

## I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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Rome, April 1974

*My dear confrères and sons,*

On the 3rd of April a hundred years ago the Church gave definitive approval to our Salesian Constitutions.

This centenary is an important and significant event for us and should be celebrated as such — just as every country solemnly observes the anniversary of its own national constitutions.

It is truly an historic moment for us Salesians, and indeed for others too, as we look back over the past hundred years of steady development and see its impact on the burgeoning forth and maturing of the Salesian vocation in the Church.

We have every reason to hope that with God's help the good work begun in 1874 will continue in the future, despite the problems that are inevitable in the life of man and the history of human and ecclesial society.

We have to realize, of course, that this will not happen of itself. It is not a case of physical cause and effect. The Salesian vocation received the seal of authority on that memorable day, and the fruits of its development are many: but they depend on the activity of man — that is, the many generations of Salesians called by God to take possession of this precious heritage. Church history makes this abundantly clear.

## **A fruitful celebration**

Looked at in this way, the centenary cannot be limited to mere sentimental reminiscences, or complacency in a rich and glorious past. We should feel the urge to further the development of all the spiritual and apostolic values inherent in our "Code of Life". In practice, for us Salesians of the seventies, the event should mean a life of motivated conviction and generous enthusiasm in the practice of the principles Don Bosco has laid down for us in the Constitutions. After all, we were fully aware of their import when we gladly and freely professed them as our safe and reasonable guidelines on the way marked out by our vocation.

Now it is exactly this that I am concerned about, and while inviting Rectors and Provincials to use all suitable cultural, spiritual and liturgical means to make the centenary fruitful and meaningful, I wish to put the following few thoughts before you. They will be appreciated by all who recall our origins so richly and extraordinarily gifted and full of teachings worthy of meditation. They will also help to motivate our fidelity to the Constitutions and render it convinced, loving and enthusiastic.

This re-awakening of loyal, sincere and effective esteem for Don Bosco, whose voice we hear in the Constitutions, is the very nub of the matter. It will give every Salesian and every community labouring in these difficult times that enthusiasm, generosity and joy in our vocation that was the distinguishing mark of the early Salesians.

### **1. DON BOSCO SAW THE APPROVAL AS GOD'S SEAL**

In a circular letter dated 15 August 1875, Don Bosco presented the confrères with the Constitutions definitively approved by the Holy See eighteen months previously, and spoke

to them in these words: "We should welcome this fact as among the most glorious in the annals of our Society, since through it we have the assurance that in observing our Rules we rest on a firm and secure basis..." (1).

The Congregation was approved on 19 February 1869 and the text of the Constitutions on 3 April 1874. For Don Bosco this was not just a simple act of recognition by the Church: it was the seal of God on his work; it was given by the hierarchy, "the indispensable means instituted by Christ to translate the message of the Word (2) into language we can grasp"; it gave authenticity to that first "dream" and the mysterious voice that guided him, in ways that were marvellous and increasingly clear, in founding his work for the young.

For Don Bosco this divine voice, expressed "in two different ways wonderful and converging" (3), was the soundest guarantee that this work, with all its difficulties, was truly the will of God. He knew that if he followed the ways so plainly pointed out by Providence, he and his sons would see the gradual realization of that vast and wonderful future that the mysterious voice revealed to him from time to time. No wonder Don Bosco and his successors repeatedly appealed for fidelity.

### **Fidelity to Rule and Mission**

The vast development of the Salesian work proved that this was no pious illusion. Father Rinaldi wrote to the confrères on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee, "In fifty years these Constitutions have meant the salvation of hundreds of thousands of boys... they have made saints of so many confrères: Don

(1) Appendix to the Constitutions, p. 233.

(2) Address of Paul VI on 5-5-65.

(3) *Ibid.*

Rua, Don Beltrami, Don Czartoryski, Dominic Savio — and numerous others whom we remember with deepest veneration, such as Don Bonetti, Don Belmonte, Don Sala, Don Durando, Don Lazzero, Don Rocca, Don Bertello, Don Lemoyne, Don Ceruti, Don Bretto, Mgr. Fagnano, Mgr. Costamagna, Mgr. Marengo, and most especially my predecessor Father Albera” (4).

Now after a hundred years, some of these names are to be found in the Church’s calendar, some have been declared Venerable, and others are no longer remembered; but the list could easily be updated with many names more recent and vivid in our memories. Known or unknown, they have left us “a great burgeoning of works and activities due to their zeal and sacrifice” (5) that have made the Salesian Congregation “one of the most notable, beneficial and promising phenomenons of Catholicism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (6).

These words fill us with pride — but we cannot let the matter rest there: we could well have qualms about the responsibility we have before God and our confrères who have gone before us. Among them were extraordinary men — yet the vast majority were just ordinary souls with their very human frailties. But they were men of fidelity; they handed down to us intact the heritage they had received; they trod the path Don Bosco pointed out for them; and God did not fail to work wonders through their humble labours.

Don Bosco had said, “Our Congregation has a fine future before it; and its glory will last as long as the Rule is faithfully observed” (7). Our future is a matter of fidelity — not so much to a code of prescriptions, but to the spirit and life that code expresses, contains and transmits.

(4) DON RINALDI, *Acts of the Superior Chapter*, n. 23 (24-1-24) p. 193.

(5) PAUL VI: *Address to members of XIX General Chapter*.

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) *Memorie Biogr.*, XVII, 279.

## The Constitutiones grew out of a way of life

Our Constitutions were indeed a way of life before becoming a written Rule.

Father Rinaldi wrote, "The Constitutions are the very heart of our Society; and our Society meant everything to Don Bosco. Indeed, in them we have Don Bosco himself. In them we find his great ideals: the salvation of souls, the perfection he sought through the vows, his spirit of gentle kindness, his tolerance, piety, charity and sacrifice" (8).

This spirit can be found in embryo in the "first dream" of the nine-year-old John Bosco when he was still living in the Becchi cottage under the educative influence of his wonderful mother. He saw, in a vague manner, his future mission; and Providence was to develop this first notion with gradual clarifications.

As he saw God's will more clearly, Don Bosco went ahead "calmly, without haste, but with wonderful constancy and tenacity, studying, consulting, praying, taking the first steps in founding the Society. And without noticing it, his men were being groomed long before the event. No mention was made of vows, ties, or Congregation" (9).

Don Bosco, could justly be called "the creator of his Society rather than its founder: he was able to work on his men, beginning from nothing, as it were, developing them and gradually imbuing them with his spirit." Father Rinaldi continues, "Don Bosco wrote his Constitutions in the practical lives and thoughts of his spiritual sons and only set them to paper when he saw that they were suitable" (10).

(8) DON RINALDI, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

(10) *Ibid.*

### 1874: definitive approval

In the 1847 Regulations for the Oratory we catch a first glimpse of a “written code” of the Salesian Constitutions (11). The tentative outlines of the future organism are indeed visible in the tiny cell of the Oratory of those days. However, the first true draft of his plan for a Congregation is that presented to Pius IX in 1858. Handing him the first sketch of our future Constitutions, he remarked in all sincerity that it contained the teaching, methods and spirit that had guided his Oratory helpers for twenty years (12).

Don Rinaldi made a good and authoritative summing-up of this draft of the Constitutions that described the character of the future Congregation: “Not constraint, but the bond of fraternal charity, so as to form one heart and soul; aiming to practise perfectly that spiritual and corporal charity towards the young and poor; carefully fostering sacred vocations; eschewing material things and living as though possessing nothing (even though retaining ownership rights); practising unselfish, generous and filial obedience that makes commands from a Superior unnecessary; not having many practices of piety in common, but living in complete union with God in the active life which is the distinctive feature and glory of his sons.

« Rather than found a Society, Don Bosco wanted a family based on a fatherliness that was gentle, loving and vigilant, and a sonship that was affectionate, filial and brotherly. He wanted authority and obedience, but with equality and no distinctions” (13).

This was the style of life written into the Constitutions; and in the various phases of approval it had to get by the restrict-

(11) Published in 1852; cf. *Memorie Biogr.*, III, 93 et seq.

(12) *Memorie Biogr.*, V, 881.

(13) DON RINALDI, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

ive ideas and Canon Law of the period. (On 23 July 1864 the Decretum Laudis was granted; 19 February 1869 saw the definitive approval of the Society; and 3 April 1874, the definitive approval of the Constitutions). Throughout all this difficult procedure Don Bosco was guided by his practical and adaptable nature, and most of all by his deep faith in the guiding hand of Providence.

From a purely human point of view it might seem that in all this reshaping of the Constitutions the more original characteristics of Don Bosco's project would have become blurred; but the eye of faith can see in this temporary redimensioning the hand of Providence: for the time was not yet ripe for them. Had Don Bosco insisted on every detail of his project, perhaps the Salesian Congregation would not have enjoyed that unified yet flexible verve and that prodigious development that characterized it.

## **2. A hundred years of fidelity**

Indeed 3 April 1874 was a decisive stepping-stone in the history of the text of the Constitutions. This text, now approved by the Holy See, became the constant point of reference for future generations, for it showed forth the characteristic aspects and the basic lines of the Congregation as the Founder envisaged it.

That 3 April, however, was by no means the end of its evolution. The text of the Constitutions had its origin in life itself, and continued to develop and adapt itself to new situations, keeping pace with the steady, vital growth of the Congregation. It was like a seed that, without changing its nature, sends up a slender shoot, and from a seedling becomes a mature plant and puts forth buds, flowers and fruit according to the seasons.

## Continuing development of the text

The supplementing of the basic project approved by the Holy See began during the life-time of Don Bosco and continued during the first years of Don Rua's period as Rector Major. These additions were formulated by the regular three-yearly General Chapters (1874-1904). Hence were added the special regulations regarding all Superiors, Rector Major, Provincials and Rectors, the houses of formation, and the norms for conducting the General Chapters.

These rulings were tried out for twenty-eight years, reviewed and co-ordinated into a single text by the X General Chapter, and only then were a number presented to the Holy See for approval. The latter were then incorporated into the Constitutions, and the others added to the Regulations.

Father Ceria, in the "Annals", describes the spirit in which the X General Chapter worked. In the lengthy and sometimes animated discussions there was not the slightest desire to innovate, but rather a constant and calm effort by all not to lose sight of the Rule given by Don Bosco (14).

Indeed the passage of the years had witnessed a steady growth. The small seed had become a tree. The Society had spread to distant corners of the globe. But the original cell had kept its nature as it grew in the structures and organization of houses and provinces. The same sap that nourished the trunk of the tree flowed also into the branches; sustenance for the whole tree was drawn from the same root — Don Bosco. And this Don Bosco was no figment of the imagination. He was very real: he spoke in the Rule he had given his Congregation; he lived in his successor. Don Bosco had quelled the fears people had expressed at his death, and had truly formed a solid, compact Congregation; he had created a "spiritual relationship, a family

(14) E. CERIA, *Annali*, III, 557.



in which could be recognized a particular type, a common style in its educative activity and other enterprises” (15).

*Certain distressing adaptations necessary*

The first General Chapters made notable contributions in the supplementing of the text of the Constitutions so as to keep pace with the development of the Congregation; and a similar capacity for adaptation was shown by the Congregation regarding the dispositions of the Holy See in matters of religious discipline. This certainly showed a total fidelity to the spirit of the Founder.

The most notable act of fidelity was shown in the revision of the Constitutions (19 July 1921) so as to conform to the Code of Canon Law. But this was not the most trying.

In the mind and practice of Don Bosco the Superior was not a bureaucrat or an official, nor a mere guardian of religious discipline: he was the spiritual father of the educative community; hence he was also the ordinary confessor. This followed logically in a Congregation that aimed at being a “spiritual family”.

For Don Bosco, the Congregation was very much a matter of the pastoral heart of the Superior, with his specific role of spiritual father of the community. He wanted the structuring to stress the primacy of persons over organization, charity over legislation, the spiritual and physical good of the members over economy and efficiency. This delicate balance underwent a crisis when the Holy See made the provision, wise in its way, forbidding a Superior to be the ordinary confessor of his subjects.

We can well imagine the distressing fears of Don Rua and the early Salesians in having to depart from this practice left them by Don Bosco. But total docility to the Holy See prevail-

(15) P. STELLA, *Don Bosco*, II, 406.

(16) *Decrees of Sacred Office*, 5.7.1899 and 24.1.1901. Cf. *Annali* III, 170 *et seq.*

ed — this was a precious heritage of the Founder to his sons, and he had given example in word and deed.

That was in 1901, and Don Rua addressed the members of the IX General Chapter in these words: "Take heart. We can be sure that prompt and perfect obedience to the Supreme Authority is the best way to receive God's blessing and ensure the advancement of the Congregation as God wills and as our father Don Bosco had in mind when he founded it » (17).

This matter was so important as to be called a turning-point in the Society's history; and the prompt and docile adherence of the whole Congregation to the directives of the Holy See was another instance of the solid spirit of unity infused by Don Bosco.

No less distressing for Don Rua and the early Salesians (and a sad day especially for the FMA) was the general reorganization of Religious Congregations of women (19). This meant the separation of the two Institutes founded by Don Bosco. Here too, despite the regrets of the Salesians and the fears of the Sisters, Don Bosco's ingrained spirit of faith prevailed in his children — God would not abandon the works he had raised up; indeed he made use of human instruments to bring them to even greater fulfilment.

### **Radical revision required by the Council**

The updating of the text of the Constitutions did not end with the 1921 revision. Nearly every General Chapter did some retouching, some supplementing, so as to suit the unified development of the Congregation. New articles were introduced into the Regulations to help direct and make practical the choices in the new situations the Society had to face. However, it is doubtful whether any General Chapter in history had to tackle

(17) E. CERIA, *Annali*, III, 189.

(18) *Ibid.*, III, 193.

(19) *Ibid.*, III, 645 et seq.

such an onerous task in the reshaping of the Constitutions as was required by the Church of all Orders and Congregations after Vatican II. (The relevant document was the *motu proprio* "Ecclesiae Sanctae".)

As time marches on the more profoundly do we realise the important influence this decision of the Church has had, is having and will have on the basic bearings of our Religious life. This is the first time in the history of the Church that Religious Orders and Congregations have been invited to undergo so profound a revision of life. Of course the Church had no intention to upset the fundamental values that have been the foundations up to then; yet this did not make the revision any the less radical — going to the very roots from which every Religious organization drew its life and continued to nourish itself: the Gospel, the charisms, the evangelical aims, the spirit, the mission of the Founder.

In the face of the novelty of the task it was natural to feel concern about tackling it, despite all the good will to act prudently and responsibly. Even though the Church laid down in "Perfectae Caritatis" and "Ecclesiae Sanctae" the basic guidelines for the renewal and adaptation of the Rules and Constitutions, there still remained a vast free area for choices of paramount importance and risk. No doubt this showed the faith the Church had in the Religious; but it was a severe acid test for all Institutes, for they had to gauge their own solidarity, solidity, maturity and responsibility.

### **The Church's directives for renewal**

Our task loomed forth in its enormity. The starting point was that all Religious had to take the Gospel as their "Supreme Rule" (20). The text of the Constitutions had to be re-thought

(20) Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 2 a.

and so cast that the Gospel-inspiration of the Religious life was made clear (as the Council had expressed it) according to the original project and the special mission each Institute had inherited from its Founder.

The Church directed that the Constitutions had to contain above all “the evangelical and theological principles regarding the Religious life and its union with the Church, and suitable and precise phraseology that recognized and safeguarded the spirit and purpose of the various Founders” (21).

“The juridical norms necessary to define the character, aims and means of the Institute” had to be preserved, but they had to be limited in number (22); all that was “antiquated or changeable according to the time”, or “bound up only with local usage”, had to be expunged (23). Any norms, then, that belonged only to the present moment or to particular circumstances, and which did not belong to the basic structure of the Institute, were to have no place in the text of the Constitutions but “had to be set down in supplements called ‘directories’, ‘customaries’, or some other such names” (24). In fine, the text of the Constitutions had to fuse together the spiritual and juridical elements so that the fundamental codes of the various Institutes would have an enduring basis and be imbued with a genuine spirit and vital norms (25).

Furthermore, that the Rule should be authoritative and stable, it had to be expressed in a way that flowed from “a need of life”. Hence the recommendation to “avoid drafting a text purely juridical or purely exhortative” (26). In fact, as Father Beyer SJ happily expressed it in an introductory conference

(21) *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, II, 12 a.

(22) *Ibid.*, II, 12 b.

(23) *Ibid.*, II, 14.

(24) *Ibid.*, II, 14.

(25) Cf. *Ibid.*, II, 13.

(26) *Ibid.*, II, 13.

to our Special General Chapter, the text "should serve as a manual of prayer". Indeed the real strength of the Constitutions lies not so much in their very necessary juridical dimension, as in their capacity to bring about a genuine vocational dialogue with God in accordance with the actual project they establish.

The form of government too was to be so structured that "the chapters and councils, each in its own way, should be an expression of the participation and concerns of the entire community" (27). The way to achieve this was to have the Religious participate "effectively in the choice of the governing bodies" (28).

Then, to make the exercise of authority more efficient, more realistic, more in touch with local circumstances, more expeditious and in line with modern times, the "various Superiors at different levels had to be granted opportune powers to avoid over-frequent and useless recourse to higher authorities" (29). This was an application to government-in-Religion of what had already been introduced by the Council into the government of the Church: participation, decentralization and subsidiarity.

The various Institutes, according to their particular missions, were to participate in the life of the universal and local Church, making their own and fostering the enterprises of the Church according to need (30).

Members of such Institutes, thanks to a deeper awareness of modern conditions, of men, and of the needs of the Church, should be able to "judge the present conditions of the world wisely and according to the principles of faith. Full of zeal, then, they would be able to help others more effectively" (31). In our case (being consecrated to the service of youth) this last principle of renewal laid on us the obligation of making a careful

(27) *Perfectae Caritatis*, II, 14.

(28) *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, II, 18.

(29) *Ibid.*

(30) *Perfectae Caritatis*, II, 2 c.

(31) *Ibid.*, II, 2 d.

appraisal of the signs of the times and a profound revision of our pastoral methods, so as to better fit ourselves to cope with the changing requirements of the young. (After all, they are the most sensitive of all to a world in radical transformation; and they are its first victims.)

### **Thorough and conscientious preparation**

Even this brief summary makes us realise the wide area of revision the Church required of every Religious Institute. For Don Bosco and his sons the voice of the Church is the voice of God. Not to heed it would be to betray the Spirit who chose us and our mission. It was not an "itching for reform" rightly condemned by Don Bosco. It was a question of fidelity.

We set about this enormous task with trepidation, well aware of our frailty, of the risks involved, of the difficulties that could hinder its success. But we put our faith in God's help, in the motherly protection of Mary, and the protection of Don Bosco and our saints, confident of their intercession.

The XIX General Chapter had already made a start on this revision. The touching-up of the text of the Constitutions was done in a small way, a notable innovation being the increased numbers in the Superior Council with the introduction of the Regionals, whose task it was to foster unity in decentralization and be a connecting link between the Centre and the periphery of the Congregation. But the XIX General Chapter's greatest contribution in the way of renewal was the selection of themes that were to be studied by the whole Congregation as it made its preparations for the XX (Special) General Chapter.

This preparation was extensive and conscientious; there was certainly no undue haste. There were three full years and two Provincial Chapters that involved the participation of all confrères in a consultation that had no precedent in our Congregation. This was a vital matter, a matter of our own lives offered to

God in the Salesian Congregation, and the fate of our young charges whose salvation would be greatly influenced by our renewal.

### **Initial bewilderment and fears**

The Special General Chapter took its first steps with some bewilderment and uncertainty. Our inexperience was justified by the complete novelty of the task we were given, despite our care to garner from the experience of others. The work clarified its direction and gathered momentum when, on 9 March, a month after its beginning, the Special General Chapter decided with near-unanimity to draw up a new text for the Constitutions. It was to be approved article by article by a two-thirds majority vote so as to better reflect the mind of the Chapter and carry greater authority with the whole Congregation.

As we look back, this stands out as an act of courage, given the uncertainty of the prospects confronting us. There would be long months of feverish work, with the inevitable tensions; there were so many aspects to be drawn together: fidelity to Don Bosco, to the Church, to our youth mission, satisfying the needs and expectations of the confrères.

Nevertheless our various points of view took second place to the all-pervading love of Don Bosco and attachment to his spirit — which consists, after all, in fidelity to God who raised up the Congregation, docility to the Church, and adaptability to the times and places of our work. The fruit of all this is now in our hands.

### **A text less juridical and more spiritual**

Every effort was made to compose a text that was less juridical and more spiritual, as the Church required. The “evangelical and theological principles” taken from the Council

documents concerning the Religious life were chosen and written into the text with sensitivity. Rather than rules whose existence and content depend solely on the will of a human legislator, the text presents us with life-values that issue from God's call and a divine mission.

All this was made possible by the will to work in communion and strive towards unity, endeavouring to understand the views of others. The individual articles were approved with well over the two-thirds majority. It had been thought that for special cases the two-thirds majority would have to be lowered; but this was quite unnecessary, as things turned out. Humanly speaking, the most authoritative organ of the Congregation could not have given a clearer expression of the will of the members.

The renewal of the Congregation in drafting the new text of the Constitutions is a determined act of fidelity to Don Bosco (32). It is a rediscovery of the basic values obscured by the barnacles and the wear and tear of time, a salvaging of Salesian values, such as the unity of the Salesian Family and a formation more in keeping with our active life (both of which could not be embodied in the old text). It is an assimilation of new values which tally with the former ones, carrying them on and extending them. The Congregation is a living organism and so could assimilate only what would contribute to its harmonious development, to its real growth, without compromising its identity in any way.

Of course, like all human things, the new Constitutions are capable of improvement. Deeper studies will be made of the Salesian sources, and there will be even greater fidelity to the Spirit who raised up Don Bosco and called us to share his mission. The Constitutions may well be bettered as a result of this and correspond ever more closely to the gift God has given to the Church and the world in Don Bosco.

(32) Cf. *Acts SGC*, Doc. 2.



The new text is the result of life and a giver of life; and like all life, open to further perfecting and development. Still, it contains and passes on to us the very same ideal of life, the very same mission to the young, the very same spirit that animated Don Bosco and his faithful sons. It is up to us to translate it into a living and dynamic reality just as the Salesians of the past hundred years have done.

### 3. THE RULE IN THE MIND OF DON BOSCO

Naturally we cannot reduce the life of a Congregation to mere written rules, even if (as with our new Constitutions) they “enshrine the spiritual riches of our Salesian tradition and are the basic norms for the life of our Society” (33).

Life is not made to suit the code, but the code to suit life. But life cannot do without concrete rulings: to neglect the norms that regulate the relations between the members of a Society would destroy the unity and cohesion of the life and existence of any community, no matter what kind — even a small domestic group.

These are the elementary truths that are behind Don Bosco’s insistence on the observance of the Holy Rule.

#### **That the Society may endure**

Don Bosco was eminently practical and attentive to the lessons of history and was deeply convinced that the observance of the Rule was “the only possible means to ensure the continuance of a Congregation » (34).

(33) *Consts.* 200.

(34) *Memorie Biogr.*, XII, 81.

In an important conference to Rectors in January 1876, a few months after presenting the confrères with the first text of the Constitutions (15 August 1875), he spoke about observance: "We are now no longer as in the past, when there was no Rule and only the Congregation was approved. We used go ahead with our traditional way of governing — a kind of patriarchate. That is all finished with now. We have to keep to our Code of Rules, study them in every particular, understand, explain and practise them. Instead of appealing to other authorities, we must always have recourse to the Rule. This will help the Rectors to govern in a fatherly manner as our tradition demands. When it is made clear that it is not the Rector who wants this or that, or advises this or forbids that, but the Rule, a member has no pretext for disobeying. The only way to spread our spirit is by the observance of our Rule. Not even good things should be done against the Rule, or without it. When enterprises are undertaken with good intention, but not within the ambit of the Rule, the result will be individual effort, not community effort. Now, the good expected of a Religious Order lies exactly in the fact that it is community-work; otherwise it would be impossible to pursue any enterprise with all one's resources. When the strict requirements of the Rule are rejected, and one member gets off by himself in this direction and another in that, the aim may be excellent, but it is individual. This is where discipline is relaxed; and the work will not carry the blessing of God as before. The need for reform must follow, and a Congregation is greatly weakened thereby, as we have seen in many Religious Orders. This is always to the detriment of souls, and destruction and ruin follow" (35).

The address is plain and simple and quite without our modern complications; but it is full of wisdom, truth and experience.

### *The Superior a model of observance*

On the same occasion Don Bosco explained his conception of the Congregation: a Congregation strongly centred in the Rule; the Superior a model of its observance; the Rule the binding and unifying force of the whole organism. He said, "The Superior must mean everything to us. All must help the Rector Major and sustain his authority, making him the heart and centre of all". And he added, "The Rector Major possesses the Rule. He must never depart from it. Otherwise instead of one centre there will be two — the Rule and his will. The Rector Major must be a model of observance; the Rule and the Rector Major must constitute one single unit. What holds for the Rector Major in relation to the whole Society also holds for the Rector in each community. He must be one with the Rector Major, and the members of his community one with the Rector. He too must be a "living Rule". All know that the Rule is the will of God, and that whoever opposes the Rule opposes the Superior and God himself" (36).

It is worth pointing out here that this principle is just as valid today, notwithstanding the fact that, to meet new dimensions and pluralism in the Congregation, certain competencies have been entrusted to Provincials and local communities (37). Decentralization does not mean anarchy, and pluralism is not to be confused with individualism. Both are quiet foreign to the thinking of Don Bosco.

### **The Rule the expression of God's designs**

The above quote from Don Bosco confirms the fact that he looked on the Rule, not as an abstract principle, nor the impersonal expression of a collective will, but as the the manifestation of the

(36) *Ibid.*, XII, 81.

(37) Cf. circular letter on *Unity and Decentralization*, Acts of SC, n. 272.

will of God, and the visible path that leads the vocations of all individual confrères to the one goal — the fulfilment in Christ of God's will; and this will transcends all and unites all in a single brotherly communion.

Perhaps it is in this perspective that we ought to see the incredible number of Regulations drafted by Don Bosco even for the humblest tasks. He was not prompted by a mania for rules. He acted out of his high regard for the worth of each individual who saw his personal duty in the community defined not by a whim but by a ruling from above (which made every Salesian community an organism whose life and activities were the detailed interest of God himself) (38). Don Bosco argued that precisely because the Rules were the expression of God's will, we were committed to observe them. On 30 May 1865 he put the question whether it was a sin to break the rules of the house. He answered it himself, "I have thought seriously about this and I answer definitely, yes. I do not say whether grave or light: circumstances must determine that. But it is a sin" (39). We should note that he is not speaking here of the Constitutions approved by the Holy See, but only of the internal rules of his houses.

One could make distinctions here; but the clear statement of Don Bosco is a significant testimony of his thinking and the training of his boys in holiness.

Don Bosco maintained that the Rules demanded fidelity insofar as they were the expression of God's design and will, and this is exactly how the Special General Chapter sees the matter. Speaking of signs that help us discover God's will, the Chapter indicates the Gospel as the Supreme Rule and the main specific means. Then it adds, "The Constitutions form another instrument which is specifically ours. They are, so to speak, our *Gospel viewpoint* for understanding realities in depth. The fact

(38) Cf. *Memorie Biogr.*, IX, 571-576.

(39) *Memorie Biogr.*, VIII, 132.

that they have been approved by the Church is a guarantee for us that they give us a practical and safe road to follow, while at the same time they unite us in a spirit of obedience to the Church” (40).

Viewing the matter in the light of obedience to the Gospel and the Church, one can easily understand Don Bosco’s contention that the conscious infraction of the Rule was a true act of infidelity to God, and not free from sin.

It should be clear to us how our Founder’s thinking is in line with the Council when we read the words of the Special General Chapter saying, “There are not two levels in this vocation: that of Religious life which is a little higher, and that of Christian life which is a little lower. For the Religious, the testifying to the spirit of the Beatitudes with the profession of his vows is *his* manner of living out Baptism and of being a disciple of the Lord” (41).

### *The Rule does not dispense with initiative*

The will of God, then, expressed through the Rule, did not, according to Don Bosco, relieve us of personal responsibility or initiative. It was not just a list of things to be done in a formalistic way; it was an ideal to achieve, a task to accomplish, a mission to fulfil according to the guidelines of the Rule, using all one’s personal resources and sense of responsibility.

Don Bosco’s thinking is better seen in what he did than in what he said: he entrusted tasks to the young that would have made grown men hesitate. He expected obedience that really proved the spirit of initiative and spiritual toughness in the most trying circumstances” (42).

A hundred years of tremendous development in the Society is the best proof that the past observance of the Rule has not inhibited originality or initiative.

(40) SGC, 630.

(41) SGC, 106.

(42) P. STELLA, *Don Bosco*, II, 407.

## Charity in observance

The Rule is not the expression of a collective will, an impersonal requirement, or an abstract common good; it is a manifestation of the will of the God of charity; and it is thus in the spirit of charity that Don Bosco wanted it interpreted and practised.

Father Rinaldi said, "Rather than found a Society, Don Bosco wanted a family based on a fatherliness that was gentle, loving and vigilant, and a sonship that was affectionate, filial and brotherly" (43). But a well-ordered family, especially if large, cannot do without rules; and it also needs charity in interpreting and observing them.

However, this charity is no synonym for weakness; it is the desire for the genuine good of every member. There is no question of ignoring the Rule, or not bothering when infringements occur, or shutting one's eyes to imperfections or transgressions; but it does mean attending to situations not foreseen by the Rule; it means respecting the rate of maturity of each member; it means acting so that the Rule which is made for all should be adapted to the possibilities of each individual according to his pace, his energies, his rate of spiritual growth — so that each person in a Salesian house may feel at ease and one of the family.

In the eve of his life Don Bosco wrote from Rome in 1884, referring to his famous dream. He described the situation that had gradually been built up at the Oratory, and expressed the shock of one who is seeing his work distorted. He asked, "Why do people want to substitute cold, impersonal regulations for charity? Why do we see that loving vigilance that prevents disorders being gradually replaced by a system (quicker and less onerous for the one in charge) whereby laws are promulgated and upheld with chastisements that generate hatred and make trouble? Our old system must be restored: the Superior must be all things to all men, always ready to listen to queries or complaints, ever

(43) DON RINALDI, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

watchful as a father, always lovingly seeking the spiritual and material good of those entrusted to him by Providence” (44).

This well-known dream deals directly with relations between Salesians and pupils; but it is not difficult to see in the background the changing atmosphere in the Religious community itself, which in turn was having repercussions on the educative community.

Don Bosco wanted the Rule observed, but observed spontaneously and voluntarily, for, he used say, “God does not want things done by constraint; being a God of love, he wants things done for love” (45). He wanted this kind of observance so as to maintain the family atmosphere, so that “the Rector’s government could always be fatherly, as desired by us” (46).

It is up to the Rector, then, to see that “cold, impersonal regulations be not substituted for charity”. What Don Bosco wanted to emphasise was the coldness, the impersonality of a regulation when no account was taken as to whether it was for people’s benefit or not.

#### 4. PRACTICE OF THE RULE TODAY

Dear confrères, in putting before you these considerations on the value of the Rule, I have not shut my eyes to the modern tendency to reject all laws. Motivations vary; the problem is found here and there in the Church; and it is present in Religious Families, our own included. This hypercritical attitude extends to ecclesiastical law, and hence also to Constitutions and Regulations and so on.

(44) *Memorie Biogr.*, XVII, 112-113.

(45) *Ibid.*, VI, 15.

(46) *Ibid.*, XII, 81.

## Emotional reaction

Such objections hold that a law lords it over one's personal make-up, crushing spontaneity, creativity, communion. It is the end of freedom, it stifles the individual. It encourages legalism, hampers progress, fosters formalism, sets up authoritarianism and destroys the spiritual vitality that is born of charity and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We cannot underplay these fears. Unhappily the law has often been used as a screen for selfishness, indolence and pride. At times it has been employed as an instrument of power and persons have been crushed under this juggernaut. It has been misused as an excuse for want of imagination and lack of generosity and availability in necessary renewal programmes. However, we should sincerely examine whether our emotional reaction against legalism (which has often afflicted the Church) runs the risk of condemning and rejecting both law and legalism, without distinguishing between the two. This attitude could damage the very reason of our battle against legalism — the defense of the individual.

The following quote is worth pondering often: "A community without laws is not, and never can be, a community of charity. It has always been, and always will be, a community of self-will" (47). We could add that it is a community of egotists under the guise of pluralism. In such a situation there is no respect for other persons, no charity. Even the elementary premise to charity, justice, is missing. Such a community is on the way to destruction.

These consequences are logical, evident and verified and do not call for lengthy proofs. They certainly set us thinking when we see to what extremes it is possible to go; and in some cases such extremes really exist. We must have clear

(47) L. BOUYER, *L'Église de Dieu* (Editions du Cerf).



notions that will overcome this emotional reaction that nowadays sees every call to obey a law or rule as an assault against freedom.

*Observance a practical expression of love*

Assuredly the temptation towards legalism and formalism, with all their baneful consequences, is seated in our human make-up, just as are pride, selfishness and slothfulness. They are very real dangers, and both he who commands and he who obeys must be constantly on their guard and arm themselves with an habitual asceticism. But the fact that laws are open to abuse does not mean they should be abolished — that would run counter to man's social nature. Nor does it mean we can belittle their value by contempt, treat them carelessly or violate them at will. The cure would be worse than the sickness, and its harmful results would soon become evident in the community.

The renewal of the Congregation can only come through a sincere and practical acceptance of our Constitutions; a faithful observance that eschews not only legalism and formalism but also arbitrariness and individualism; it will assure for each of us greater charity, for the community greater communion, and for our apostolate greater efficiency.

Father Karl Rahner prays to the Lord thus: "This wise knowledge I already possess, Lord, and I wish to increase it: that I shall never enjoy your freedom by crying out against him who is invested with your authority. When I find my burden heavy and try to be rid of it, I am not acting according to your spirit of freedom but according to my lower nature, my laziness, my selfishness. The fact is that I have not cared about scandalizing my brother, for whom your Son shed his blood; it means nothing to me that I consider every good thing licit, even though it harm my brother (48); I take no account that I have the

(48) Cf. *Rom.*, XIV, 13 et seq.

'knowledge that puffs up and not the love that builds up' (49).

"I have considered as hindrances to freedom precepts and injunctions that were safeguards for the freedom of your love and protections against the laws in my lower nature. Yes, again and again I see that the laws of your Church are a schooling in patience, in disciplining the will, in conquering myself, in attaining serenity of spirit, in practising respect and love for my neighbour. I see more and more that maturity comes through duty, not through pleasure. Not every duty is a constriction; and fidelity in work is not always a sign of a high moral standard or genuine freedom.

"I also realise that orders and injunctions, ceremonies and customs, methods and diligence that are recommended and imposed on me, can become a practical expression of my love — if I have love; and if I am weak and too lackadaisical to give them life, they become dead things" (50).

Just as much today as in the past does the Congregation depend on this sort of observance; and to help us all understand and live it the better, I put these reflections before you.

### **The Rule protects the individual and the community**

When the Rule is viewed according to the above principles, we see that it is genuinely at the service of the individual person and his freedom in the true sense of the word. "The law, genuine and just, is a kind of outer protective skin that allows a person to be born and develop; to break that skin means attacking the life of a person" (51).

The Rule defends the person from arbitrary treatment — on the part of the Superior and even more on the part of the com-

(49) Cf. *1 Cor.*, VIII, 1 et seq.

(50) K. RAHNER.

(51) L. BOUYER, *op. cit.*, p. 596.

munity. It establishes what can be commanded, decided or directed. And this Rule is freely accepted by each member on the day of his profession.

The Rule also protects the community from the whims of the individual who would gravely or systematically fail in the duties he has freely accepted and would thus influence the lives of the confrères in a negative fashion.

Finally the Rule protects the individual from his own frailty and caprice. It is a constant reminder to him of the duties he has assumed before God and his confrères. Indeed, in this way it represents the freedom of his response to the call of God.

### *The Rule the guardian of important values*

It is clear that the Rule does not merely carry out the negative function of protecting the Religious community. Its main function is positive — in the promotion of the values it contains: Gospel values lived in the charisma of the Founder; values of brotherly communion; values of the divine mission to save the young. It is precisely because these values are inherent in the Rule that the Community suffers gravely through poor observance — for the values are then not practised.

Naturally not every breach of the Rule damages them in equal measure — some of the values the Rules guards and promotes are more important than others. Some are so basic as to be part of Christian life; some belong to the essentials of Religious life in general (as stated by II Vatican Council), or the particular kind of Religious life to which we have been called and have freely embraced. Other values derive from the decisions the Congregation has made, after lengthy consultation, through the General Chapter (its supreme responsible organ) in order to be better equipped to carry out under modern conditions our God-given mission and work for the Church and mankind. Finally there are the values (such as organizational structures) that are practical

choices of ways and means considered helpful in the smooth running of our life and mission.

Then there are the different modes of expression in the Rule. Some articles express only the basic lines of a matter, leaving the details to the responsible initiative of the provincial or local community; whereas others express exact rulings and hence must be carried out by all.

### *Danger of picking and choosing*

Every infringement or arbitrary interpretation of the Rule is a weakening of our mutual bond of union and communion — and assuredly not in accordance with God's will. He wants us to live and work together (52), and the visible road towards this brotherly communion is our Holy Rule.

What has been said about the Rule holds also for the decisions taken at the various competent and responsible levels of community life — Provincial Chapters and Councils, Communities Councils and House Assemblies.

The reasonableness of this is obvious. It would be a sad day for the Congregation if the principle of picking and choosing were accepted in theory or practice; if each member considered himself bound to obey only those legitimately established ordinances he found pleasing or in accord with his personal point of view, and rejected the rest. Selfish individualism would prevail, the very antithesis of Christ's Kingdom of justice, love and peace. The Congregation could not continue as a social structure, for mutual confidence would be lacking — and that is the very basis of living in communion.

The systematic lack of observance by a notable group of confrères would impoverish our Religious life, hinder fraternal communion, impede our apostolate and stifle vocations. The history

of Orders and Congregations bears out the dismal reality of this picture.

There is absolutely no intention to use these arguments to establish that the Rule should be absolute and unconditional. Whilst warmly recommending observance, it must be borne in mind that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (53). The Rule is at the service of the life and mission of the Congregation, and can not and must not be an obstacle to its true mission. What really causes a rift in communion is not so much the infringement of the letter of the law as the individualistic arbitrariness of the infringement; it is the latter that runs directly counter to the spirit of the law — which is a spirit of solidarity, charity and communion.

Charity is not selfish and does not seek its own interests, but rather the good of others; it is not individualistic, for it tries to achieve this good “in the communion of brethren”. To avoid arbitrary individualism in this good we do and the way we do it, any possible exception to the letter of the Rule ought to have the purpose of observing its spirit. This means acting according to Don Bosco’s principle, “with one’s eyes fixed on the centre of unity” (54); and in matters of greater importance, one should act (at the various levels of competence) in accord with the community one belongs to: the members are the “day to day interpreters of God’s will” (55), and it is only with their consent that we can be assured of treading the path God wants.

### **The Rule promotes Salesian communion**

To delve a little deeper: when we say that the Rule is at the service of the individual and the community, we wish to stress something very positive: fidelity to the Rule is the most important

(53) *Mk.*, II, 27.

(54) *Memorie Biogr.*, XII, 82.

(55) *Const.*, 91.

means of achieving the Salesian communion at all levels, that “living and working together that for us Salesians is a fundamental need if we are truly to fulfil our vocation” (56).

Indeed, if we believe that “the Salesian Society came into being not only by human agency but by the providence of God” (57), we must also believe that it is God who has called us into it and given us brothers to love (58), to accomplish in communion with them in our Religious consecration the apostolic project of Don Bosco, “in our own Salesian way trying to become signs of and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are the poorest and most in need” (59).

The bond that unites us all to one another is charity. This we received from the Holy Spirit at Baptism, when we became members of the Mystical Body of Christ, sons of God in Christ and hence brothers to one another. And this fraternal and apostolic charity was reinforced and became for each of us a solemn duty before God and confrères when we made our profession of the evangelical counsels. It presupposes certain relationships and commitments and thus tends by nature to become visible and social.

The Rule is simply a social expression of the duties we took on ourselves with our Religious profession. It defines the religious and apostolic life we intend to follow in communion with our confrères, the bonds that unite us, and our mutual commitments. On the one hand, the Salesian community, by accepting a member, binds itself to help him carry out the divine call; and “the member in turn realises his commitment to help build up the community in which he lives” (60). The least he can do is observe the Rule faithfully.

(56) *Ibid.*, art. 50.

(57) *Ibid.*, art. 1.

(58) *Ibid.*, art. 51.

(59) *Ibid.*, art. 2.

(60) *Ibid.*, art. 52.

The practice of the Rule is not the sum-total of the duties to which we have pledged ourselves: it is only a “way that leads out to Love” (61). But it is “the safe way” to know what God wants of each of us (62), so as to be able to fulfil the solemn pledges expressed in the new profession formula: “To live in the Salesian Society one in spirit and action with my brothers, to give of my best and all I have to those to whom I shall be sent, especially to poor and abandoned boys, and in this way to have some share in the mission of the Church”; and all this “according to the way of life of the Gospel traced out in the Salesian Constitutions” (63).

*To achieve a oneness of spirit*

This Gospel way delineated by the Holy Rule achieves “the community of spirit and action” not only at the provincial and local level; it goes further — it puts into practice article 56 of the Constitutions: “Through our vocation we become part of the world-wide Salesian community and participate in that communion of spirit, witness and service that the Congregation offers to the universal Church”.

We know well that Don Bosco was deeply aware of the need of communion at the world level. “We must do all we can to achieve a oneness of spirit”, he told his Salesians. He insisted again and again that the Congregation be united so as to carry out its mission in an efficient manner. He spoke of spiritual unity, corporate unity, unity of direction, unity of command, and even unity of sentiment (65).

“If small divisions find their way into the Congregation,

(61) *Ibid.*, Foreward.

(62) *Ibid.*, art. 91 and 200; cf. *SGC*, 638.

(63) *Const.*, 74.

(64) *Memorie Biogr.*, XIII, 286.

(65) Cf. *Memorie Biogr.*, XIII,286; VII,626; VII,847; IX,572; XII,499.

our progress will be hampered. United in one heart we can achieve ten times as much and work far better" (66). The SGC says, "Unity at world level finds its first expression in the Constitutions. These mark out for the whole Salesian world the fundamental outlines of our credo, our life and our mission" (67); and the "ministry of unity" entrusted to the Rector Major, the Superior Council and the Superiors depends on them.

The General Chapter thus answered the feeling throughout the Society of "an urgent need to clarify and to reinforce the essential ties of unity, to keep intact the original project of our holy Founder and maintain the life and efficiency of the Congregation" (68).

Dear confrères, today more than ever does the Congregation need this complete communion of spirit for the efficiency of its mission.

### *The Rule and one's personal talents*

Today we hear everywhere of "doing one's own thing", and the importance of personal talents. A modern author throws an interesting side-light on this matter. "Religious Families have at times taken this as an encouragement to spontaneous initiative and a justification for every Religious "to do his own thing". But the prospect of an exaggerated freedom to tackle any sort of individual apostolic dream is not a solid foundation either for the formation of those whom God calls, or for coherence in the community. A person who wants to do only what appeals to his judgement should consider that he would do it better outside the Religious life.

"The attractive force of an Institute lies in its being and manifesting itself as an "ecclesial group" that directs its members'

(66) *Memorie Biogr.*, XII, 384; cf. also XIII, 304.

(67) *SGC*, 720.

(68) *Ibid.*



talents to a specific and effective apostolate. The credibility of an Institute in this area depends on the clarity of its commitment in carrying on effectively a genuine apostolate” (69).

Fidelity to the Constitutions is the only guarantee of this universal solidarity that makes the Salesian mission visible and efficient in the Church. It unites the activities of all into the one great Salesian project for the salvation of the young. This is the only way to get back that corporate spirit so necessary for the sociological conditions of today. It is the only way we can be constantly sure that God’s act in raising up the Congregation for the young is still going ahead — in that all its members live the Rule that enshrines this Congregation, this gift of God, and that they promote an ever greater fidelity to its observance (70). In Don Bosco’s dream of the cloaked person who represented the Congregation we have these important words of recommendation, “Meditate morning and evening on the observance of the Constitutions” (71).

These thoughts are of paramount importance. It is not enough to be Salesians in name only — especially today. Unfortunately individual members, communities and even Provinces can, up to a point, find themselves outside the pale of the Congregation; for we are only Salesians insofar as is evidenced by our fidelity to the Constitutions.

These days, we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that it is only observance of the Rule that can prevent us from heading for schism in our Salesian communion (at least in practice). It is only in the faithful observance of the Constitutions that the Congregation will draw ever nearer to the achievement of that strong unity as conceived and explified by its Founder (72).

(69) AHERN BARNABAS, *The Consecrated Life*.

(70) Cf. *Const.*, 200.

(71) *Memorie Biogr.*, XV, 186.

(72) Cf., *Const.*, 49.

## Fidelity to the Rule a matter of faith

Don Bosco used often say that the Rule was the voice of God (73). It my hope that the thoughts outlined in this letter will help towards a better appreciation of the force of this statement.

This was the “voice” that spoke in the intimacy of the heart of Don Bosco. It called the poor shepherd of Becchi as he tended his sheep and made him a shepherd, father and master of youth. It was divinely confirmed and authenticated when the Church approved the Congregation he had founded and thus perpetuated the mission entrusted him by God; and the same voice called each of us to carry out, in community, as Salesians, and according to the Rule, his apostolic project.

The voice of God calling us “does not need to be heard in some extraordinary way. Rather is it recognized and weighed in the signs God uses every day to manifest his will to prudent Christians” (74). One of these signs is the Holy Rule, the safe way pointed out to us by the Lord so that we may carry out his call to perfect Love (75). It is a sign that can only be perceived in the light of faith. This is why the Foreward of the new Constitutions affirms that “only with a living faith can we meditate fruitfully upon this book of the Constitutions”.

If we have this faith it will not be difficult to perceive beyond the mere code the face and voice of the Father, inviting us to love him and to build up, in communion with our confrères, the Body of Christ among the young and throughout the world. But if our faith is lacking or weak and feeble, the Constitutions will mean little to us — or worse still, they will be seen as an obstacle to our freedom, perhaps a hindrance to the achievement

(73) Cf. *Memorie Biogr.*, XI,365; XII,81; XIV,849; XVII,296.

(74) *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 11 a.

(75) Cf. *SGC*, 630.

of our completely personal plans, a straight-jacket from which we shall do our utmost to escape as quickly as possible.

Let us consider the great number of Salesians who have gone before us. They were models of faith and fidelity, and answered God's call, following the way of the Rule pointed out by Don Bosco; and we know how fruitful was their faithful observance. Often they were but humble instruments in God's hands, but because of their fidelity and docility he accomplished great things through them.

For our common comfort, and speaking from experience, I can say that today also, so many confrères throughout the world and in greatly varying circumstances, have accepted the new Constitutions in a spirit of faith. They are discovering with joy the rich spiritual values and the Salesianity therein. They are living these Constitutions with profound conviction, and their communities plainly show the results: a spirit of generous work, brotherly love, fervent prayer and joyous optimism. This was the same spirit that animated the first fervent communities of the Congregation.

These confrères are efficiently building up the communities of today just as did the first Salesians of the golden age of our Society.

Let us be convinced that the new Constitutions are God's way we are to traverse together to answer his call and carry out his mission today. It is only by being docile to his voice that we can be sure of building something that will endure. To carry out his plan of salvation God does not need our personal talents so much as our fidelity which places them at his service.

### **A message for future generations**

On the occasions of centenaries or jubilees of important events one often sees the erection of a monument in order to preserve for posterity the remembrance of the particular event.

This centenary is of the greatest importance for our Congregation; but there is no need for a monument. However, we feel the obligation of transmitting to the generations of Salesians who, please God, will take our places a message that is not couched in words but portrayed in our lives — our genuine love of Don Bosco that will translate itself into effective and practical love of our Constitutions. Don Bosco has told us that in them he lives and speaks. On the deck of the ship that was taking his first missionaries to South America, our good Father handed his sons a copy of the Constitutions recently approved by the Holy See, saying, "Through these Rules I am coming with you".

Dear confrères and sons, our sure way to be truly with Don Bosco is to live the Constitutions. This is the message that we Salesians of the 1970's feel obliged to leave for future generations, for the fruitful mission of the Congregation: the Constitutions in our own lives — not just practising them but living them with love as the expression of our genuine affection for Don Bosco.

May our dear Father and Founder bless this determination of his sons and help us carry out the Holy Rule ever more perfectly each day.

God bless you all. My prayers are for you, especially the more elderly, the very young and the sick.

Please pray for the many needs of the Congregation and for my own intentions.

In gratitude yours,

Father LOUIS RICCERI  
*Rector Major*