do not mean to reduce the apostolate to a mere series of devices for “vocation-fishing” just for the satisfaction of keeping our houses of formation full. The matter is wider, deeper and more substantial than that.

The vocation apostolate “consists in the action of the Christian community, organized by the hierarchy, with the aim that every Christian from his early childhood may develop his fundamental vocation to holiness and to the apostolate that issues from his Baptism. Thus he may be able to discover his own personal vocation and find the necessary conditions for maturity and perseverance.” (4).

Seeing that we are dealing with a theological reality (our collaborating in God’s action that at the same time deeply influences the destiny and life of man) it is necessary to bear in mind those theological premises that give this vocation work its true meaning. I enumerate three of them.

First, *the action of God*. Every vocation in the Church

(4) CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La preparazione al sacerdozio ministeriale* 1972, pag. 313.

comes from God. The Spirit appoints to each one his special charism. The calling to the ministry or consecrated life is an act of predilection: it is not man's decision or choice. "You did not choose me, but I chose you." (5).

Secondly, *the needs of the Church*. Vocations are for the Church, so that she may achieve her sacramental mission of saving the world. "God will not allow his Church to lack ministers," the Council assures us, referring to priestly vocations. (6)

"We must not minimize the difficulties of the present or the future," wrote the French bishops recently, "but the Church was sent to this world of ours in order to call it to salvation. It is for the world that the Church needs the vocations of all Christians, especially vocations to the ministry and the consecrated life. Throughout all today's difficulties, uncertainties and questionings God is present in his Church and in the world. In our world so full of hope and restlessness God continues his call so that the Church may serve the world he loves." (7)

Finally, *all vocations are complementary*. The purpose of charisms is "the renewal and building up of the Church." (8) The Church must grow and expand and achieve its destiny of being the community "of every creature."

The present-day theology of vocations gives great importance to this ecclesial purpose of all vocations, and it was emphasized too by the Council. All individual vocations converge in a self-completing inter-relation so as to do their part for the Church's one great mission. (9) Indeed, regarding this latter vocation-service, we must not forget that "vocations do not

(5) Jn. XV, 16.

(6) *Optatam Totius*, n. 6.

(7) CONFÉRENCE ÉPISCOPALE FRANÇAISE, *L'Esprit, le sens et les moyens d'une pastorale des vocations*. In *Vocation*, n. 257 (1972), pag. 20 & 9.

(8) *Lumen Gentium*, n. 12.

(9) Cf. *Ad Gentes*, n. 15; *Lumen Gentium*, n. 32-33.

compete with one another but combine their work within the Church and among men.”(10)

### **Objectives of vocation apostolate**

Once we have posited these theological premises, we may delve deeper and scrutinize the main objectives of the vocation apostolate. Here are two of them.

*The baptism-vocation must “come alive.”* The first objective of the vocation apostolate (in common with the general apostolate) is to have the Christian cultivate and live his fundamental vocation with conviction — his vocation to the faith, to be one of “God’s people.” “All the elect the Father predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son... He planned to assemble in the Holy Church all those who would believe in Christ.”(11) This summons is our most sublime and fundamental calling. There is no greater one.

“The outstanding cause of human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God.”(12) “The ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine”(13): to enter into the Paschal Mystery via the Church. This is another way of saying to enter into close communion with God and attain reintegration and glorification once and for all.

*Baptism and membership of the Church mean holiness.*(14).

What matters is that the Church be built up by the holiness of its members, the whole Christ living and present in the world. The task of all Christians (each according to his own state) is to strive daily to follow and imitate Christ. They

(10) CEF, *o.c.*, pag. 8.

(11) *Lumen Gentium*, n. 2.

(12) *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19.

(13) *Ibid.*, n. 22.

(14) Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 39.

must “follow in his footsteps and mould themselves in his image, seeking the will of the Father in all things, devoting themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour.” (15)

For a baptized Christian to “identify” in such a way is inconceivable without sharing in Christ’s mission. The Special General Chapter says, “Every baptized and confirmed person becomes a ‘Christian’ and receives his mission of contributing to the ‘sacramental’ function of the Church — that is, of bearing witness, as a sign of the mystery of Christ, and of serving as an instrument of his communication to man.” (16)

This is the basic aim of every apostolate, and, in practice, of the vocations apostolate: to help every Christian to live Christ’s mission, to make him aware that by baptism he has assumed responsibility to further and spread the Kingdom of God, to be holy and build up the Church.

### *Helping each vocation to develop*

The Special General Chapter continues: “However, all this is not expressed in a uniform manner, but according to a variety of different concrete vocations. The Church is a living reality and its functions are complex. It is animated by the Holy Spirit who appoints to each his special function in the Church: “first apostles, second prophets, third teachers.” (18)

Each member has his own place in the organism and performs his own function so that the body will develop, strengthen and reach perfection. The Holy Spirit “distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices

(15) *Ibid.*, n. 40.

(16) SGC n. 109.

(17) *Ibid.*

(18) 1 Cor., XII, 28.

advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church.” (19) The vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life thus fits into this wider area of the Christian vocation that has its roots in the sacrament of Baptism. (20)

Unfortunately many of us have often forgotten this. We have expected to find specific vocations where there was no clear awareness of the Christian vocation.

The vocation apostolate must be seen fundamentally as part of the general apostolate, with this difference, that it needs to be directed into a particular channel. There is no such thing as a “generic Christian.” Every person, at some specific time in his life, is called by God to fulfil some particular task in the Church, and he needs to find out what exactly it is.

This is precisely what the vocation apostolate aims to do: help each one to discover his personal vocation and perfect it.

### **Some characteristics of the vocation apostolate**

From what has been said we can draw certain important conclusions. First of all, the vocation apostolate takes on the aspect of an *educative service we owe to the young*. Indeed Christian vocational guidance is a pedagogical service that the young person has a right to expect from us (naturally with the proviso that his personal destiny is ultimately his own concern). (21) We should render wretched service to a youngster if we developed his character and talents and left it at that, so that, for want of being directed into his own particular niche, his qualities remained useless and unproductive for the Church and society. In the second place, the *vocation apostolate includes all vocations*. The Christian educator has the duty to see “that all the faithful are led individually to develop their own specific vocations accord-

(19) *Lumen Gentium*, n. 12.

(20) Cf. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, n. 5

(21) *Populorum Progressio*, n. 15.

ing to the Gospel and in the light of the Holy Spirit.” (22) Hence the vocation apostolate is concerned with all vocations, and cannot be reduced to priestly or religious vocations, and certainly not to mere “candidate-foraging” for one’s own Institute. A change of mind is indicated here (23) so that we can eventually accept the principle cheerfully that “all of us are responsible for all vocations.”

Finally, the vocation apostolate is a *specific action that favours sacred vocations*. We have established that youth apostolate properly understood is already a vocation apostolate, in that it makes the youth aware of God’s personal call, leads him to embrace his baptismal vocation generously, and inspires him to throw himself into the mission of the Church. It remains to add that this general apostolate must culminate in specific action in favour of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life.

One of Christ’s first concerns was to single out certain men from the crowds who followed him. These were to be the trained souls who would witness to his mission and carry it far and wide: they were his disciples and apostles. They received from him an invitation that was clear, explicit and deeply personal: “Come, follow me.” These Jesus cherished and trained with special care. Our way of acting should be modelled on Christ’s.

God gave his Church the task of calling suitable candidates, (24) and the Church must see to it that “in the People of God here on earth labourers are not lacking.” (25)

The whole ecclesial community is involved in the care and guidance of vocations: “The duty of increasing priestly vocations belongs to the whole Christian community,” we read in “*Optatam*

(22) *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 6.

(23) *Ibid.*, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 52.

(24) Cf. *Optatam Totius*, n. 2.

(25) *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 11.

Totius” (26); and Christians must achieve a “spiritual climate” so that their lives, sensitivities, prayer and moral education are all imbued with rich supernatural values.

Let us all look to the example of Don Bosco. He was able to create the perfect climate that brought forth priestly and religious vocations in abundance.

## **2. WHAT THE CONGREGATION MUST DO**

Vocational guidance thus takes pride of place in our Salesian mission. If the Congregation is to remain “Salesian” (that is, the Congregation founded by Don Bosco for the education of youth), guidance and promotion of vocations must be carried out in a big way.

We have seen that the vocation apostolate has a twofold dimension: generically it helps the baptism vocation “come alive,” and specifically it favours “sacred vocations.” Both these dimensions deeply concern our Congregation.

Seeing that the “vocation apostolate enlivens the Baptismal vocation,” it comes to be identified with our own Salesian mission. The Special General Chapter says, “Our Society, which has received the specific mission of evangelizing youth is called to realise this vocation work within the Church. In a particular way it has the mission of helping youths to define their own position and to discover their own roles in the human community and in the Church.” (27) And going a step further, caring for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life is just as essential to our mission, and is indeed the main aim of our Congregation. This statement is well supported by our Salesian documents.

### **The true Salesian must necessarily be involved in vocation work**

Our Constitutions make no bones about this significant work: “Let us seek to encourage the growth of lay, religious

(26) *Optatam Totius*, n. 2.

(27) SGC n. 662.

and priestly vocations to the apostolic life. Such work enriches the whole Church.”(28) The members of the Special General Chapter, too, showed their awareness of its importance; and various documents of the Chapter bear witness to their interest and study.(29) The Chapter calls the vocation apostolate a “privileged sector of Salesian action”(30) and insists that “this characteristic of our work must remain.”(31) It views the Salesian as urgently bent on augmenting the Body of Christ, concerned about the “pressing problems regarding priestly and religious vocations, the inspiring of layfolk to involve themselves in the apostolate and in work for the missions.”(32) It further adds that “an essential element of our pastoral activity and its natural consequence is the promotion and care of possible religious and priestly vocations and youth leaders. This is one of the more immediate and responsible services we can offer.”(33) It goes on to say: “Salesians should take special care to help in the formation of those the Lord has called to a total consecration to himself for an apostolic mission.”(34) And again, “Our schools will take the greatest care to seek and guide good vocations to the priesthood and religious life from among the half million boys who attend them.”(35)

The Chapter merely echoed the vocation aspect and the charisma of Don Bosco, who was convinced that he had received this mission from God. The Biographical Memoirs describe how

(28) *Const.*, n. 12. Cf. also *Const.*, n. 24, 29, 107; & *Reg.* n. 72. Also Letter of Father Ricaldone « *Formazione del personale salesiano* », in *ASC* n. 78 (1936), (well worth reading).

(29) *Document I*: n. 50, 61-65, 99. *Document II*, n. 220-223, 235-236, 250, 258. *Document IV*, n. 374, 382, 397; especially *Document XIII*, n. 662, 673-684.

(30) *SGC*, n. 65.

(31) *Ibid.*, n. 50.

(32) *Ibid.*, n. 99.

(33) *Ibid.*, n. 397.

(34) *Ibid.*, n. 662.

(35) *Ibid.*, n. 382.

the sorry social and religious atmosphere of Don Bosco's times was so antagonistic towards vocations, and goes on to add these words (which have always impressed me): "Priestly vocations among the young were practically at rock-bottom... To fill up the vocation gap seemed a task that was humanly impossible. But Don Bosco felt that God had entrusted him with the mission of supplying this desperate need in the Church, and did not hesitate." (36) These words are not a biographer's imaginative wanderings. We have them confirmed by Don Bosco himself four years before his death in a precious document we could call his paternal will and testament: "God called our humble Congregation to promote ecclesiastical vocations... Let us recall that we present the Church with a great treasure when we find a good vocation." (37)

In one of his circular letters Don Rua spoke with intense feeling of his responsibility to the Congregation, exhorting all Salesians to work ardently for vocations. I feel the same zealous conviction that Don Rua had, and consider it my duty to "bring all my thoughts and energies to bear on caring for vocations. Without this concern our Congregation will languish and would not be doing the work of our Founder." (38) I repeat here what I said to the Chapter members: "I am utterly convinced that the peak of the Salesian community's pastoral activities has to be vocational guidance." (39)

### **The community's responsibility**

One of the great finds of the Special General Chapter was the value and importance of the community. It maintains that "the mission is confided principally to the community."

(36) *MB*, 5, 388-389.

(37) *Ibid.*, 17, 262.

(38) MICHAEL RUA, *Lettere Circolari*, pag. 187.

(39) *Relazione generale sullo stato della Congregazione*, CGS Roma 1971, pag. 107.

The mission of the Congregation “is entrusted not to the individual but to the whole Congregation and to its provincial and local communities.” (40) The community that is responsible for vocations (41) is not just the universal Church, or the diocese, or the local Churches, or the parishes. It extends also to religious communities at all levels, to Christian families, educative communities and apostolic associations. It must be insisted that every community is a “sacrament of the universal Church” and hence receives a call and must answer it.

The community is the suitable ground, the seedbed where plantlings thrive. Using these principles, today’s thinking affirms that a vocation cannot develop and mature without the community. The community element belongs to the very nature of a sacred vocation; its birth, its growth, its purpose, its fruitful performance — all depend on the community. The community cannot stand aloof: the call is addressed continuously to the community by the very fact that it is a community.

Many Provincial Chapters have shown a good understanding of the foregoing and have gone into the matter accordingly. The Provinces as such and all the local communities, conscious of being trustees of the mission of both Church and Congregation, have risen to the occasion. Whether vocations were plentiful or scarce, whether a crisis existed or not, or whether the task was difficult or easy, made no difference to them.

Each community has to make a genuine effort to revitalize itself (for this is a “must” if vocations are to be had) and work out a detailed programme for the vocation apostolate.

The first condition for this is to be community-conscious and desire to build up the community at all costs; and this includes the religious community and the educative community (42) (the latter embracing lay collaborators, pupils and parents). (43)

(40) SGC, n. 29.

(41) *Optatam Totius*, n. 2.

(42) SGC, n. 357.

(43) Cf. *Ibid.*, Document 8 *The community of brotherhood*.

“In this way an atmosphere is created in which vocations can grow.” (44)

### **Every Salesian is responsible**

All Superiors ought to feel involved by the Council's call. “Christus Deus” reminds them that “they should foster priestly and religious vocations as much as possible and take a special interest in missionary vocations.” (45) Their special task is to inspire and co-ordinate.

Remember the words of Pope John: “The problem of ecclesiastical and religious vocations is a daily concern for the Pope.” (46) Please God all in authority may feel this way. May their concern elicit, as it did for Pope John, “earnest and fervent prayer from the longing depths of their souls” (47) that the vocation apostolate be given its rightful importance. It needs our hearts, our minds and our strength.

The Council then turns to all educators, insisting that they “strive to educate the young people confided to them so as to enable them to discover God's calling and follow it generously.” (48) We are all in this category — priests, brothers, young and old, superiors and non-superiors — for we are all educators.

*Priests* have a special responsibility, for “this is part of their actual priestly mission.” (49) “As educators in the faith, priests must see to it that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to develop their own vocation as required by the

(44) Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 507.

(45) *Christus Dominus*, n. 15.

(46) *Optatam Totius*, n. 2. note 3.

(47) *Ibid.*

(48) *Optatam Totius*, n. 2; cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 24; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 11.

(49) *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 11.

Gospel.” (50) It is hard to see how our consciences can rest easy if our pastoral ministry lacks this aim and the driving urge to achieve it.

*Brothers*, as Salesians and Religious are just as much involved in the vocation apostolate as priests. I mention them specially to emphasise the fact that the lay vocation is every bit as important, valuable and attractive today (indeed moreso) as when Don Bosco conceived and introduced it. Rethinking has greatly enhanced the value of the layman in the Church and society, and this offers the Salesian lay vocation greater possibilities and a wider field of action. To quote the Special General Chapter: “In promoting vocations, let us not forget our own vocations — Salesian priests and Brothers; and they should be given equal importance.” (51) It is fundamental that our Brothers bear witness.

### **Specialists are needed**

There is no lack of desire or will to throw oneself into this interesting and necessary work; but often people baulk at it through fear of not going the right way about this delicate task. They feel inadequately prepared; they would like to have a more solid background in theology, psychology, pedagogy and so forth. Some lose heart when their efforts are not successful; others are bewildered when they come up against certain complex situations or meet with opposition. Others again work enthusiastically but not always according to judgements and methods that are sound and well-chosen. They push on in a confused, hit-and-miss sort of way, sometimes off the track altogether, with no idea of the Church's directives today or the safe tenets of pastoral theology and sound psycho-pedagogy. Hence the need

(50) *Ibid.*, n. 6.

(51) SGC, n. 692.

for specialists and vocational services that are well organized: so we must turn to our provinces and houses and make use of our competent delegates, promoters and directors (and indeed these will often be the very ones in charge of the vocation apostolate). Then there are our various services, centres and trained staffs, all organized for promotion, guidance and vocational work.

Terminology varies according to time and place. The important thing is to clarify the specific functions of such persons or groups: whipping up awareness, interest and involvement, undertaking formation, organization of projects and activities, co-ordination, aid, information, study and reflection — in fine, everything that goes to make up the methodology and ascetics of vocation promotion.

It would be a bad mistake, however, to conclude that these people are the only ones responsible for vocations, and that communities and individuals may therefore off-load their personal responsibility. These trained people are not meant to shoulder our labours. They are not expected to work in direct contact with the young. Their mission is to act as delegates and animate the apostolate of the communities and individual confrères and give them every possible help.

According to the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, these organizations should have the following aims.

— To stir up vocation interest in every pastoral activity.

— To study the most efficient activities and try them out — this to be carried out to suit the different circumstances, places and persons, especially, the different age levels.

These activities consist mainly in:

— prayer (always the chief means);

— appraisal of conditions;

— training of responsible personnel;

— spreading solid theological knowledge regarding vocations, the ministry, the consecrated life;

- employing more apt means of communication;
- contacts with selected youth groups;
- perfecting personal and group methods of study and guidance, with vocations in view;
- ways and means of supporting and keeping in touch with the better youngsters until their possible entry into a formation centre. (52)

To achieve these ends we should employ everything useful that modern psychological and sociological findings have to offer. (53)

### 3. Planning for vocation activities

God is the prime mover in the field of vocations; but, far from excluding man's help, God expects his solicitous, generous and intelligent collaboration, a collaboration preceded by reflection, study and prayer. We need to analyse the situation, discover what is necessary, fix our targets, decide what methods to adopt and propose ways and means.

Through the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, the Holy See has asked the episcopal conferences to carry out a wide consultation and deep study of vocations, and to elaborate national plans that meet the specific religious and social conditions of each nation. These plans are to be based on the teachings and pastoral norms of Vatican II and subsequent documents, and their results are to be checked regularly. (54)

This certainly brings home to us the necessity that each Salesian Province or Region look to its own special conditions of life, and work out practical lines of action for the vocation apostolate.

(52) Cf. *Encl. 3, letter n. 418/70/153*, 10.3.1971, pag. 19-20 (roneoed).

(53) *Optatam Totius*, n. 2.

(54) CARD. G. GARRONE, *Lettera ai Presidenti delle Conferenze Episcopali*, 10.3.71.

### **A few norms for planning**

— Our planning should *keep in mind the joint apostolate* and work in harmony with its organization and all facets of ecclesial action. We must not play a lone hand. We have to take cognizance of the various doctrinal, spiritual, psychopedagogical and organizing aspects. This planning has to form an integral part of our youth apostolate. (55)

— *Our planning must be down-to-earth* and eschew all that is airy-fairy. There is no getting away from the fact that we move about in an ambient that leaves much to be desired (social, political, cultural and religious problems, especially among the young). We have to acknowledge the more urgent on-the-spot needs of the Church and the Congregation, and harvest what material, human and institutional means are available. These are the realities we must start with; and when they are very unfavourable we are going to make slow progress. The first hurdles have to be overcome, greater sacrifices and dedication will be needed, together with a deep faith when faced with the prospects of no immediate results. Nevertheless it would be useless and harmful to work any other way.

— *Our planning must be practical.* We cannot be satisfied with mere analyses and general principles and conclusions. Real solutions are wanted; guidelines and goals have to be mapped out; and they must be clear, progressive and adapted to the various situations.

— *Our planning requires regular checking.* This should be done on the personal, local and provincial level and should not be limited to immediate results and numbers (which will generally not be forthcoming for some time, anyway). Rather should we examine what real efforts have been made, the enthusiasm, the difficulties that have cropped up and ways to improve the procedure.

— *Our planning must be ecclesial.* It must be in step with the Church, not narrow and hide-bound, not behind closed doors; but wide open and ready to collaborate with other efforts the Church is making in the diocese or country.

— *Our planning must be Salesian.* It must be imbued with Don Bosco's charisma, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit for the enrichment of the Church. Hence it should have the following traits.

— It will fit in with the principles of our Preventive System: our sacramental and Marian pedagogy, joyousness, optimism with the boys, our presence among them that educates and makes for inter-personal relations. (56)

— It will show a natural preference for vocation work among the pupils in our schools, colleges, youth centres, clubs, parishes, etc.

— It will envisage co-ordination and collaboration with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

— It will engage the rest of the Salesian Family in this vocation work: Co-operators, Don Bosco Voluntaries, Past Pupils, and all who are within the Salesian sphere of influence (pupils, parents, teachers, people in Salesian parishes, The Association of Mary Help of Christians, and other apostolic movements dependant on us). (57)

### **Our Salesian way and the Preventive System**

All our educative activities (and hence our vocation apostolate) is based on the Preventive System. We should feel the need of re-examining it and giving it a new pride of place among us. (58) This was Don Bosco's contribution, his "little grain

(56) Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 363.

(57) Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 357.

(58) The European Convention on the Preventive System is being held at this very time here at the Generalate (31 Dec. to 5 Jan.). It is organized

of sand to help in educating the young" (59); and "educating" for Don Bosco meant educating the whole person. "For an educator, the good of his pupils means everything, and so he is ready to put up with all hardships and fatigues to attain his end: their social, moral and scientific education." (60) The result of this integral education is that the young assume their proper place in Church and society. Don Bosco puts it simply: "The people educated according to this system are useful citizens and good Christians; they hold respectable positions and lead good lives." (61)

Don Bosco owed his success to the fact that his heart grieved for these abandoned and bewildered youngsters, for their waywardness that could compromise them in the next life. So he never let up in his work of education and guidance; he was a true martyr to the cause.

The Preventive System gives great importance to *human formation* (physical, psychic, intellectual and social), *Christian formation* (moral, spiritual, liturgical, sacramental), and *vocational guidance*. (62)

Paging through the Biographical Memoirs we see that Don Bosco made use of, and bequeathed to us, all the resources that our modern vocation apostolate demands. "Let us practise the Preventive System," he said, "and we shall have vocations in abundance." (63)

We could list these resources thus: an accurate and progressive catechesis, a deep and active liturgical, sacramental and spiritual life, optimism, joyousness and the witness of the educator

by the Commission for Youth Apostolate in collaboration with the Higher Institute of Pedagogy of the Salesian Pontifical University. I look forward eagerly to its possible follow-up in other continents.

(59) *MB*, 13, 918-923.

(60) *Ibid.*, 13, 922.

(61) *Ibid.*, 13, 922-923.

(62) *Ibid.*, 13, 918-922.

(63) *Ibid.*, 17, 262.

(that is, his active presence among the boys, his obvious virtue, his total dedication to the pupils, and his respect for their personality and freedom). Other corollaries naturally follow: sharing ideals, participation in apostolic work, encouraging formation and activity groups, the conviction that there is no substitute for prayer, and so on.

Let us examine these means. After all, if we really want to work we must know what tools to use and how to use them.

### **An active and progressive catechesis**

Catechetics well presented will keep the Christian's conscience ever alert to his baptismal state. It puts him in close and personal contact with the Word who unites and animates his Church; it keeps him involved in achieving the Church's mission according to his personal vocation. (64) To catechize and evangelize mean to announce the living person of Christ, to help people meet him and experience the powerful attraction and fascination and infinite kindness of this most complete Person — the only one who can obtain from the young a response that cannot be gainsaid .

Our catechesis will respect the growing-up process and will clearly and adequately present the different vocations the Holy Spirit inspires in the Church. The youngster may then search out his own personal vocation whereby he may serve God and man.

We should fail sadly and render a disservice to our pupils if our catechesis did not fulfil this requirement. It would be like describing the beauties and riches of a land to our boys and leaving them to drift about in a sea of confusion with the risk of never reaching it.

(64) Cf. *Italian Episcopal Conference: Il rinnovamento della catechesi*, pag. 33.

In our pastoral teaching we have ample opportunity to instruct our pupils, their parents, our past pupils, Co-operators and parishioners on the basic points of vocation; and they are opportunities we should take full advantage of: religion classes, sermons, hearing confessions, giving spiritual direction, talks and conferences. Other excellent occasions are the preparation and administering of baptism, matrimony, holy orders and religious professions.

### *Sacred vocations*

In presenting to our charges the various vocations we shall of course be enthusiastic and objective in pointing out the spiritual excellence of each. And when we treat of sacred vocations it is only natural that we should evince a special care and interest in them. This method will save us from the error of tub-thumping like a hard-sell TV advertisement. We need to be quite concerned about the way these vocations are spoken of, and the reasons are obvious: people find it hard to understand their significance, and there is much ignorance about them. Also in recent times people have valued them less, partly because the married and lay state have been doctrinally upgraded. And the inherent renunciation in sacred vocations is another difficulty.

Let it not be laid at our door that that someone has missed following the Lord "more closely" simply because he did not know of something we should have taught him about vocations. If a young person knows the path there is always the chance that God may invite him to walk along it.

### **Deeply spiritual life**

No Church directive, no principle of the vocation apostolate forbids Religious to publicize and encourage esteem for their

own Religious Family, provided this be done prudently, (65) without competitiveness, and within the bounds of that universality we keep referring to.

We should show scant justice or gratitude to the Holy Spirit who raised up Don Bosco, if we neglected to make him known by the practical witness of our lives and by word of mouth. It is the will of the Holy Spirit that the Salesian charisma be conserved in the Church, and it is our duty to make it known through Don Bosco and his Congregation.

Don Bosco, saint of giant stature, colossus of holiness, tireless in activity, prodigal in his work for poor youth, great-hearted sharer of the hopes, perplexities and joys of youth — this “other Christ” has inspired and still inspires thousands of young people to consecrate their lives to the service of the poor.

And we must publicize the Salesian charisma through the Congregation. There should be no triumphalism — nor should there be false humility. Our attitude is that of people who know they have made an excellent choice and wish to share it with others. We simply take a page from the Gospel, “that (people) may see (our) good works” and be drawn to collaborate with us in our style of life, to “give glory to (our) Father who is in heaven.” (66)

### **Youth involvement in the apostolate**

Most people today live in a worldly atmosphere of materialism and neo-paganism: hence it is well-nigh impossible for youngsters to hear God's voice. “The turmoil of life, the vacuum left by rejected traditions, the often harmful pressures of our environment — all these things make interior silence a problem. It is more

(65) *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 24.

(66) Matt. V, 16.

and more difficult for our consciences to hear the voice of the Lord.” (67)

This situation has to be corrected as soon as possible — purified and spiritualized, so that our young people can appreciate supernatural values and see earthly things and events in the light of faith.

This is Don Bosco’s pedagogy, and we know it is based on the sacraments, friendship with Christ (i.e., the life of grace), and devotion to Our Lady. These three realities of religion are not over-popular these days — even among some Religious; nevertheless, not only do I mention them, but I emphasise them with my firmest conviction and want you to give them your attention. Dear confrères, let us re-assess them, practising them according to Vatican II improvements, and allotting them an even higher level of importance. They have no substitute in our Salesian pedagogy, or in any apostolate for that matter. They are the “pillars that must support an educative building”, (68) and they are a most efficacious means for promoting vocations.

Every time Don Bosco proposed his “strategy campaign” for vocations (and he did it very frequently, speaking and writing to rectors, missionaries, parish priests — indeed to all) he always gave pride of place to “approaching the sacraments frequently.” (69) In a conference to his Salesians he said: “As far as we are concerned, the frequentation of the sacraments is the very basis for vocations. This must always be our solid and holy foundation.” And to show there was no question of mere ritualism and that it was essential to have freedom, good preparation and true practical principles, he added, “making sure that confessions and communions are well made.” (70)

(67) Card. G. GARRONE, *La Chiesa*, LDC 1972, pag. 141.

(68) *MB*, 13, 921.

(69) *Ibid.*, 12, 88.

(70) *Ibid.*, 14, 44.

### *Importance of spiritual direction*

Confession and spiritual direction are the best means to help young people open up to God's influence.

Vocations do not mature of themselves: they need help; and this is where "pastoral dialogue" comes in. Paul VI has rightly said: "Spiritual direction is going out of fashion; but it is necessary, and we must hold on to it with respect. It has nothing whatsoever in common with a domineering attitude. It is a matter of counsel, friendship, opening up the heart, and (something we must teach the young) self-examination... How many vocations are born at the sight of the poor, at the sight of the abandoned, at the sight of so much good to be done. And the one to point out these things and explain them to the young is the priest who befriends them, is their companion and brother, and who talks to them and directs their souls." (71)

These talks between priest and youngster are vitally important and have a definite influence on his Christian and human development. We cannot insist enough on these intimate, private and sacred contacts. It is indeed a serious matter.

Spiritual direction enhances many other means too — in a way it epitomizes them and often takes their place. A suitable atmosphere for vocations means an atmosphere of real Christian living that is mature and responsible and capable of a truly dedicated choice; and to create this, these means play an especially important role: retreats, days of recollection, special times of enlightenment during prayer or listening to the Word of God. Don Bosco was well convinced of their importance and we know how diligently he used them.

### **No substitute for prayer**

Another key point. The normal way, the main way the Holy Spirit's call comes is through the good example of a vocation

(71) *Paul VI to members of IV World Vocation-Congress.*

well-lived. "Where we see a priest or a group of priests giving true witness of faith, piety, fidelity, zeal; where a religious community is dedicated to its sacred duties, lives together in complete harmony, is open to the world without being swamped by a worldly spirit, and is obviously faithful to the Gospel counsels — it is almost impossible that there should not be vocations." (72)

### *The example of everyone*

"The example of good priests, the value of good works seen in religious institutes, these have a considerable influence — I would say an overwhelming influence. It is through a priest that Christ says "Come, follow me" to his future minister. And it is the same with religious vocations." (73)

### *The example of the community*

"A community that does not live generously according to the Gospel will be a community short of vocations. But wherever daily sacrifices keep the faith vigorous and maintain a deep love of God, priestly vocations continue to be numerous." (74) "It can be said without a doubt that what matters for people today is personal example, and especially the good example of a group of people." (75)

These are statements that must set us thinking.

### *The message par excellence*

I repeat that the community is the normal channel for God's call, and the Special General Chapter document on "Evange-

(72) Mons. CARRARO, *Una pastorale delle vocazioni rinnovate*, in *Atti della XII Assemblea generale CISM*, Roma 1972, pag. 65.

(73) Paul VI: *World Vocation-Week Message*, (in *Teachings of Paul VI*, 8 (1970).

(74) PAUL VI, *op. cit.*, pag. 191.

(75) Cf. CEF, *op. cit.*, pag. 11.

lization and Catechesis” bears this out convincingly: “Communities united fraternally in charity and pledged to the service of all men and united by their faith in the Eucharist, become in the eyes of the world the supreme message, which brings with it an evangelization power that man can only resist with difficulty... The strong attraction and conviction radiated by Don Bosco and his community at the Oratory were the fruits of an exceptional witness on the part of both Salesians and boys.” (76)

This is our own history, factual and genuine. Thank God it repeats itself in many communities today; and I am sure that a universal effort would extend it to the whole Congregation. The best vocational guidance we can give, the best recommendation for our Congregation, the most convincing invitation to embrace our life, is our own example. (77)

We are all aware of what this involves. Let us really make the effort, personally and as communities, and God’s help will not be wanting.

### *Harmful example*

It is all-important to rid ourselves of certain very harmful things that frequently work their way into our lives: the soft and easy life, lack of respect for things ecclesiastical and religious, insensitivity to the problems of other people, the habit of bitter and destructive criticism, compromising between God and the world (with its corollary, superficial piety), dodging our duty under specious pretexts, and “worldly” attitudes.

The antidote for this travesty of the priestly and religious life is to live the evangelical counsels. The vocation crisis according to Paul VI is a crisis of credibility. Certain young people no longer believe in the values of the consecrated life because

(76) SGC, nos. 294 & 295.

(77) Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 24.

they see the opposite of what is taught. It is up to us to restore its credibility by our practical lives.

It is the same with our Salesian life. Perhaps it is time we gave renewed importance to virtues such as the family spirit, hard work, bold apostolic creativity, the fight for purity, devotion to Mary, loyalty to the Pope.

The problem of identity comes in here — priestly, religious and Salesian identity. This has played a great part in defections and fall-off in vocations both in the Church generally and in our own Congregation. Fortunately the difficulty seems to be working towards a solution today, thanks to the recent deep studies made by the Church and Religious Congregations, and the common effort for renewal. Certainly there is no lack of clear teaching and practical guidelines. It is a case of studying these documents with interest and enthusiasm.

### *Youth involvement in the apostolate*

This is a necessary step to take. In this way a youngster begins to practise his Christian vocation and identifies himself with the Church's mission. By gradually putting him in direct contact with the material and moral needs of his peers and people in general, we help him gather experience in his own personal Christian life; he discovers Christ in others; he feels more responsible in his mission; and if well directed by his educator, he dedicates himself more and more to developing the grace of his Baptism and Confirmation.

This is the place for group dynamics. Group work has a value all its own in spurring on vocations, especially when it aims at formation and social and apostolic service. Modern psychology finds in these groups possibilities and resources that are of tremendous help in the self-education of the young and their development towards maturity. We must give them special attention and help.

This is exactly what Don Bosco's sodality groups were — they formed characters, stirred up zeal for apostolic work; they were a schooling process for convinced Christians; they turned out young apostles and priestly vocations.

Indeed the sodalities have a history rich in vocation. We read in the Biographical Memoirs, "By means of the Sodalities Don Bosco unobtrusively drew to the Congregation young lads in whom there was high hope. The novitiate was not a new world for them — they arrived already well prepared by the training of the sodalities." (78)

For some years many of our houses have replaced the sodalities with modern "group-work"; but in lots of cases they have not functioned efficiently. This may be due to untrained leaders, unsuitable times for meeting, or possibly vague notions about structures and aims .

Similar movements have been set afoot lately both within and outside our houses, their aim being to promote the apostolic formation of boys, youths and young adults.

This valuable educative and pastoral means must undergo a regular, honest and sincere appraisal so as to use it in the new modern style without losing any of the content and purpose it had in the mind of Don Bosco. (79)

### *No substitute for prayer*

Last but certainly not least we come to prayer. Prayer is so important that without it all the other means are useless. A vocation is a mysterious right God reserves for himself. All vocations come from him; and this great and only "caller" calls with complete liberty. Yet God wills the mediation of the Church: not only does the Church call in the name of God; she also asks him for vocations.

(78) MB, 11, 226.

(79) Cf. SGC, n. 357,366, 368.

Christ's vocation programme was twofold: he saw the need and scarcity ("The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few"), and he indicated one single way to meet the problem — prayer ("Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest").

It is in prayer and meditation that God's call is heard and understood; (80) it is only this contact with God that can elicit an assent that is decisive and without conditions.

As I have mentioned in another letter, (81) there is no doubt in my mind about two things: first, amongst the various causes of loss of vocation, the main one, always present, is lack of prayer. And secondly, prayer is absolutely necessary if our mission is to be realized (and mission implies vocations).

It has been rightly observed that the crisis in vocations has coincided with a general falling-off in piety both in the Church and in Religious Congregations; and this has brought with it a consequent diminution in prayer. I put the greatest importance on this relationship between prayer and vocations. We too are undergoing the greatest vocation crisis we have ever had. These last years have shown us for the first time in our history a graph of the Congregation that not only did not rise or even remain stationary, but actually fell.

I know our interest and preoccupation should not lie in numbers; but they are a pointer — we are aware of the spiritual and religious problems that accompany defections and a falling intake of novices.

We must pray to God every day, humbly, intensely, explicitly; we must all pray together; we must storm heaven on such occasions as World Days of Prayer that are set aside for vocations, seminaries, missions; contemplative vocations. We have to go further: take ourselves in hand and immerse ourselves in prayer so as to learn the will of God.

(80) Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 11.

(81) Cf. *Letter on prayer*, in ASC (Jan. 1973).

#### 4. THE ASPIRANTATE - NEW EXPERIMENTS

It is not enough to awaken the keen desire in a young man to give himself to Christ's mission and to bring him to the point of considering the possibility of a divine call to total consecration. It is not sufficient to discover in him the inclination, the desire, the talents that are reckoned as signs of a vocation.

A possible or incipient vocation has the need and the right to be helped along its journey to confirmation and maturity. This is a difficult, complex and delicate process — moreso when it concerns pre-adolescents and adolescents. Sometimes their plans for life are mere wishful thinking.

A seed is a possibility yet to be realized. If it be neglected, it may yet develop by itself; but it may also die. It is the same with a vocation. It is a dynamic reality; it is born and it develops — but it can also fail to develop. It is patent that it needs to be cared for, and certain means and structures are required so that it may mature.

This could be considered the most delicate part of the vocation apostolate — a job for an artist.

#### **Aspirantes are still valid**

An important word on aspirantates. I know that for some years they have been highly criticized and have been in a parlous state. The result is often confusion and discouragement. It is well known that many accusations are laid at the door of the aspirantate. I list a few.

— They mass-produce standardized, depersonalized types, lacking in "human" formation, and with a load of frustrations such as infantilism, idealization, and lack of initiative, responsibility and objective criticism.

— They favour an other-world spiritually, life being artificial and enclosed, not participating in strong Christian experiences.

— They breed class-consciousness and a sense of being a privileged group, as a results of being trained into an easy, comfortable clericalism without social relations.

— They cause serious temperamental deficiencies because of the segregated life that hinders integration and arrests the psychological development of the young.

It could be granted that in certain respect these accusations could be valid in occasional circumstances and practical situations; but one may well doubt their accuracy and authenticity. They are over-generalizations and have become universal catch-cries; and they display an impressive mental laziness.

It is all-important to make an honest examination as to whether the educative defects attributed to aspirantates are inherent in them as such, or rather whether they are common to many other pedagogical or educative institutions for the young. The answer does not do away with the faults; but it does throw light on the attitude we should take — we should not rush in with ill-considered decisions that do nothing to right the wrong but rather create worse ones.

### *Destruction is not the answer*

In many places the first consequence of these uncritical judgments has been to eliminate the aspirantate or reduce it to an "ordinary college." This decision is too facile a solution to be valid. Destruction is not the answer. Destruction creates nothing.

Cardinal Gonzalez Martin, in a recent pastoral letter, has written about a similar institution, the diocesan seminary: "In the years following the Council the imagination baulks at how much has been written, said, done or permitted regarding the seminary. If an historian were to summarize it all, it would amount to a documentation so complex as to set our heads spinning — and in some cases it would fill us with remorse and shame.

Side by side with praiseworthy efforts at renewal we find witless proposals that unfortunately have considerable influence in many places. This sort of thing, together with other causes, has had an alarming effect: the ever-growing crisis in priestly vocations.” (82)

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, studying these matters from its excellent vantage point, has come up with some thought-provoking reflections. Cardinal Garrone writes, “The only safe course in these troublous times is to cling to the means the Church judges necessary, constantly trying to perfect and update them according to the thought of the Council. If there are some non-seminary vocations, they are exceptions.” (83)

Much the same may be said of our aspirantates. Uncritically damned, they have disappeared in one way or another. Nothing positive or constructive has replaced what has been destroyed.

The loss of aspirantates has meant the loss of many valid and positive elements. It would show a distressing disregard for facts to overlook the many benefits both Church and Congregations have gained from aspirantates and minor seminaries. They have promoted enormous numbers of vocations; they have enriched the world with legions of genuine apostles, missionaries, saints, noted scholars, and fine social reformers. It has yet to be seen whether so much excellent yield will be forthcoming without the help of this kind of basic vocational education.

### *Renewal is the answer*

I am certainly not advocating that we should hold on to the traditional aspirantate or minor seminary regardless. But I do maintain above all that our criticism should be just, calm

(82) Card. MARCELLO GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, *Un seminario nuevo y libre* (pastoral letter). Toledo 1973.

(83) Card. G. GARRONE, Toledo 1973, *op. cit.*, pag. 142.

and objective; that we eliminate anything that hinders the efficient running of the aspirantate, and insist on a high standard in accordance with its scope and importance. Renewal is the answer.

The overall picture of Vatican II is renewal, not destruction; and this is assuredly the Church's practical directive for the minor seminary. In "Ratio Fundamentalis" we read, "The Council has certainly established that it be completely renewed, but has also declared that it is still valid for our times, and suitable for cultivating the seeds of a vocation." (84) In drawing up their National Plans for the vocation apostolate, many Episcopal Conferences have recognized this. Anyone who follows up this matter will note that in books, reviews and conventions there is now an authoritative and responsible call from the People of God and from scholars (even including "the opposition" of a few years back) to recognize its validity; and its reinstatement and improvement are forecast. Naturally this does not preclude other ways as well.

Cardinal Gonzalez Martin has written the following about the seminary (which we call the "aspirantate"): "Statements like the following are just not true: 'Minor seminaries are not needed'; 'The important thing is to form good Christians and vocations will follow'; 'Pupils in a minor seminary must live the same way as those in other colleges and institutes'; 'There is no point in favouring a life of special piety'; 'One shouldn't speak to them of the priestly vocation till they are grown up,' etc. This is a distressing mistake to make: a mistake, because it is not the thinking of the Church; distressing, because it is scotching the opportunity of using legitimate means to offer more priests to the Church." (85)

Thus it is not a case of shutting off roads. Rather should the existing ways be levelled out and widened to make them

(84) *Ratio Fundamentalis*, note 60.

(85) Card. GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, *op. cit.*

more speedy and efficient; and new roads should be opened up that answer to needs and conditions when and where they occur.

The Church not only validates this one particular way, but gives it special pre-eminence. No one must permit its destruction, for it is a support and inspiration for other ways. (86)

We are on safe ground here. The Church, on the basis of secular experience, recommends certain types of formative institutes such as aspirantates, convinced that if they undergo adequate renewal they will be pre-eminently suitable.

Our Special General Chapter was in step with this when it asserted: "The aspirantate, as an environment characterized by an intense vocational guidance, is still a valid form to help the young to discover their own vocation and respond to it with a well-informed awareness." (87)

Our Regulations too have summarized the Council's directive: "The aspirantate is a centre for vocational guidance (and should be sufficiently open and maintain family contacts) where young men who show an aptitude towards the religious and priestly life are helped to understand more easily where their calling lies, and then correspond with it." (88)

On the other hand, the Regulations recognize and extend to each Province exact responsibilities in the vocation field: "Let each Province establish within its own limits the criteria, methods and organization for the training of vocations." (89)

### **New aspirantate parellels**

A recent document states that while the Church recommends minor seminaries, she does not oppose the "simultaneous" trying out of other methods suited to foster vocations, "provided the

(86) Cf. *Ratio Fundamentalis*, n. 12.

(87) SGC, n. 662.

(88) Regs. n. 73.

(89) *Ibid.*, n. 72.

minor seminaries do not suffer thereby; and these new experiments must be organized with prudence, to suit the aims of sacred vocations, and not be a mere covering excuse for giving up the minor seminary.” (90)

The word “simultaneous” is worth noting. The mind of the Church is clear: by all means use the new methods; but in such a way that they do not substitute, but complete and help, the aspirantate (which after all has stood the test of time).

Up to a few years ago young vocations were directed, practically, without exception, to the aspirantate (or “minor seminary” or “apostolic school”). Today there are other forms being tried out in parallel with these — some of a permanent nature, others temporary, and differently organized according to the circumstances of the local Church. (91) These institutions carry the explicit recognition of the Church (92); and the Special General Chapter has also referred to them, taking a positive attitude and recognizing the principle of plurality in the training of vocations. In the document dealing with “Formation to the Salesian Life” we read: “The following can be suitable and sufficient environments to help attain vocation maturity... the family, the school, associations and youth groups of a formative and apostolic character.” But the proviso it posits is all-important: “Provided a young man finds the right conditions and assistance.” (93) This is absolutely essential. These environments cannot be rated suitable for helping vocations if the young men do not actually receive the spiritual, cultural and Salesian help they need. It stands to reason, then, that not every school, group or community is suited to impart the formation required for the calm, free choice of a vocation.

Our aim should be to make every community a genuine

(90) *Ratio Fundamentalis*, note 60.

(91) Cf. *Optatam Totius*, n. 3; *Renovationis Causam*, n. 4, 10-12; *Ratio Fundamentalis*, n. 11-17.

(92) Cf. *Optatam Totius* & *Ratio Fundamentalis*.

(93) SGC, n. 662.

centre, capable of imparting to its young men three necessary elements:

— a suitable *environment of psychological freedom* that will neutralize the negative pressure of the sociological context in which we live. The world pours forth its flood of suggestions and inducements in one direction only, and this is a great hindrance to a free religious choice;

— *the example of good Salesians*. To form and guide young men, members of a community must, by their good religious life, their presence, and the way they act, relate to them personally, and help them work out their life plans by enlightening them in a practical and personal way;

— *meeting other young people* who have the same ideals. This will enrich them humanly, socially and spiritually, and will prove a great help in their inevitable conflicts and crises as they clarify and develop their vocations.

Just as the suppression or non-existence of such initiatives “would gravely compromise the future,” (94) so also the choice of one or other of the above methods and the creation of other new ones cannot be a light decision. They cannot be looked on as matters of indifference or valid for all places everywhere. Less still should we start up new ventures, allowing ourselves to be led by the nose by pressures from within or without, or by a mania for getting rid of all that smacks of the past, just for the sake of trying out something new.

It is a distressing experience to witness the anguish of some Providences who jettisoned their aspirantates and substituted them with other methods considered better in every way. Surely elementary prudence demanded that nothing valid should be abolished until there was something more valid to take its place!

We must examine seriously whether what we wish to introduce can give us the necessary guarantees. Let us get busy

(94) CEF, *op. cit.*, pag. 17.

and see that these institutions are really capable of genuinely helping vocations, that those in charge are themselves excellent examples of good vocations and are well able to pass on to the candidates that cultural, human and spiritual nourishment to which they have every right.

### **Forging ahead with Don Bosco's determination**

I cannot dwell on the practicalities of renewal in our vocation apostolate and our aspirantates, nor the detailed examination of other possible forms which can accompany them. This is the task of the Provinces themselves. But I beg that it be done calmly and with a deep sense of responsibility. Our motto for 1974 (bidding us intensify the vocation apostolate) will spur us on.

I invite every Provincial and Rector, with their councils, the delegates of the youth and vocation apostolates, the staffs of the houses of formation, to deepen their knowledge of the Church's doctrine and directives regarding vocations. Let everything be based on the documents of the Council and the hierarchy, the Special General Chapter and the magisterium of the Congregation (especially as promulgated in the Rector Major's letters).

I beg you to give serious attention to the actual situation in your own Provinces or Regions; try to examine what each member can do to feel responsibly involved; then go ahead courageously and put the resultant findings into practice.

For many Provinces the wheels were set rolling by the deliberations of their Special Provincial Chapters. Others have yet to make a start.

There are Provinces where the job has been tackled intelligently, confidently, wisely and courageously, and results are already in evidence. They confirm the wisdom of the measures taken and are a beacon of hope for us all.

Go ahead then dear confrères with the faith and determi-

nation of Don Bosco. Your love of the Congregation will spur you on.

May 1974 be for you a year that is genuinely "holy," a year of fervent and fruitful activity in the Salesian apostolate; and may your community enjoy that spiritual conversion and reconciliation with God and neighbour as proposed by Paul VI for the fast-approaching Holy Year celebrations.

You are always in my prayers. Please pray also for me.

Father LOUIS RICCERI,  
*Rector Major*