

### THE CENTENARY OF THE SALESIAN MISSIONS

*Rome, January 1975*

And so, by the grace of God, we have begun 1975. This year is outstanding for two events: the Holy Year and the centenary of our missions.

The Holy Year has already been well publicized. In my traditional letter and "strenna" for the New Year, I have invited all confrères to live intensely the spirit of true conversion which is especially called for by the Jubilee Year. This should lead each one to a real and sincere reconciliation with God and his brothers. And I am sure that all of us, devoted sons of the Church, both individually and as communities, will take to heart the invitation that the Holy Father has addressed to all the faithful.

As I have said in the "strenna", if we take the Holy Year celebration seriously, it will certainly help us to prepare for the other event of the year, which is of special interest to us Salesians. It is this very important anniversary that I wish to draw your attention to.

On 11th November, 1875, with the boldness that only Don Bosco could inspire, the tiny Salesian Congregation launched its marvellous missionary adventure. Don Bosco himself described it as "the greatest enterprise of the Congregation". On that day the first band of Salesians departed for South America.

Only one year before this, the Constitutions had been de-

finitively approved. The two events were not unconnected. With the approval of the Constitutions, the Congregation was recognized as a living, healthy organism, capable of strong growth in the service of the Church.

It is true that the Salesians were still few at the time, with few foundations; but under Don Bosco's charismatic influence, they lived in a climate of intense faith and enthusiasm which they expressed as a lively desire to dedicate themselves, at Don Bosco's bidding, to the most arduous undertakings. A historian of the Congregation rightly observes: "This approval of the Society and the Rules gave the members a constant stimulus to devote themselves to undertakings that were ever more ambitious and more demanding. The departure of Salesians from Piedmont and Europe fit in with the logical scheme of things ». (PIETRO STELLA: *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, 1, 167).

*A commemoration not to be scamped.*

You will appreciate the importance of this event in the developments of the last hundred years in the Congregation, and in fulfilling the mandate of evangelization entrusted to it by Divine Providence. The historian who remarked that the first missionary expedition marks "the beginning of a new history of the Congregation" was in no way romancing, but was making a sober assessment of a reality that, by the grace of God, has kept growing and growing like a river fed by melt-water. We ought, then, to recall this event with the rich values it has to offer. If we stop merely to re-echo the praises of those pioneers, we shall be wasting our time. Rather, we shall try to throw into relief all the 'missionary riches' that these hundred years have given to the Congregation and the Church. In this way, we shall become aware of the responsibility of the new-generation Salesians to capitalize those riches and, in our Father's spirit, to make all the adjustments demanded by the sensibilities and situations of today.

I will not, however, repeat what I wrote only two years ago on the theme "The Missions, our road towards renewal" (*Acts*, No. 267). In that letter you should be able to find matter for reflection that still holds goods today, especially with reference to the "missionary spirit" that must animate the Congregation in all its pastoral activities — and, of course, the missions hold pride of place.

It may be useful to reread those pages, which, you will remember, are a commentary on the SGC document on the Missions. It will complement the present letter commemorating the hundred years of missionary work in the Congregation. A commemoration is meant to remind us of what happened and of the values that lay behind the happenings, so that we can receive their signals and re-transmit them at high frequency.

My dear sons, let us go back for while to the period covering the immediate preparations for the expedition, the event itself, and its aftermath. I shall refer especially to the Biographical Memoirs: in them, through, the witness of those who lived through those fervent days, we shall relive the climate of enthusiasm that galvanized Valdocco and our infant Congregation.

## 1. A LOOK AT THE PAST

Don Bosco, the Salesian Congregation, the Missions: take the ideas individually, fuse them, and you have the living reality. Don Ceria wrote: "The missionary idea in Don Bosco grew, we could say, with him. At first it was an interior voice which called him to bring the Gospel to pagan lands; then it became a flame of zeal, enkindled by the desire to spread the activity of his sons to that field". (EUGENIO CERIA: *Annali della Società salesiana*, 1, 245).

One of his dreams, the first of his missionary dreams (cf. *MB* 10, 54-55), came through strongly as a call to action. He

found himself in an immense plain inhabited by rather fierce-looking and primitive men. A group of missionaries who came to evangelize them were put to death. Then a second group appeared on the scene—this time a happy-looking bunch, preceded by a group of boys. They were Salesians. The scene was transformed: the people put aside their savagery and listened to what the missionaries had to say.

Don Bosco was very much impressed by that dream. For three years he tried to identify the place through geographical research. Then he realized what he had been looking at: the people were Patagonian Indians. The very name conjured up visions of heroic sagas and mysterious, unexplored lands, a harsh climate, and savage tribes.

### **The First Expedition**

The circumstances that led up to Don Bosco's decision are well-known:

a) The first stage was to be the establishment of the Salesians in the more densely populated areas of the Argentine, where there were greater numbers of Italian immigrants in need of spiritual assistance.

b) Once these centres had been established, the first missionaries would live among the indigenous peoples and begin the work of spreading the Gospel.

c) Those who had already been converted would, in turn, help to spread the faith.

The dream he had had at the age of nine was coming true: the savage beasts would be changed into lambs and these would eventually become shepherds; and what had taken place at Turin would be repeated in the regions being opened up by Don Bosco's pioneers.

A few flash-backs to the final stages of preparation for the expedition would be interesting and instructive (cf. *MB* 11, 142-155; 11, 372-390; 11, 391-410. EUGENIO CERIA: *Annali*, 1, 245-266. PETER STELLA: *op. cit.*, 1, 167-196. MORAND WIRTH: *Don Bosco e i Salesiani*, 193-204).

22nd December, 1874: Don Bosco announced the request of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in Buenos Aires for missionaries, and presented his proposals for the approval of the Superior Chapter.

29th January, 1875: Feast of St Francis of Sales. With the greatest possible solemnity, Don Bosco presented the plan of his missionary enterprise to the embryonic Salesian family (Cf. *MB* 11, 142-143).

25th February, 1875: Don Bosco sent a circular letter to every Community informing them of this event, at the same time asking for volunteers among the confrères (then numbering 170) to go on the first expedition. The ten chosen are listed below:

- Fr. *Giovanni Cagliero*, leader of the expedition;
- Fr. *Giuseppe Fagnano*, with degrees from the University of Turin and one of Garibaldi's Thousand;
- Fr. *Valentino Cassini*, elementary-school teacher;
- Fr. *Domenico Tomatis*, teacher of literature;
- Fr. *Giovanni Battista Baccino*, elementary-school teacher;
- Fr. *Giacomo Allavena*, elementary-school teacher;
- Bro. *Bartolomeo Scavini*, master carpenter;
- Bro. *Vincenzo Gioia*, shoe-maker;
- Bro. *Bartolomeo Molinari*, music master;
- Bro. *Stefano Belmonte*, supervisor for music and domestic affairs (cf. *BM* 11, 373).

With all the to-do of preparing for the expedition, some found it hard to believe that it would ever come off... they were

looking at things from the human point of view. Don Cagliero was to lead the expedition. He was lecturer in Moral Theology, in charge of music at the Oratory, and the spiritual director of the Salesian Sisters. Of the others to leave, one was the headmaster of a school, another was a senior-school teacher, another had important duties: how could they be replaced? Humanly speaking, the difficulties posed real problems.

Take the case of Bro. Belmonte. He was in charge of looking after the visitors to the Oratory—and there were visitors every day at the Oratory! Well, he was still busy with his job in the house half-an-hour before his departure, and the wonder was that he didn't go off to South America with his keys still in his pocket. But Don Bosco was far-sighted, and, what is more important, he saw everything from the supernatural point of view, with the eyes of faith. "He drew up his plans before God, and he was far from thinking that there would be no difficulties on the way. But he would not be deterred by any obstacle: rather, he would overcome them, always reverting to the words of St Teresa: 'Let nothing upset you!'" (BM, 11, 155.J).

### *Don Bosco's Farewell*

Those who had been chosen went to Rome to receive the blessing of the Vicar of Christ: "On the feast of All Saints, they had the honour of a special audience with the Holy Father. Among other things, he said to them: "You are the sons of Don Bosco going to distant lands to preach the Gospel... There you will have a great field for working wonders... I pray that your numbers may increase, for the need is great and the harvest abundant". And Don Ceria adds: "The confrères came out of the hall thrilled, and prepared to go to the ends of the earth, even to give their lives for the faith". (BM, 11, 376-7).

Then came the great day: 11th November. The farewell celebrations went off with great joy and enthusiasm. After Vespers, Don Bosco spoke to them. The Basilica of Mary, Help

of Christians, was filled to capacity; there was a deep silence charged with emotion. Don Bosco, after sketching out their programme of missionary work, said, among other things: "You must always remember that you are Christians... that you are Salesians. As Christians... you are sent by the Vicar of Christ to fulfil the mission of the Apostles sent out by Jesus Himself... that very same Gospel preached by Jesus, by his Apostles and his successors, beginning from St Peter right down to our own days... you must love ardently, stand up staunchly for your faith and preach, in season and out of season. As Salesians... never forget that here in Italy there is a Father who loves you in Christ, a Congregation that thinks of you always, will assist you and will be united with you as brothers." (*MB*, 11, 385). And he added these words, spoken in humility but illumined by the light that God grants to his faithful servants: "We are laying the foundations of a great work. It is not that we have any illusions about being able to convert the whole world in a few days. Not at all. But who can say that this small beginning may not be the seed from which a huge tree is to grow up? Who can say that this may not be like the tiny mustard-seed, which grows little by little; that this is not going to bring about a vast amount of good?" (*MB*, 11, 385).

After Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, "Don Bosco and all the priests present gave a parting embrace to the missionaries. It was the scene of the father bidding good-bye to his sons, who were setting out for a far-off land to transplant beyond the seas the work begun in the meadows of Valdocco. As the group of missionaries and Don Bosco left the sanctuary and were making their way towards the square, Fr Lemoyne said, with feeling: "Don Bosco, are we beginning to see the fulfilment of the words 'inde exhibit gloria mea' ('from here shall my glory go forth' — part of the inscription 'Hic est domus mea: inde exhibit gloria mea' adorning the Basilica) "Yes, indeed", replied Don Bosco, deeply moved." (cf. *BM* 11, 388-399).

On Sunday, 14th November, the missionaries boarded the ship which was to take them to Buenos Aires. Exactly one month later, 14th December, they landed there. The first missionary expedition was now a fact: "For the Oratory and the Congregation, a new chapter of history was beginning".

The first group was followed by others with astonishing regularity. During Don Bosco's life-time, that is to say, between 1875 and 1887, eleven missionary expeditions made their way to South America. The first, as we have seen, on 11th November, 1875: 10 Salesians with Frs Cagliero and Fagnano; the second, on 7th November, 1876: 23 Salesians (6 priests, among whom were Frs Bodrato and Lasagna, 7 clerics and 10 Brothers); the third, on 14th November, 1877: 17 Salesians with Frs Costamagna, Vespignani and Milaneseo.

### **The Salesian Sisters, 1877**

Six very young Salesian Sisters also formed part of the expedition of 1877. This fact is worth underlining. It was the beginning of that common effort on the missions which was destined to become ever closer and more fruitful. It shows the complementary character of the two Congregations, which live the same spirit and share the same mission, each in its own sphere. Leading the group of Sisters was Sr. Angela Vallese. She was hardly 24 years old.

The departure of the Sisters was decided on in the General Chapter of the autumn of 1877. Mother Mary Mazzarello accompanied the first group of missionary sisters to Rome, where they were given an audience by Pope Pius IX. Then she accompanied them to the port of Genoa, and they embarked for Uruguay. Don Bosco had told them: "You will not immediately become missionaries in the Pampas or Patagonia. You will begin your work by strengthening God's kingdom among those who are

already Christians. You will set it up among those who have abandoned it. After that you will extend it to those who have never heard of it". (GISELLA CAPETTI: *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo*, 46).

In 1878 a second expedition of Salesian Sisters made their way to Buenos Aires. From there, in 1880, they went on towards Patagonia, which was mission territory proper. A Buenos Aires daily wrote: "The Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, are the very first nuns from the beginning of the world to go to preach the Gospel in those far-off lands of the south". The Salesians had gone there one year earlier, in 1879. Only in that year were they able to start the real missionary work, by making direct contact with the Indians of the Pampas and Patagonia.

The first three expeditions were followed by eight others in the course of less than ten years: the fourth on 8th December, 1878; the fifth in January, 1881; the sixth in December, 1881; the seventh in November, 1883; the eighth in February, 1885; the ninth in April, 1886; the tenth in December, 1886; and the eleventh in December, 1887.

On 30th January, 1888, the eve of Don Bosco's death, they read out to him the telegram announcing the safe arrival in Quito of the missionaries he had embraced and blessed some weeks before, in spite of his very poor health. He made a sign to show that he had understood what had been read out to him. He must have rejoiced and thanked God for his help in transforming into reality what had been shown to him in his dreams.

At the time of Don Bosco's death, out of a total of a little more than one thousand Salesians, one hundred and fifty were to be found in America. Fifty Salesian nuns, too, were working in five countries of Latin America. The little seed of 1875 had indeed multiplied. The Salesian work in America now consisted not only in giving pastoral assistance to young people and the families of immigrants, but also in preaching the Gospel to the primitive autochthons who had not yet heard the Good News.

## Expansion under Don Rua

The pace of expansion and the spread of missionary fervour in the Congregation did not stop with the death of Don Bosco. Blessed Michael Rua inherited all his missionary zeal. It is enough to note that, during the time of his administration, which included some years when it was touch and go for survival, he succeeded in sending out as many as 25 missionary expeditions, some of which were extraordinarily large. With good reason it has been said of him that "his thirst for the missions was unquenchable". (ADOLFO L'ARCO: *Don Rua a servizio dell'Amore*, 66).

And so, by the time of Don Rua's death in 1910, the Salesians had extend their work to the Americas (Colombia, Perú, Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, El Salvador, and U.S.A.), to the Middle East, Asia and various parts of Africa.

It is interesting to note that Don Rua was concerned not only with sending missionaries to new lands, but also with passing on to them some of his perceptive ideas and suggestions, after the style of Don Bosco.

For example, he wanted his men "to adopt the life-style and customs of their new homelands, leaving behind their own ways of doing things". (G. B. FRANCESIA: *Don Rua, primo successore di Don Bosco*, 15). This concern of his was very much in keeping with what Vatican II has explicitly and forcefully indicated to missionaries about accepting the values that the Creator has implanted in the peoples of the earth. Proof of this is a letter he wrote to Fr Balzola, who was working with the Bororo Indians. He says: "About some customs these people have: take care that you don't make fun of them. As the Church did in ancient times with the pagans, try to make these customs Christian, provided that they are not harmful to body or soul". (EUGENIO CERIA: *Vita di Don Rua*, 262).

By the time Don Rua died, the missionary endeavours on the American Continent had grown remarkably. 1,473 Salesians

were working there, and that was an impressive percentage of the total membership of the Congregation (about 4,000).

In addition to the continuing large number of Italians, members from other European nations also left for the mission-fields. The Congregation soon found that it was foremost among the missionary congregations, and was able to supply personnel to missions run by other societies.

Great pioneers of the stature of Cagliari, Fagnano, Milanese and Lasagna were not satisfied with consolidating and developing the works they had begun, but, with the aid of generous collaborators, they widened the scope of their apostolic work. In the meantime, outside the American continent other towering personalities arose to emulate these giants of the Americas.

### **Hard times under Don Albera**

While Don Albera was Rector Major, the first World War broke out. It had repercussions throughout the Congregation and the Missions, slowing down the rhythm of expansion of the preceding years. There was a reduction in the departure-rate. But as soon as the war was over, the departures resumed even more vigorously than before. Then Don Rinaldi succeeded Don Albera.

At the beginning of the century, Don Albera had been commissioned by Don Rua to visit all the Houses and missions in the Americas. This he did, at the cost of discomforts and dangers of every sort. Even the war did not stop him. During his years as Rector Major, most of them war-years, 345 Salesians set out for the Americas and other continents.

Towards the end of Don Albera's term of office, there developed in the society a phenomenon which could be called 'the great Indian adventure'. It is true that, under Don Rua, a small group of Salesians had gone to work in Tanjore, in the

diocese of Mylapore. But the Salesian missionary activity in India received its main impetus when Don Albera, at the insistence of the Prefect of Propaganda Fidei, sent into Assam a small nucleus of missionaries guided by the intrepid Fr Luis Mathias, rightly referred to as 'the Cagliari of India'. Faithful to his motto of "Take a chance and hope for the best", he did, in fact, give this mission a powerful lift-off. Among other things, he lost no time in opening a novitiate with the idea of getting recruits from Italy to join the first Indian vocations. With this sort of drive, it is little wonder that the Salesians were also called to Calcutta, Krishnagar and Madras, while expanding their successful works in Assam. Today, all of us know how well our Congregation is represented in that immense subcontinent, and how great are our hopes of development for the future.

### **New Expansion under Don Rinaldi**

As we have seen above, under Don Rinaldi the Congregation had what might be termed its missionary explosion. The Servant of God had at one time wanted to go to the missions (v. EUGENIO CERIA: *Vita di don Rinaldi*, 377). Don Bosco had discouraged him, telling him that, instead, he would one day send many missionaries abroad. The words of our Father were fully realized. Don Rinaldi sent a large number of missionaries and was responsible for some original developments which served for a long time to keep the missions strong in resources and personnel. He created such a climate of missionary fervour throughout the whole Family that it became the golden age of Salesian endeavour on the missions. You just have to look at the numerous works for the development of missionary vocations, including adult vocations. For this purpose, the Central Province was created, and it accounts very largely for the development of our missionary work. Also the Gioventù Missionaria Association and magazine were founded to provide burses for future candidates for the missions.

The 50th Anniversary Mission Exhibition in Turin, following the one for the Holy Year in Rome, 1925-26, was one of the more spectacular results of the missionary enthusiasm engendered by Don Rinaldi's singular zeal. But the most convincing proof of this enthusiasm in the Congregation at that time was the sharp increase in departures. The Salesians who left for the missions during the time of Don Rinaldi reached 1,600, whilst the rate of expansion in other parts of the world was not affected in any way.

The departure to mark the 50th anniversary of our missions, which took place in 1925, deserves special mention. 185 Salesians received their crucifixes. Among these was a group bound for Japan, headed by Fr. Cimatti. Don Rinaldi, who had found in him the ideal man in many ways for this particularly demanding mission, did not hesitate to take him away from the house at Valsalice, thereby fulfilling a long-standing desire of Fr Cimatti's, which he had expressed in these terms: "If the superiors were to send me to the missions... I would go there on my knees". We all know how this great son of Don Bosco worked away with simplicity, great insight, and the Salesian brand of genial enthusiasm, all to bring the Gospel to this great nation, a task bristling with difficulties.

### *Communist whirlwind in China*

A word about China. We know the story of our missionary work there. It began in the first years of the century with the foundation in Macao and received a greater stimulus in 1918, at end of the First World War, when the Holy See entrusted the missions of Shiu Chow to the Congregation. Its rich growth was saddened by the tragic end of the heroic Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Versiglia. Later on, the Communist Revolution, like a monstrous bull-dozer, levelled all the flourishing works which had sprung up within a short time.

But the confrères displaced by the Communist onslaught

did not give up. With their help the work in Hong Kong and Macao expanded and multiplied. Vocations increased to such an extent that this little section of China, together with Formosa, was ready to become a Province. Other Salesians from China, and also from North Vietnam, transferred to other countries of the Far East and so stimulated a vigorous expansion of our missionary work in the Philippines and South Vietnam.

Today, thanks be to God, the young Province of the Philippines has begun to provide personnel for the neighbouring Province of Thailand. We hope that the Delegation of South Vietnam also, with its many confrères in training and its many vocations, will soon be able to collaborate actively with other missions, especially in the East.

### **2,500 missionaries during Fr Ricaldone's administration**

I have spoken about the springtime of the missions which was reached during Don Rinaldi's term of office. But I must point out that, in his Prefect General, Don Ricaldone, he had just the man to realize his wealth of ideas. You could say that Don Ricaldone was the dynamo-set in the missionary power-house of Don Rinaldi, who had given him full responsibility for all the problems of the missions.

Energetic, genial, down-to-earth and hardy, Fr Ricaldone visited all the missions of India, China, Japan and Thailand, taking months to do so. He gathered information which proved to be of great value to him in his close collaboration with the Rector Major and later on when Providence called him to govern the Congregation.

Don Ricaldone was a man of great initiative and extraordinary ability as an organizer. Here is just one fact among many that I could quote to give you some idea of the enormous expansion that took place under his direction. At the end of 1951, the year

of his death, the number of Salesians assigned to the missions during his term of office, which had experienced the paralysing torments and tragedies of World War II, reached over 2,500. As a consequence of this marvellous development, it was necessary to designate a member of the Superior Council to work full time for the missions. And so it was that, during the General Chapter held immediately after the War, the post of Consultor for the Missions was created.

The Congregation, and especially our missions, owe very much to the truly extraordinary work of Don Ricaldone.

### **The world tour of Don Ziggotti**

Don Ziggotti continued the missionary work of Don Ricaldone with complete dedication. The most significant gesture of his great feeling for the missions was certainly the world tour which he undertook in order to visit the confrères, missions and foundations of the Congregation.

It is not hard to imagine what Don Ziggotti had to go through to visit in person the Salesians and Salesian Sisters working in the most out-of-the-way places in the Salesian world. His sacrifice, however, was repaid by the enthusiasm and encouragement generated everywhere by his visit.

Even though the rate of growth was not what it had been in years past, the departures of missionaries continued. In the period between 1951 and 1965, exactly 1,606 Salesians left for the missions.

### **Present difficulties and hopes**

The situation today, on account of an accumulation of causes that you well know, is unfortunately nothing like that of the thirties. Between 1966 and 1974 about 500 men were lost to

the missions. Even so, there are aspects which, without losing sight of reality, give us reason for hope and consolation. One of these is the notable increase of indigenous vocations. It is an indication of the good work done by our missionaries, a clear sign that the new churches are maturing and also evidence of stability and security.

For example, in India we have a hundred novices in the four Provinces. The seminaries of the various dioceses entrusted to us in Assam have good numbers of students right through to theology. The Province of the Philippines has 16 novices and caters for those from Thailand as well, while the Delegation of Vietnam has 19 novices. Looking back over the last hundred years, we come up with the following figures: There have been 104 missionary expeditions so far, always with a gradual increase in the number of Salesians from different nations. It is gratifying to see the prominent part played by the smaller countries in sending personnel to the lands outside Europe: Belgium occupies third place after Italy and Spain. Then we have Ireland, the Netherlands, Malta, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia, and we can count in Poland, which can hardly be called small, but which shares a difficult situation with Czechoslovakia.

Other observations: the Salesians in the mission-field and in the countries of the Third World total up to 7,166, which is more than a third of the grand total. Another notable detail is this: of these, 4,722 are indigenous.

It seems to me a very significant fact that the great majority of our 56 bishops are working in mission areas and in poorer churches. These men are the expression of a Christianity that has been born and is growing through the work of the Salesians in spreading the Gospel.

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

Now that I have sketched the history of our missions, I should like to mention some aspects that are characteristic of the style and spirit of the work.

### The Salesian Brother, a unique rôle

It is very impressive to observe that, in the first expedition of 1975, of the ten who went, four were Brothers. This lines up with what Don Bosco had in mind: "The priest", he said, "needs help, and I believe that all of you here, priests, students, artisans and Brothers can be true evangelical workers" (EUGENIO CERIA: *Annali*, 1, 705). These are the words that Don Bosco addressed to his Salesians and senior boys on the evening of the feast of St Joseph, 1876. On another occasion he said to the Brothers: "There are certain things that the priest and clerics cannot do, and these you can do". (BM. 16, 319). Thus we read in the new Constitutions: "in many sectors he has a unique rôle all his own ...".

Don Bosco realized the importance of this rôle, especially in the mission areas. The Brothers on the missions have responded splendidly to the trust placed in them by Don Bosco and the Congregation. The past century has been enriched by the outstanding figures of innumerable Brothers. I recall only a few names, but there are many more who deserve to be mentioned.

Buscaglione, De Fonseca, Pankeri, Mantarro: four great builders of churches, chapels, seminaries, bridges, canals and villages; but, for all this activity, they were always exemplary religious. Milanesia, the courageous and faithful companion of Fr Bälzola in the land of the Bororos. Conci, called "The Ketteler of the Argentine": sociologist, journalist and trade union organizer. Srugi, infirmarian and miller from Palestine, and a man of noted

sanctity. He was called 'the friend of God' even by the Muslims.

But these are only the van of an army of missionaries who, working in a wide range of occupations, became the builders of the kingdom of God. Their witness to the faith was tenacious, their assistance to their brother-priests indispensable. Today, the Brothers working in the mission-field and the Third World number 1,115 of a total of 3,496 and continue in the same tradition of hard work, dedication and fidelity to their vocation that distinguished their predecessors.

### **The Salesian Sisters, missionaries "by nature and by vocation"**

I mentioned above that a small group of Sisters formed part of the expedition of 1877, a fact of great significance. It is recorded that Pius IX, the Pope of the missions, said to Don Rinaldi: "We cannot have missions without the sisters. Indeed, there should be more sisters on the missions than missionaries". (EUGENIO CERIA: *Vita di don Rinaldi*, 395). Don Rinaldi commented: "We need a woman to educate a woman ... without the Sisters, we cannot convert a country..." (IBID.).

This evidently was Don Bosco's idea, which was shared by St Mary Mazzarello. The Salesian Sisters, then, faithful to Don Bosco's wishes, took on the Salesians, so to speak, at the missions game, facing the adventure side by side with them. They were not deterred by risks, discomforts or difficulties, but continued to strengthen their numbers in the various continents and to diversify their works. In fact, they fully vindicated the words of Pope Pius XI and Don Rinaldi.

Today, just as we regard our missionary wing as essential, so the Sisters see theirs in the same way. The missionary nature of their organization is written into the Constitutions: "An Institution educational and missionary by nature and vocation". (Constitutions of the Institute of the FMA, art. 3) The sisters working on the missions and in the Third World at present

account for a good third of the total number: to be precise, 6,847 out of 18,168.

*And now, the Salesian Secular Institute \* as well*

For some years now the first *Volontarie di Don Bosco* have been working in collaboration with our missionaries. Naturally, they work in the way of a secular institute, but always with the spirit of the common Father.

Let us hope that they will extend their activities and continue to benefit the people they are working for.

### **The invaluable support of our Co-operators**

The missionary work of Don Bosco, from its inception onwards, "began to receive the help of the Co-operators... when the need was pressing ... They responded generously to the appeal, each according to his means". (EUGENIO CERIA: *Annali*, 1, 212).

This also seems to me to be a characteristic of our missionary programme. Don Bosco, launching the Salesians into this huge undertaking, made it his business to create at the same time a close-support organization made up of committed Christians who would provide material and moral aid to his men working in the hostile conditions of distant lands. Since then, it is plain that "the Co-operators have done their duty" (MORAND WIRTH: *op. cit.*, 254). With good reason Don Bosco could say towards the close of his life: "The Co-operators are an unshakeable buttress" (*BM*, 18, 146). Ever since, they have stood by us as a real army of Christians and today they are still supporting the Salesian works, especially the missions, in all the (inhabited) continents. In its numerous editions, the Salesian Bulletin keeps in

\* Footnote: this title is provisional and entirely unofficial.

contact with and encourages these thousands of people, who intimately share in the work of our missionaries, through prayer, moral support and a wide range of activities. Not only the missionaries, but the entire Congregation should express their constant and deep-felt gratitude to them.

An interesting point about lay missionaries. Nowadays there is much talk about lay missionaries, and we appreciate the generous availability of these Christians. Perhaps it is not generally known that many of our missionary expeditions since the earliest times included lay people, often in large numbers. They are mentioned in the chronicles and statistics over various years up to 1941. On the missions, they worked together with the Salesians, in a variety of occupations and lived there for the rest of their lives.

### **Don Bosco's way**

a) "*... to take special care of the young*".

To the Salesians about to leave for America, Don Bosco said: "Let it never be forgotten that we are going for the sake of poor and abandoned youth"; and again: "On the missions we must take special care of the young, particularly the poor and abandoned"; and, more explicitly: "The missionary who is surrounded by a crowd of youngsters will go ahead and do much good". (*BM* 17, 233; 18, 44; 12, 280). It is pleasing to see how this conception of missionary strategy, on which Don Bosco insisted so much, received strong support from the authoritative voice of the recent Synod of Bishops. In their agreed statement we read: "In a special way we speak to youth ... Youth has top priority in the work of the Church" (Cardinal Cordeiro, Archbishop of Karachi). Our work of evangelization must be directed towards the young, so that, in their turn, they can pass it on to their contemporaries" (Bishop Pironio, President of the Latin American Episcopal Conference).

Our missionaries, and not just the early ones, either, have always kept before them the words of our Father, as the natural reflection of our special vocation, backed up by the full weight of the Church's authority. Among the boys of the Boca district, Buenos Aires, very much a deprived area at that time, and the many thousands of very poor boys in Haiti, in the Cité des Jeunes, Lubumbashi, and the shanty-town of Tondo, outside Manila, wherever our confrères pitched their tents, in fact, they instinctively went looking for youth, especially those in need. And that's not all: they created among these young people, by their educational methods and their way of life, the characteristic atmosphere that succeeds in winning youth, no matter the race, country or culture.

I repeat: one comforting fact, closely linked to this preference for the young, is the great increase in the number of indigenous vocations in many countries. This has now reached the stage where the Salesian strength is practically drawn from the country itself. Even more significant is the phenomenon of young people on the way to sanctity, such as Zefirino Namuncurà and Laura Vicuña.

#### b) *Economic and social advancement*

In conclusion, I would like to stress the work done by our missionaries, right from the start, for the economic and social advancement of the people entrusted to them. When we come to look into what they started with and the limited resources at their disposal, applause gives way to astonishment at their achievements: agriculture and cattle-raising, building houses, running co-operatives, organizing both the work and the workers, digging wells, building bridges and roads; teaching the three R's, training for technical qualifications, publishing books, setting up broadcasting stations ... and all with a view to pressing on with the great drive to liberate the whole man in Christ through the Good News. This is not meant to give the impression, of course, that

everything was always and everywhere perfect, or that the work done fifty years ago measures up in every respect to the standards of today; but, taking the past hundred years as a whole, we have to acknowledge that our missionaries have turned them to excellent account: for which we give thanks to the Giver of all good things.

c) *United with the centre*

I think it is worth-while to mention a common factor amongst our missionaries wherever they work. Don Bosco had succeeded in creating a family both at Valdocco and in the young Congregation: this atmosphere, which is hard to define but which gives to those who breathe it a deep sense of contentment, was exported to America with the missionaries. The chief medium for the maintenance of this family feeling that kept Don Bosco united to his sons was letter-writing. The letters were frequent, regular and heart-warming. Our archives are full of this precious material, which has grown over the years because the tradition has been kept up, even when the number of missionaries increased considerably and they were scattered throughout the world. I don't know whether other institutes have a tradition quite like this in style or intensity.

Anyway, it is certain that these family bonds — and letter-writing is only one of the threads — still constitute a useful interchange of information between the centre of the Congregation and its outposts. These links have made it possible to overcome difficult trials, have given enlightenment and security at times of crisis, which are bound to occur in a large family whose members are scattered around the continents in all sorts of situations. There is nothing bureaucratic about all this, the basic ingredient being sincere spontaneity. Communications play a vitally important part in fostering the unity that is the strength of the Congregation. Talking about unity, I would like to stress once more the fact that our missionary communities are characteristically

international. Without trying to white-wash the inevitable lapses in a potentially explosive situation, I say that the general effect has been the integration of different sets of values, which, far from being detrimental to unity of life and action, has actually enriched it. At the same time, it gains credibility in the eyes of the people who see Christ's charity at work in it.

d) *With a strong simple faith*

I have given you some points that I think are characteristic of the life and work of our missionaries. But it is natural to put the question: What is behind it all? I think that the safe answer to that one is simply — faith. The faith that took them far from their homeland in search of souls, that spurred them on to do incredible things. These men were not always well-up in the latest theological speculations, and yet, with this strong, simple faith, they faced the most difficult and, humanly speaking, desperate situations. It was the faith that we find at the root of the whole life and activity of Don Bosco. "It is faith that does everything", he used to say. (BM, 10, 90). This vision, this sense of the Invisible became transformed into prayer. When we read about many of our missionaries, and especially when we come into contact with them, we sense this flame, this unflagging zeal burning within them.

One more detail: from Don Bosco at Valdocco, the first missionaries had absorbed the devotion to Mary, Help of Christians. They kept it strong and vigorous in their new home, and so did those who followed them. They became its zealous apostles, as any visit to regions where Don Bosco's sons have worked will readily show.

### **Missionaries for our times**

At this point, I can see that some of you will have some queries to make. For instance, considering the times that we live

in, doesn't the whole commemoration smack of an optimist's pipedream? How about all the problems and protests that confront the Congregation, or, for that matter, the rest of the Church, in the mission situation itself?

Well, we are not blind to the fact that serious difficulties do exist in the Church and in our own Society with regard to the missions. But can difficulties, however formidable, be allowed to stop anyone who believes firmly in the command of Christ: "Go and teach"? To men of faith, obstacles are not an invitation to lay down their arms: they are an incentive to find new ways of overcoming them. In this matter we must be enlightened and strengthened by the faith of our Father, Don Bosco. Let us recall his words: "We cannot stop. *Guardiamo avanti!*" We see here a will that is indomitable yet full of trust; and the message was repeated by the Holy Father when he said: "Go right ahead".

By way of consolation I ought to say that among our missionaries—and here I use the term 'missionary' in the wider sense—I have not seen any perplexity, or discouragement or defeatism. Instead the men on the spot are hard at it seeing how far the well-tried methods are still effective in spreading the Good News. This is something positive, I must say. To adjust, improve and revise in the light of experience must be our constant concern. Our missionaries believe in their vocation—they live it. Their one desire is to bring their missions into line with the needs of the times we live in, and so make their work more fruitful.

During this Centenary Year of our first missionary expedition, let us unite ourselves with the faith, the will to work and the sense of Salesian realism of our missionaries, and to launch any initiative that may serve to give the entire Congregation a missionary look, or, better still, a missionary heart. It would be a grave error to pretend that the missionary renewal concerns only the missionaries: the entire Congregation is missionary. I repeat here what has been said more than once already, and with the full support of the Church behind it: if the dynamic

missionary spirit of the Congregation were to falter, it would cease to be the Congregation, the one Don Bosco knew, at any rate.

*In the cess-pools of the big cities*

Today it can be stated that evangelization is not limited to planting the Church among peoples not yet baptized, though this does, in fact, receive priority treatment in the Church's missionary policies. Evangelization is needed in those countries where the faith, if it is not already defunct, has become a poor, twisted thing. Wherever we live, whatever our work may be, we are expected to be evangelizers and missionaries.

The statement of the Bishops in the last Synod, which was on this very topic of spreading the Gospel, clearly stresses this fact. To quote: "Strengthened by our faith in Christ... we wish to state anew that the command to evangelize all nations is the essential mission of the Church. The present-day changes are profound and wide-spread, affecting religion, ideologies, cultures and traditions. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the necessity of proclaiming the Gospel to all nations, and to every individual within those nations, is all the more evident and urgent. This must be done, especially for those who have not yet heard Christ's Good News, in whatever part of the world they may live, so that the Church and its message may be implanted among the peoples where it has not yet taken root".

For us, then, it means that we have to rally to this apostolic task, each one in his own situation, with all that involves. Of course, we shall continue to go out to the pagans; but we cannot turn a deaf ear to the urgent appeals that come from the twilight regions of our giant cities, those cess-pools of all sorts of human misery. We cannot remain insensible to the cries for help of the young victims of atheism, drugs and a lust-crazy society. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that a large section of the

society in which we live is in the grip of a terrible ignorance of religion.

### *Catechesis and witness*

It follows from what has been said above that each one must dedicate himself with all seriousness to the work of catechizing, which has been authoritatively defined in the recent Synod as “passing on the message of the living Christ: it is essentially an education in faith and a clear Christian answer to the deepest problems of mankind”.

Faced with this tragic situation, there is not a single one of us that can opt out of doing something about it, urgently. The words of St Paul, “Woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel”, ought, I think, to sound their warning in the ears of every son of Don Bosco. The opportunities and responsibilities of each one will vary. But, I repeat, in this mighty and holy battle, there is a task for every one: for the staff officer and the private, for the scholar, the craftsman and the ploughman. All of us, no matter what position we occupy, must be messengers of the Gospel through our apostolate of witness. What we do should tally with what we preach, otherwise our message will not be accepted and we shall be building on sand.

Then there are the pointed words addressed to the active religious institutes by the 2nd Vatican Council asserting the responsibility of evangelizing by living the Gospel values: and this applies to all of them, even those not strictly missionary. Among other things, we read: “The institutes should ask with all sincerity before God if their way of life bears witness to the Gospel”. This same point was stressed by Pope Paul recently when he said: “The Gospel is to be lived before being preached”.

### 3. THREE POSITIVE IDEAS

From what has been said above, each one of you should see that the commemoration of our missionary enterprise should not remain unproductive. At both personal and community level, we must reflect seriously on the matters broached in this letter. This will help us all to work for the renewal of the missionary spirit in the Congregation, the operative word being *all*: the determined individual effort is the only sure way to the total renewal of the Congregation.

I think that the scheme put to the Provinces for the Centenary celebrations may be of some help. While it is true that no one scheme will solve all the problems of our missionary renewal, it is equally true that a number of things can be made to work together for the renewal. The Centenary celebration is one of these things.

In practice, then, this what I propose:

#### **First: co-operation**

The communities at Provincial and local level must contribute their share towards a missionary *revival* by backing the schemes worked out at the Centre. These plans and suggestions, which will be sent on as they are completed, are the result of a lot of hard work put in by many confrères, Sisters, Co-operators, Past-pupils and pupils in conjunction with the Heads of the various Departments. It will be left to the individual Provinces and Communities to study which of these to put into operation, and how to do it.

It may be that the local product will be better suited to the local needs. The big thing is that something concrete is done about this renewal. It can be taken that the Sisters will be willing to give their support in every Province, as they do at the Centre. Also the other branches of the Salesian Family

will be interested in the different initiatives. I am pleased to see that the Argentine Provinces have made up a very interesting programme for the Celebration in common.

## **Second: a missionary expedition worthy of the Centenary**

What follows is not so much a proposal as an invitation. The Congregation is, needless to say, grateful to God for all the good it has been able to do for souls in the last hundred years; yet it is deeply conscious of how much is still to be done. Now, Divine Providence knows how to reward those who leave their Provinces for the missions, and to inspire new and generous vocations; so the Congregation proposes to call for *a missionary expedition worthy of the great event*. I know that the missionary fire still burns in the hearts of many confrères, and we want to make the most of this fire with a gesture of faith and hope that will benefit the whole Congregation.

We are thinking of organizing the volunteers of this expedition along two distinct lines of action: first, we shall concentrate our forces in certain very needy yet promising areas so as make a real impact with a sustained programme; and second, we are thinking of branching out into a new type of work.

I therefore invite the confrères who feel inspired by this appeal to write to me directly. I thank you even now, while I pray the Lord to bless those who generously offer themselves, and to bless the local communities and the Provinces they come from. For the superiors and confrères of the Province, this will mean a sacrifice; but I am sure that this sacrifice will be made willingly as an act of faith and practical charity towards those who have the more urgent need. The Council has something à propos: "The grace of renewal cannot flourish in communities unless each of them extends the range of its charity to the ends of the earth, and devotes to those far off a concern

similar to that which it bestows on those who are its own members.” (*Ad Gentes*, 37).

But on this there is more to be said, something born of hard experience. Cardinal Poletti, Vicar General of the city of Rome, has written: “The missions have need of us, it is true: but perhaps our own churches have still greater need of the missions”. (In *Agenzia Fides*, January, 1973). Again, it has been stated recently, also from direct observation of a similar reciprocal effect and especially with regard to vocations: “The first beneficiaries of the missions are the churches that give, not those that receive”. This throws light on the stand taken by the Church in France: “Our option is for the missions... the Church refuses to be a select club”. (Card. Marty, Inaugural Address, French Episcopal Conference, 1971). And in the face of the chronic crisis of priests and seminarians: “The clergy will be revitalized only through a strong missionary spirit.” (French Episcopal Conference, Final Document). These statements should make us think very seriously. No rhetorical vapouring here: they clearly point the words of Christ, “Give to others, and God will give to you.” (*Luke* 6: 38).

### **Third: solidarity with the missions**

These words apply also to the material help that each local community could give, specially during the Centenary year, for the many needs of the missionaries. You will be kept informed about the distribution of the Solidarity Fund, which will be determined by the priorities of the work in hand.

I invite all the communities to increase their contribution to this programme of fraternal aid, making sure that, whatever is done, is motivated by love, and, above all, productive of spiritual benefits. There will then be the mutual enrichment that, even with the exchange of material goods, is the natural bi-product of true solidarity in any form.

## Our "stone" for God's Kingdom

To conclude, dear confrères: a hundred years ago, Don Bosco, greeting our missionaries in the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, expressed his deep joy that "the Congregation, for all its scanty resources, was collaborating actively, bringing its stone to add to the fabric of God's Kingdom." (*BM*, 11, 386). We have the privilege of celebrating the Centenary of the Salesian missions—what should we say? And, more to the point, what should we do?

Putting aside all triumphalism, let us humbly acknowledge our responsibility before the Church, before the Salesian Family of the past and the Salesian Family of the future. Let us recall the sentiments of gratitude to God and to Mary, Help of Christians, which Don Rinaldi proposed to the Salesians during the golden jubilee of the missions "for all the benefits granted to our Society" during the last years of missionary work. *Let us turn in admiration, gratitude and prayer* to the thousands of confrères who, in their different ways, have built souls into the kingdom of God.

Don Bosco wanted the Good News to be kept at the forefront of the Congregation's thought and action: following the example of our missionaries, who dedicated their lives to their mission, often to the point of the supreme sacrifice, let us "relive the ideal of Don Bosco intensely." (cf. *ASC*, no. 244, 1966).

And may our Father bless our efforts.

Fr. LUIGI RICCI  
*Rector Major*