

## I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### LET US LOOK TO THE FUTURE WITH THE OPTIMISM OF DON BOSCO

Rome, April, 1975

*My dear confreres and sons,*

I have been thinking for some time about the subject of this letter, and I must say that I have also been prompted to write it by the requests and suggestions contained in the letters that continually flow in to me from all parts of the Salesian world. These letters are always valuable, and I try to reply to all of them. I would like to say, in passing, how helpful I find these comments which come from the heart, a chorus of voices differing widely in key, language and emphasis, but all converging on a single idea: Don Bosco.

Coming back to the present letter, you will be glad, and possibly surprised, to hear that, while I was marshalling ideas to put into it, I received an 'open letter' which was a cordial exhortation . . . to keep cheerful.

The writer of this letter was unknowingly opening a door that for me already stood wide. But it shows that the idea of optimism, linked with hope and joy, is a topical one. The times we are living in are a temptation against hope, especially for those who cannot think straight and whose faith is shaky.

I am not speaking of those whose attitudes are a projection of a warped personal background that darkens their thought, morality and vocational aspirations; these people are going to be

steeped in pessimism, anyway. No, I am referring to all those, including ourselves, who are looking on sorrowfully at the events, often disconcerting, that are taking place in the Church, the religious life and our own Congregation. A little calm reflection on this point, which is highly topical for us Salesians, will be helpful. It has been said that Jesus was the Great Optimist, and that His crucifixion provided the unique and greatest proof of it.

We Salesians are sons of a Father who found the strength to face and overcome the most incredible difficulties and surmount obstacles that, humanly speaking, would have broken the most tenacious of wills. The Church has every reason to apply to him the words of Scripture: 'When all hope was gone, he still hoped'. His hope, rooted in faith, made him steadfast even in the face of really desperate situations.

As Christians and Salesians, then, whilst being realistic in assessing situations, we must look calmly and carefully to see if the prospects offer some hope somewhere.

## **1. Crisis and optimism in the Church**

We all know that we are living in an era of profound change, with its attendant confusion, in every sector of life. Both the Church and the Congregation feel, and in a certain sense reflect, the grave crisis the world is going through at the moment. There is no gainsaying the massive weight of informed opinion on this point.

### *The crisis of today*

Not long ago Cardinal Garrone wrote as follows: "The explosive rate of progress, its dizzy acceleration and extension into the space age, have found man unprepared and have put the world in danger of losing sight at one stroke of the reason for progress: MAN, threatened physically by imminent catastrophe,

and, more ominous still, at sixes and sevens in his moral consciousness. And so even the proper development of the human person, generally accepted without question as a Good Thing, can degenerate into a doctrine of freedom and autonomy that destroys true education and respect for authority" (G.M. Garrone: *La Chiesa 1965-1972* - LDC 1972, 62).

In a certain sense, there is a connection between this view and the words of the Holy Father: 'Perhaps never before have literature, entertainment, art and philosophy borne more ruthless witness to man's shortcomings, mental incapacity, overpowering sensuality, moral hypocrisy, ready delinquency, rebellious cruelty; they show up his abjection, his vacillating personality; and the entire indictment is based on a terrible and apparently irrefutable argument: "This is man! This is the great and wretched child of the times! This is the way life is!"' (Pope Paul: Christmas Message, 20-12-1968).

Now, it is not to be wondered at that the Church, on pilgrimage in a world it cannot push aside, should be caught in the backwash of this turmoil. Cardinal Garrone speaks of an 'irresistible avalanche of ideas, theories and doctrines in the midst of which it is very difficult for the believer to find or keep his footing. Even the most fundamental points of the faith seem to lose their certainty and to be thrown open to discussion. The better ones grope around, looking for the vestiges of the great certainties on which they built their lives: the Resurrection, the Real Presence, eternal life. There seems to be no longer any difference between the ideas of some theologian or the other, even one outside the Church, and the recognized, traditional doctrine of the Church . . .' (op. cit., 59).

A very realistic picture is given to us by Pope Paul himself: 'A corrosive spirit of criticism has become fashionable in some sectors of Catholic life. There are magazines and newspapers, for instance, whose sole object seems to be to carry unpleasant news about the Church. These are often presented in a one-

sided way, and possibly touched up to make them more spicy, with the result that the readers are conditioned to adopt a negative and suspicious attitude, a systematic mistrust, a preconceived contempt for anything ecclesiastical: persons, institutions, policies. Their readers are led to throw aside the respect and solidarity that every good Catholic and, indeed, any unbiassed reader, ought to have towards the ecclesial community and its authority.' (Pope Paul VI: Address at the General Audience of 18-9-1968).

So the Church is dragging along a host of negative elements, and these elements, in turn, are rooted in a society swept by the cyclone that is blasting every aspect of life, social, economic, civic, right down to its cultural, moral and religious infrastructure. We are facing an evolutionary crisis entailing changes that are among the most radical ever known to history. And, strange to say, this is happening in spite of — though some would say, because of — a technical and scientific advance without precedent, but regrettably turned to the advantage of the individual person or group.

### *The many crises of the past*

You may, perhaps, want to put the question: is this kind of trial, a crisis of this gravity, something new for the Church? You don't have to read very far into Church history to realize that things have been just as bad in the past. I'll leave you to follow up and think about the following references:

When the Church was born in the gloom of Calvary, anyone — and the apostles were the first to admit it — would have spoken of an irreparable failure. But we know what happened on the following Saturday night . . .

There followed the persecutions: it seemed that they must annihilate the Christians and their creed. And yet the blood that was shed so profusely became the seed of a new Church.

The barbarian invasions, and then the incursions of Islam,

again gave rise to the feeling that Christianity was on the verge of extermination. However, despite painful amputations, the Church surfaced once more in the rejuvenated 'churches' that sprang up from the mingling of cultures and civilizations.

The schisms and heresies of later centuries caused some sad moments for the Church, but she emerged from them purified, and, after these exhausting struggles, found once again that evangelical urge to set out across the oceans and carry the Good News to peoples unknown at that time.

It seemed that the French Revolution would leave the Church prostrate, but it failed to do so. Even the nineteenth century, though it turned out to be a period of struggle, often violent, finished up by being one of the most fruitful periods in her history: one has only to think of the saints and other outstanding Christians, the missionary movement, the rise of the Catholic laity.

And even our own century, which suffered at the outset from the ravage of modernism — what astonishing things it has seen in nations and between nations, things that seemed beyond imagination in the past. Look at the way the Catholic Action movement has spread in every land, for instance, or the phenomenon of the Secular Institutes.

What can we conclude from this sampling of Church history? The Church is well aware that her history is one of struggle. 'Her Founder did not predict, and much less did He promise, a peaceful life. What He did promise was that He would be with her to the end of time.' (G. Courtois: *Incontri con Dio*, 2, 172). The events of twenty centuries are there to show that the mysterious barque has always been battered by storms, but even when it seemed that it must surely sink, it weathered the storm and sailed on.

Furthermore, the life of the Church — and this is a point to keep in mind — is not reckoned in generations, nor is it confined to one particular part of the world. Cardinal Schuster, the noted historian, recalled in this connection what happened to

the Churches of the Middle East and North Africa. Flourishing at one time, they disappeared beneath the hordes of Islam as a Saharan oasis beneath the desert sand. But that did not mean the end of the Church; soon after, she was growing and developing in other lands and other continents.

I conclude these brief reflections with the words of Cardinal Geronzi, taken from his courageous book on the Church. After the clear and objective diagnosis already quoted, he remarks: 'We have no right to despair'. And the facts bear him out.

### *The confidence of the Holy Father*

Whilst we are following this line of thought, it will be of help to consider the words of Pope Paul. Without overlooking the negative side of the situation in the Church, he gives equal prominence to the positive: 'We should be ignoring, or misinterpreting very many "signs of the times" if we failed to identify, amidst all the current unrest and agitation, certain yearnings, certain indications which seem to us to be harbingers of a happy renewal.' (Paul VI, Audience given to the 6th General Assembly of the IEC, 11-4-1970).

Again: 'Thanks be to God, we seem to be able to discern (in the Church) a degree of goodness and hope that far outweighs the negative side; and even here an improvement can be confidently awaited. My chief reason for saying this is that I have experienced the resolute and unyielding loyalty of all — almost without exception — of our fellow-Bishops: loyalty to the Church and to the humble Vicar of Christ, the Lord. This loyalty has been re-affirmed in situations sometimes far from easy, giving to the Church the calm security that comes from the union of the Episcopal College with its Leader . . . .

Thus we are comforted by the evidence that repeatedly reaches us from all parts of the world. I have in mind especially the places which, on account of external conditions, have been separated from us for longer periods; where religion and the freedom of the

Church still suffer from unjust restrictions. It is almost as if these made us feel more strongly the necessity for communion with the hierarchical centre of the Church; and they strengthen the ties of love with the Father and the brethren ...' (Address to the Cardinals, 23-12-1968).

The Holy Father, by his words and actions, asks us to have confidence, an immense, personal confidence in the risen Christ, the source and cause of all our hope; it is the confidence of St Paul: "...I know whom I have trusted." (II Tim., 1,12). The thought has been paraphrased by Chesterton, the famous humorist, in typical style: 'Christianity has often died, but it always rose again, because it had a God who could get out of the tomb.'

## **2. Optimism and crisis in the Congregation**

A spontaneous remark arises here: this is all very true of the Church, which has Christ and the power of renewal through trial and purification; but what about the Congregation?

Let us think a while about this, calmly but frankly. I do not think the conclusion will be in any way depressing, even though some may take alarm at the shadows that seem to have fallen across the Congregation. Could we really hope to escape the effects of the general crisis in the Church? The Congregation is made up of men who, by the very fact of what they are and what they do, are moving in a turbulent society constantly clamouring about the world-wide crisis it has on its hands. The Congregation could not remain unscathed by this 'atomic fall-out', which gets in everywhere and affects everything in one way or another.

The General Chapter, through months of toil, following the policies of the Church in Council, drew up guide-lines, directives, Constitutions and Regulations specifically intended to meet the new requirements deriving from the profound and irreversible changes taking place, always having regard for the character and

charism of the Society. No one claimed that the work was perfect; but it was recognized, even outside the Congregation, as courageous and yet wise and down to earth. And what response was made to this?

Well, some praiseworthy efforts were made to put it into practice; but we must admit, in all sincerity, that in some cases we are still marking time; elsewhere the effort just withered away, or, worse still, became deformed, as though the General Chapter had thrown out the fundamentals of the consecrated life or of the Salesian mission.

*Our crisis is a reflection of the general crisis*

Here, of course, you will ask: 'What are the causes, at least in general, of these negative reactions?' There are always weaknesses and limitations in the doings of men, and the task of renewal is a complex one; however, I think we can isolate two fundamental and opposing factors that, to some extent, have aborted the action that should have resulted from the General Chapter.

First: there is a kind of inertia caused by an allergy to anything new, a blind and deaf insensibility to the changes that have taken place in society and especially in its youth sector. It is a false fidelity that fails to distinguish between the essential and the accidental, the permanent and the transitory.

Second: going to the other extreme, there is the acceptance in theory and practice of many of the ideas fashionable in the Church today that undermine the very foundations of faith, of the Gospel, of the Church itself. These ideas challenge the essentials: Priesthood, Eucharist, Papal Authority, and so on. From here it is only a short step to a concept that could be described as thoroughly subversive of religious life: vows, community, prayer, all crumble away.

Once these ideas find acceptance (materialistic theology, for example, and the theology of the death of God), even our vocation

begins to lose the sense of the supernatural. When that happens, its soul is lost and our mission becomes degraded and devoid of meaning. It ends up as a kind of agnostic attitude peddling the cause of personal freedom, or as a crushing socio-political indoctrination (but with no concern for personal freedom). Sometimes it becomes a flood of sympathy and kindness intended to soften up a target for evangelization (but never actually getting round to it). There is no need for further details. In my earlier letter against the soft and easy life (A.S.C. No. 276, October 1974, pp. 17-20, and especially 32-36), I have already described some of these negative practices that have found their way into some spheres of Salesian life.

Now it is clear that this secularism, for that is what it is, with all its moral and ideological ramifications, has nothing in common with the General Chapter or, *a fortiori*, with Don Bosco. These are deviations, distortions, arbitrary acts, excesses running counter to what the S.G.C. was trying to do. And the S.G.C. (I cannot stress this point too strongly) was completely permeated with a dynamic sense of rebirth.

To round off this point: it is essential to recognize that, if we love the Congregation, we must move off without further delay in the direction clearly pointed out to us by the S.G.C. Otherwise we shall be guilty, to a greater or less degree, of causing an unstoppable breach; further, we shall be writing off as meaningless the mission confided to us by Providence.

*Ours will be the optimism of the strong*

Here, the author of the open letter on optimism will perhaps be thinking: the Rector Major is painting an awfully pessimistic picture; everything about the Congregation seems to be negative. Some clarifications are indicated.

Ours cannot afford to be an ingenuous, over-simplified, unreal optimism, the trait of a temperament that is blind to

defects, aberrations, difficulties and risks, and therefore under-rates their importance.

Our optimism, following Don Bosco, is that of men who are strong in an unshakeable faith, and therefore strong in will. From this they draw the courage to work on, day by day, constantly, patiently, towards their goal: a clear-eyed courage that studies the best ways of reaching the objective, with periodical checks and adjustments and no thought of giving in to the inevitable difficulties; a courage, in fine, that knows just where it is going.

This is precisely what we are aiming at. I have outlined some negative aspects because, in a family of adults, all members must have a common sincerity and courage to recognize the seamy side of things. In brief, optimism for the man of strength, for the convinced Christian, for the son of Don Bosco, who was both enthusiastic and realistic where the Church was concerned, does not mean playing the ostrich: this is what the timid and the cowardly do. What we have to do is to look reality calmly and courageously in the face, and to accept the truth even if it is unpleasant.

But having said this, we must add at once, in deference to the realism of which Pope Paul gives us a constant example, that the negative aspects I have cited are only part of the canvas, the darker part. Thanks be to God that the Congregation does not consist only of black spots and blemishes, nor is lack of vitality a universal phenomenon. Indeed, there are notable and not infrequent high-lights that strengthen the heart and give rise to a well-founded optimism.

### *The Congregation has a future*

What, then, are we to think, what can we do, what is to be our attitude before the total reality of the Congregation? I would like to begin with a statement of some importance. Stay

with me here, because I believe that what I am saying is perfectly true.

Although it would be ridiculous to ignore the fact that our Congregation, like others, faces a variety of serious difficulties, have we the right to speak of a crisis of life and death?

First, let us put the record straight on this point: even though the Congregation may be accused of a certain functional disorder here and there in harbouring elements that are abnormal, even poisonous and corrosive, it nevertheless presents the general picture of a substantially healthy body.

The problems facing the Congregation today are not the ones Don Bosco had to face; they are different again from those that beset the Congregation after Don Bosco's day, though quite as certainly — and this is basic — they will not allow us to remain inactive before them. It is not enough merely to deplore them; and to wrap ourselves up in a fatal cocoon of discouragement and frustration is unthinkable. This is the reaction of a soul whose ideals are dead, bereft of the hope that informs the builder of the Christian Kingdom.

And now for a little reflection together. Painful trials are nothing new for the Congregation. So far they have been successfully overcome. Can the present ones be similarly resolved? For me the answer is a calm 'Yes', and it is based on sound reasons. Here are some of them.

### **3. Reasons for hope**

There is something that happens very often, something that makes me think. The Pope, and with him many others who are responsible for the government of the Church in Rome and throughout the world, as well as eminent laymen, who are sometimes non-Christians and non-believers, show a confidence in and esteem for the Congregation that at times make me feel worried and almost abashed.

a) *The Church and society have confidence in us*

This attitude is so obviously sincere and impartial, so widespread among people who are well acquainted with men and events; it is so constant, despite unfortunate episodes not likely to create a positive image of the Congregation, or at least of some of its members, that it cannot be without a solid foundation.

It is understandable that anyone looking from within at certain short-comings, misfortunes and defections may wonder somewhat sceptically about such appraisals; but perhaps he is overlooking the fact that the people who make these judgements do not get lost among the details of individual people and circumstances, but see the thing as a whole. And taken as a whole, as we have said already, the Congregation is seen in its service to the Church and to society as a healthy, effective organization.

I do not think it out of place to recall the words addressed by Pope Paul some months ago to a group of confreres taking part in the Second Course of On-going Formation. His words are typical of many statements of the sort: 'Providentially for the Church, we know that you are promoters and defenders of the genuine Christian spirit. You are masters of the technique — indeed, I would say you have the magic touch — of leading the youngsters of our age, so highly resistant to Christianity lived at depth, to the profession of their religion . . . . With all our heart we bless and encourage your dedication and specialization in this field.

So have no fear! Be good Salesians, sons of Don Bosco, and you will render a great service to the Church and to society.' (Welcome to the Salesians at the General Audience, 20-11-1974).

These words are typical of what the Pope says about us; and rather than arouse in us a sterile complacency, they should spur us on to deserve in full the esteem and trust of the Church.

b) *Our mission was never more badly needed.*

Quite apart from these external relations, has the Congregation internal reasons, all things considered, for looking to the future with confidence?

Today there are many congregations that have had to revise their mission radically. If we have a special need it is to dedicate ourselves more decisively to the young: they are the special object of our mission, after all.

We are all aware that, in these days, young people have been raised to a position of primary importance in society; youth is referred to as a new 'social status.' Add to this the fact that, in many parts of the world, it represents a tremendous, even explosive force. No, I don't think our mission will disappear for want of 'material' to work on. The Congregation is open to the future and looks ahead for this very reason, that it is directed to the service of the young, who are the hope of the future.

Our problem, then, lies not in the nature of our mission but in how to adapt it to new times and needs, to the new problems and susceptibilities. And here we have to look at ourselves, at our mentality, our lack of awareness, our peaceful life perhaps compounded with a mental blockage, so that we are prevented from understanding and accepting the many changes that have already come about and are still going on. These changes are often irreversible; but that does not mean that we must abandon our mission. On the contrary, we stay in the field and adapt our strategy.

Isn't this what Don Bosco did, the thing that singled him out as new and original? If he had been content to remain shackled to the easy-going way of those who graced their short-sighted sluggishness with the name of prudence, or dignity, or tradition, Don Bosco would still have been 'in the Filippi meadow', to use Don Caviglia's phrase. Or perhaps he would have given up and disappeared into the limbo of some small

provincial town . . . . Far from being intimidated by the problems of the times, Don Bosco accepted them and used the new conditions for his own ends.

c) *We do not have the difficulties of Don Bosco*

I am not overlooking the obvious objection: 'Don Bosco was Don Bosco, but we are far below him in stature, and the Congregation is going through a crisis that is neither simple nor trivial.' I would reply first of all by saying that it is a mistake to identify individual negative situations with the whole Congregation. And then we are not called upon to confront the vast accumulation of problems and difficulties that our Father had to overcome in the teeth of an army of adversaries in the Church and civil administration, some with good intentions, others his sworn enemies, intent on killing off the Congregation. The situation today is very different, and in many ways more favourable.

We have a rich and constant tradition coming from Don Bosco himself. Since the Founder's death, it has been clarified and strengthened by a century of experience, which is a secure guarantee for the future.

Thanks be to God, in the Congregation not only are there worthy men, well prepared and involved in the wide range of tasks offered by our mission, but those men are of all ages (I say it designedly), living their Salesian spirituality with an equally intense conviction and simplicity. I would especially like to point out how many confreres there are whose life is one of prayer: prayer that animates the vast and fruitful activity with which it is interwoven, Don Bosco-style. And this is true wherever work is being done in our Father's name.

d) *The many, many confreres who want to give themselves totally*

And what proof is there for the existence of apostolic and spiritual riches, which circulate like living blood in the body of

the Congregation? I have it in the replies I have received from all parts of the world to my invitation for the Centenary of the Missions. They come from confreres, young and old, whose only wish is to give themselves without reserve, for any place at all; many of them even ask to be sent to the places of greatest poverty, of greatest need, to those who are most abandoned.

This is surely a source of comfort. But this army, full of vitality as it is, makes no fuss: which does not mean that it is any the less effective. Little notice is taken of this fact, and the reason is simple: a falling tree makes much more noise than a whole forest growing in silence. 'And yet', as van Balthasar remarks, speaking of the Church, 'it should be a comforting thought that not only does evil remain more deeply impressed on the memory than good, but also the world cannot see, or can see only very indirectly, the good done by Christians. Who can estimate the acts of self-control by which evil has been prevented, the acts of selfless penance and charity, the volume of ardent and hidden prayer? Who besides God knows the experiences of the saints, who, carried up from obscurity to the heavens, lift whole periods of history off their hinges, thrust aside mountains of misdeeds, and redeem irretrievable situations? You cannot attend only to the debit side of the Church's ledger without taking into account these entries on the credit side.' (Urs von Balthasar: *Chi è il cristiano*, 14).

I think we have to make similar reflections on the Congregation, if we want to make a realistic diagnosis. To avoid making a superficial, biased assessment, you must know the Congregation thoroughly from within and in its totality; it cannot be assessed piecemeal or from the outside, nor by generalizing from local situations as though they applied to the whole Congregation, and in every case the credit side must be set off against the debit, even when the latter is real and cannot be ignored.

e) *Life begins again after every storm*

I have already referred to men of all ages in the Congregation who live out their Salesian vocation in faithful generosity. I think it will be useful to be more explicit.

There came a time when our young confreres were caught in a violent storm, and many were overwhelmed. And they weren't the only ones involved, either: there were older priests and confreres also. The phenomenon burst with the suddenness of a cyclone, a complicated affair with many contributory factors, some of them of distant origin, many coming from older members. There may be causes of this sad episode that would repay prompt and prudent investigation, at least in order to avoid the same mistakes in the future.

The Congregation suffered great harm, as did the Church itself and the other orders and congregations. But it must be said, too, that the hurricane uprooted a number of sick and sterile plants, and stripped off the dead leaves.

A glance around the world today would show that the height of the storm has apparently passed, leaving a very obvious trail of destruction. However, if we seem to be standing before a city that has been struck by a tornado, it is equally true that life shows signs of stirring once more. We are picking up the pieces, helped by the experience that has been gained.

This is particularly evident in the vital area of vocations.

f) *An upward trend in vocations*

An immediate boost to our hopes is provided by the upswing in vocations in a number of Provinces; and they are vocations amongst young people who are much more mature and better prepared than earlier generations. This is confirmed by the improved perseverance rate among novices of recent years.

These young people are well aware of the troubles that have come upon the Provinces, and it is nothing unusual to hear them

say that they have no desire to imitate those confreres, some of them quite young, who neglect prayer, try to rationalize their lack of faith, find Salesian work distasteful, play down the importance of knowing Don Bosco, and make no effort to live his spirituality. The rejection of such attitudes on the part of the new generations is without doubt a very comforting sign.

Let me dwell a little longer on this matter of new vocations and quote you some figures, which, unfortunately, are incomplete. My apologies.

In the current year, the two Provinces of the U.S.A. have 21 novices, Venezuela has 19, Sao Paulo 18, Central America 12, the two Provinces of Colombia have 18.

In Europe, the Province of Bilbao has 31 novices, 4 of them Brothers; Madrid and León have 40, including 15 Brothers. England and Ireland have 25 novices between them, the two Polish Provinces 29.

In Asia, the Indian Provinces have almost 100 novices, the Philippines have 19, Vietnam 17. In Australia on Don Bosco's feast, 7 young men made their first profession. The Provincials assure me that these novices give good hopes of perseverance because they have had a better-planned period of probation, have been selected more carefully, and have come to the Congregation older than in the past.

Now to draw conclusions. Given that the presence of good vocations is a sign of regenerative power in the Congregation, and a prerequisite for its continued existence, surely this revival in numerous Provinces is an immediate cause for confidence in the future of the Congregation?

*We are not yet out of the tunnel*

We are by no means out of the tunnel yet: there is still some way to go, still some building to be done, and not a little rebuilding. I admit that the vocations sector is still not universally promising. It would be unpardonable self-deception

to be satisfied with the improvement that has been made, even though it is real and encouraging. We need to give due attention to the negative situations, whatever the causes may be. Some of these may even be external to the Province concerned, but they spring in the last analysis from the Provincial and the local Communities.

We need the courage and sincerity to avoid trite explanations and to face reality so that we can trace the causes and find appropriate remedies. There *are* Provinces where the situation is very serious, and could become disastrous; but these are isolated cases, which do not compromise the Congregation as a whole.

Now we come to the question of numbers. As you know, the number of Salesians has fallen considerably in recent years, for the reasons we have already mentioned. This is a cause of regret, but we must add at once that it would be still more regrettable and harmful if we who are left were not to make the necessary adaptation to the present-day needs of the Church and the Congregation.

Today, much more than in the past, the success and true greatness of the Congregation are not to be measured by numbers but by the quality of the Salesians. By 'quality' I mean especially the quality of their religious and apostolic life—and don't take me up wrongly here. I'm not saying that our confreres must all be spiritual supermen bestriding the apostolic scene. This is what Pope Paul has to say: 'It is not numbers that count, but fervour and dedication: what is important is the spirit.' (Address at the Public Audience, 20-11-1974)

A growing number of mediocre, unfaithful Salesians could be weakening, possibly self-destructive, rather than a source of strength and growth. One writer has observed that, if you multiply mediocrity, the result is not a building up but a spreading out. You can imagine what the results could be in our case. The level of our community life would fall at an increasing rate.

So, although we do not ignore numbers altogether, let us not make a fetish of them.

Today, after ten years' experience, we feel that our first concern must be quality: we must not repeat the mistakes of the past, the full seriousness of which could be seen only in these years of crisis. I am referring to a certain superficiality and carelessness in admitting candidates; to certain benevolent judgements in cases of serious psychological or vocational defects, or of character-defects that were never properly assessed, with the result that the candidates were allowed to go forward when they should never have been permitted to do so.

*g) New initiatives are flourishing*

Returning to our present situation: there are still more reasons for having confidence. Here are some of them.

Great strides have been taken in putting the directives of the Special General Chapter into effect to bring about the renewal sketched out by Vatican II, although I admit that there has been some initial dragging of feet.

This point has come out clearly in meetings with Provincials, Rectors, Provincial Councils, and hundreds of confreres. It is confirmed by the Superiors who have visited individual Provinces; it is confirmed also by many of you.

In very many communities, serious and praiseworthy efforts have been made to give to prayer its proper place and to make it efficacious, freeing it from the palsy of formality without going to the other extreme of arbitrary exaggerations, which impoverish it and make it an occasion for drifting away from God instead of getting closer to Him. Many communities, after a rough passage, have now succeeded in developing a happy atmosphere of sincere respect, fraternal understanding and solidarity.

And what about the way of life that combines generous effort with Salesian austerity to make each Community a happy

one? More than one Provincial has been able to tell me this sort of thing: 'We are poor indeed, but we are happy in our poverty.'

I wish I could give you an adequate idea of the ferment of real growth that is taking place in the Congregation. It would be practically impossible to draw up an exhaustive list of initiatives designed to bring about the spiritual renewal that needs to take place across the Salesian spectrum. But at least we can mention one or two items.

There are the Courses of On-going Formation at the Centre. Those who have taken part in them are the best witnesses to the good derived from them, as seen in the way they live and the work they do. Similar courses are at present being arranged for Brothers and missionaries, and there are others being organized in the Regions. They are indeed a blessing.

The *Two-year Course of Spirituality* at our Salesian Pontifical University is being attended by dozens of confreres, Brothers as well as priests, who draw good, meaty sustenance from it for carrying out their apostolate in the Provinces. Besides this course, there are others for up-dating in Theology and Education, not only at the U.P.S. but in many other centres as well.

As for *retreats*, and especially annual retreats, satisfactory progress is reported in making them more effective and better adapted to the new mentality. Confreres are also being trained for this.

You know already what efforts are being made to promote systematic historical studies on Don Bosco, the Congregation and our spirituality. These riches must no longer remain unexploited.

You will also be glad to hear that nearly everywhere we are giving our *collaboration*, often much appreciated, to the local Church in many different ways: the mass media, specialized assistance in particular fields, the care of immigrants, the instruction of the illiterate, etc.

And, in our own field of operations, the catechetical centres

and youth centres are very numerous. I hear also of interesting developments in constructive pastoral work in the schools, and in the establishment of *educational communities*, where lay people and parents share responsibility with the Salesians. And this happens in youth centres as well, those courageous works designed to help difficult and neglected boys in poor neighbourhoods.

New forms of youth movements and associations are springing up. From many places I hear of new vitality and new ideas in this field, but with all of them the chief concern is to give something solid to the youngsters and not harmful substitutes. As a matter of fact, young people are the first to ask for this wholesome and palatable fare, to demand a serious work which will cause Christ to grow in their souls.

I also see with pleasure that, in some places, properly prepared groups of young people are offering themselves as *volunteers* in the real missionary spirit. I know that some of these have had the generosity to embrace the consecrated life.

Interesting though these developments may be to read about, if you wanted to understand what our men are doing, the joyful sacrifices made by young and old, you would really need to live on the missions, where they spend themselves for those poor people who have very few material goods but who are rich in their simplicity and faith. In this typical mission-country, I must mention the many confreres who work with great dedication, humility and Christian charity amongst *the poorest wretches* of the slums, favelas, bidonvilles... The names are different, but the calamity is the same: the depths of human and moral misery. And the ones who always come off worst are the young. It is to these that our confreres, being Salesians, give their first attention.

If there are any of us who are living a flat and colourless life, the very existence of these thousands of generous confreres should be enough to convince them that the Congregation is alive

and vibrant, it is fertile and has a mission which it is fulfilling with feverish energy in the Church of God.

Finally, I think of the Salesian Co-operators, and especially the young Co-operators. This great apostolic force, with its renewed consciousness of the mission handed to them by Don Bosco, is in a state of continuous expansion. And I could continue with this list of positive phenomena, but I think I have said enough to give you a fair idea of how very vital and dynamic the Congregation is today.

*It is for us to build the future of the Congregation*

From these considerations, I think we can reasonably deduce that we have the right, and the duty, to look to the future of the Congregation with complete confidence.

The source of our hope lies primarily in the Risen Christ. It is a hope that is rooted in and nourished by faith, the faith that made our Father the new Abraham who 'in hope believed against hope.' Thousands upon thousands of builders of the Kingdom have been spurred on by faith to attempt the impossible; and amongst them are countless Salesians, well-known and not so well-known. Faith must sustain us too: 'Lord, increase our faith,' we should say with the apostles; and this, I think, is the whole point.

But this is not enough. Although our hope finds its nourishment in Christ, God, in the mystery of His economy, does not wish to do for us what we should do for ourselves. 'God helps those who help themselves': He does not make Himself a substitute for us, He does not do what we ought to do, and, at a human level, He leaves all the responsibility to us. But if we do our best on our side, God gives us added strength. This is what happened to Don Bosco.

And so we must work with God if we want Him to be the author of our hope. Just as our predecessors have built up the Congregation in the past hundred years and more, so now

we must bear the responsibility for its future. When I say 'we,' I mean that no one is free of such responsibility. We must have a lively understanding of this obligation: each of us, according to the rôle Providence has assigned to him, with his personality, cultural background and personal standing, has the power to be a builder of the Congregation's future. And by the same token, he has the tragic possibility of destroying it.

I remember a film I saw years ago that put across in a striking manner the idea of how a state could disintegrate not through the action of its external enemies, but from the combined destructive action of its own citizens. Massive walls were shown, made of enormous blocks of stone. The juts and recesses were filled with myriads of tiny men, each armed with a pick-axe. These lilliputian men were busily engaged in chipping away, and, as they did so, the giant blocks first became dislodged, then tottered and finally came crashing down. The massive walls, which at first sight appeared impregnable, were eventually flattened by those thousands upon thousands of little blows.

The story needs no comment. It represents a reality for us too. And destructive action can take many forms: resistance, deviations, absenteeism, lack of trust...

In this connection, I would like to invite you to read again, with particular attention Don Bosco's dream of the 'Meeting of the Devils,' which had been called to plot the destruction of the Congregation (*BM*, 17, 384-387). You will find there some food for thought on our present situation, *mutatis mutandis*.

But it requires no great effort to convince ourselves that, if we are all united in our constructive work, the Congregation will overcome this time of trial. I repeat: no one is without value in these operations; there is space and work for everyone. The Rector Major and his Council, the Provincials and Rectors carry the heaviest responsibility, it is true; but there is little they could do without the hard work of the individual confreres.

To be constructive we must be united, that is, we must all pull in the same direction. This means that all of us must accept the Special General Chapter and its implications wholeheartedly, entering into its spirit and objectives. These objectives are entirely above board, they respect the past, they are not permissive, so there is no fear that they will lead to the ruin of the Congregation, nor to a secularism that would dry up the living source of the Salesian vocation.

The S.G.C., in the spirit of our Father, wanted to impress on the Congregation a dynamic sensitivity to the times, which would give substance to our consecration and make our mission fruitful. The Holy Year, our Missionary Centenary, the Provincial Chapters of this year and the intercontinental Provincials' meetings, soon to take place, all of these I would call providential occasions for promoting the healthy development of the Congregation. It is a sincere, courageous overhaul of what we have done in the last few years, an opportunity to set things right with firmness and precision, so that we can make steady progress.

The news that we have received so far about the Provincial Chapters is very encouraging. Let us go forward together, then, the young and the not so young, in this union of purpose and fraternal charity which was the constant concern of our Father.

For the rest, the vision of a 'city divided against itself,' with its consequent dissolution and death, serves as a spur and a warning to us to make ourselves 'one heart and one mind,' convinced and effective architects of renewal along the lines given us by the S.G.C.

#### **4. Joy, the visible sign of optimism**

So far I have spoken of the optimism we ought to base our lives and actions on in this kind of trial, and I have pointed out the natural and supernatural motives for it. There has

been no attempt to cover up the pressing realities that are all around us, demanding the reaction of a strong faith rather than the inaction of a passive acceptance.

But I don't think that these reflections would be complete without a word on the natural, sensible and typically Salesian expression of our optimism: I mean joy.

### *The joy of the Christian*

Fr. Courtois, in an interesting little book entitled *Good Humour*, asserts: 'Contrary to what Jansenism would have us believe, joy is an essentially Christian virtue.' This is what Chesterton says: 'Joy is the great secret of Christianity.' Claudel explains it like this: 'Joy is the first and last word of the Gospel. The angel appeared to Mary to give her news of a great joy, which was later confirmed by the angels who appeared to the shepherds; and the last word of Jesus during the Supper and before the Ascension was: "so that your joy may be full, and life may abound in you."'

Jesu worked his first miracle not to cure sickness, nor even to convert a sinner, but simply because the joy of a family-feast was imperilled. But then Jesus consecrated joy and shared it on many occasions; so much so that, in the Gospel, we see how keenly sensitive He is to the things that enrich the human spirit and gladden the heart. He enjoyed the sights of nature: the flowers of the field, the golden grain at harvest time, the calm beauty of the Lake of Genesareth. He enjoyed the flaring torches that lit up Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. He loved and turned naturally to the intimacies of the family and of holy friendships. He did not disdain to wear a cloak on feast-days, or to take part in a wedding-feast." (Raoul Plus: *Seminare la gioia*, 104)

One can understand, therefore, the force of the greeting often used by Jesus with his disciples: 'Be filled with my joy' (cf. Jn 15, 11).

It was natural for St Paul, in the midst of his many trials, to repeat in his letters with moving insistence: 'May you always be joyful in your lives in the Lord. I say it again: Rejoice!' (Phil. 4, 4).

It follows from all we have said that a habitual attitude of sadness would be anti-Christian. Such a contradiction—unfortunately by no means infrequent—prompted this vehement reproof of Christians by Bernanos: 'Where the deuce have you hidden your joy? No one would think, from seeing the way you live, that to you and you alone was promised the joy of the Lord.' And Paschal says: 'No one is so content as a true Christian.'

The point is this: the true Christian is full of radiant joy, and to be a true Christian means to live intensely the teaching and example of Jesus in the Beatitudes.

### *The joy of the Salesian*

Now, if this is true of every genuine Christian, how much the more does it apply to us Salesians, sons of a saint who brought the characteristic note of joy to the building up of his educational works.

Don Bosco 'built walls of light' for his sons. He once suffered much on finding that, instead of the singing, smiling, light-hearted bustle, the openness and cheerfulness that normally prevailed in the house; 'the shouts and the songs could no longer be heard, the lively activities were gone; instead boredom, weariness and ill-humour could be seen in the actions and on the faces of many of the boys, together with a lack of trust that brought pain to the heart.' (Letter from Rome, 1884)

Joy is very much part of the Salesian way, with all its important implications. The constant teaching of Don Bosco, seen in a thousand examples, leaves no doubt about it. There is no need to give any here: you can find plenty of them in our rich literature.

But I would like to quote that pithy Article of the new Constitutions, No. 47: "Let nothing disturb you," Don Bosco used to say. Because God has sent us, we have confidence in his providence and (shall) not be discouraged by difficulties. There is also the optimistic humanism of St Francis of Sales, which helps us to believe in the natural and supernatural resources of man without, however, ignoring his weakness. With this background, we know how to make our own what is good in the world and refuse to lament over our times. We "hold fast to what is good," especially if it is attractive to the young. We make our own St Paul's exhortation "Rejoice in the Lord always." This is the witness we must give to youth. "... The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, ..." and this is where our own hope and our openness to the Spirit is rooted.'

As you can see, in this article all the richness of Salesian joy and optimism is happily summed up. These are riches that have come down to us from our Father to nourish the life of the Salesian as a religious and educator in the faith.

Fr. Aubry, in his book *Una Via che conduce all'Amore*, has an excellent and highly persuasive commentary on this article, which is very characteristic of our spirit.

What is the practical conclusion? The real Salesian is one who diffuses joy, the evangelical joy typical of Don Bosco. If this is what it is going to be, Don Bosco's joy, it must obviously spring from and be fed by Don Bosco's faith, and that was overflowing with charity.

It has been rightly said that 'fundamentally, joy is always the fruit of love.' And so the radiating of joy, with calm good humour and understanding, working with others and sharing the ups and downs of life with them, must be part of our being and of our mission.

And there are innumerable ways of doing this, some of them very simple: the innocent joke, the happy remark that defuses an explosive situation, softening the effects of a bitter remark,

remembering the anniversary of a confrere, becoming one with the Community, unobtrusively helping it to grow in charity. These are all real contributions, though hardly noticeable, and they are indispensable for creating the serene atmosphere that we all long for . . . and we all long for it because that is the way the heart of man is made.

This need for joy is felt all the more today, when 'Men are much less happy than they were long ago . . .' 'Our so-called civilization has wiped the smile off mens' faces: gigantic office-blocks, assembly-lines, sky-scrapers, stress, impersonal environment. Outlook gloomier and gloomier!' M. Thielicke: *Il sorriso dei Santi e dei Pazzerelli*, 74).

We must react, then: absorb joy to give it out again in the conviction that, as Romano Guardini says, and he never wastes words: 'A smile is one of the weapons of the human soul.' And let us not forget that we do not cease to be men of our time on the day we make our religious profession.

Blessed are those confreres who, by their attention to the small needs of others, spread this joy, redoubling the energies of the soul, and for that matter, doing physical good as well. The value of what they are doing for their confreres they may not even imagine.

### *The Eleventh Commandment: joy*

The Salesian is consecrated for others, especially the young and those on whom life smiles least. His vocation, in its widest and richest sense, is to be an educator. Now, to educate, that is, to enlighten the intellect and lead it to truth, to strengthen the young will and so bring it to live what is good and true, is a difficult and delicate task, and nowadays is more difficult and delicate than ever. This is where joy comes in—it is a powerful and necessary ally.

Fr. Auffrey quotes an expert in education, Richter, who has a picturesque way of describing joy in education: 'Like the eggs

of a bird, like the young of the turtle-dove, a child at first needs nothing but a little warmth, and this it finds in the joy that, like the rays of the dawn, enables its infant strength to grow and mature. Joy is the heaven beneath which everything, except evil, can grow.' (From A. Auffray: *Il Metodo Educativo di Don Bosco*, 62)

Fr. Caviglia has this to say of Don Bosco, priest and educator: 'Don Bosco was a saint of good humour, and to talk to him gave joy to the soul. Happiness and serenity for him were moral factors of the first order that gave shape to his educational method, to the extent that he wanted a sharp eye to be kept on the sly and the sulky. That is why I say that joy was the Eleventh Commandment in the house.'

Don Bosco is very clear in expressing these pedagogical principles of his, and he presents his plan of education in a style that is simple, but rich in substance. This is how he puts his plan to the boys: 'I'll teach you how to live as good Christians, and, at the same time, make you happy and content.' (*Giovane Provveduto*, Introd.) And to this project he directed all his educational strategy and tactics. It should be noted in passing that Don Bosco always made his object clear: to inculcate Christian truth and values (nowadays we would say 'to evangelize'.)

Fr. Auffray again: 'It was Don Bosco's wish that joy should be the predominant feature of his houses; he poured it freely into the Regulations and impregnated every action of the day with it. He did not neglect discipline, which he wanted to be firm but not rigid, respected by the pupils, but not over-worked by the educator, a family affair, and never rigorous. But he wanted joy to be the pivot of all that his sons did in education; and he never departed from this principle.' (op. cit. 58).

For this reason Fr. Caviglia, writing about Don Bosco, could say: 'Whoever enters one of Don Bosco's houses cannot fail to

be immediately aware that he is in a realm of gaiety where happiness is supreme, not only because he sees everyone, boys and masters, mixing freely together, but also because the Salesians themselves always look happy and serene.' And, speaking of Valdocco, he adds: 'Even in church, in Don Bosco's house (with 1,400 boys) there is never a liturgical function, not even prayers are said without some singing. He preferred ordinary prayers to be said outside church; but in any case he wanted hymns sung, and liturgical music as well. He had singing in recreation, and whenever there was any kind of anniversary.' (A. Caviglia: *Don Bosco*, 92)

This brief outline will serve as a clear indication of the place joy has in our system of education, and is an invitation to every community and every individual to make a sincere examination of conscience. Our work, our actions, our community, how far do they reflect this serenity, this wholesome joy and happiness, which are at the same time Christian, evangelical, and truly Salesian?

I have used the word 'wholesome' because Don Bosco's kind of joy, which is Christian and beneficial, is not to be confused with that which is based on a frenzy of amusements and entertainments. These leave young hearts barren, and sometimes disturbed; they are mere diversions, specious substitutes for true joy.

Remember: the joy that fills the heart and binds a boy to his educators, the joy that creates an atmosphere where a vocation can blossom is closely bound up with our own personal joy, with our enthusiasm for living our vocation. Ultimately the boys will reflect what we are ourselves. We shall see in them our faith, our Christian love, the sincere dedication of ourselves to their good. These are the springs that feed the spirit of joy as Don Bosco understood it.

I would like to invite every confrere and every Community

to look again at this matter, which is certainly no secondary one, in the light of what our Father and our best traditions teach us. Don Bosco not only found new 'walls of sunshine' to enlighten and warm the hearts of his boys, but he wanted each one of them to be a source of joy for others. I am thinking of the theatrical productions, the band, the choir, gymnastic displays, and so on. And I recall with regret that, in some places, these joyful means of Salesian education have been abandoned. On the other hand, many of these same activities, which for years typified our educational system and which we have laid aside—theatre, music, etc.—have been taken up in a modernized form by other organizations, some of them even non-Christian, and used successfully to capture the interest of the young.

Of course, the mummified practices of a past age cannot be preserved; but it is one thing to renew, to re-create them without losing their substance, and quite another to abandon them altogether without putting anything in their place, thus making our system the poorer for their loss.

One of our past pupils, a thoughtful man well acquainted with the problems of the young, pointed out to me recently that the films we show them—and some of them are far from suitable—and the football matches and other sporting events are not the best things for creating that atmosphere of joy, understanding and familiarity that strikes deep into the minds of the boys. Much more now than in the past, these youngsters are likely to be the victims of frustration and distress, of misunderstanding and confidence, and create a climate that is constructive, helpingness. They need a kindness that is expressed in a friendly presence, in the quiet chat and the helping hand—I am thinking here of the new forms of group activity, which lead to friendship and confidence, and create a climate that is constructive, helping to make men and Christian of our young people, despite the difficult age into which they have been born.

*We have Someone at our side*

I think I have given you enough to think about in these points, which seem to me to be very topical. Let me now conclude. When, at our Baptism, we became members of the Church, the priest said: 'May this child serve the Lord in joy.' And this wish accompanies us on our path through life; it is a wish for us and all the souls for whom we become in any way responsible. But the path is long, often it is rough and dark; and then that baptismal wish clouds over, and discouragement threatens to swamp us.

Our best safeguard against the temptation to discouragement is the certainty that we are not alone. We are with Don Bosco, we are with legions of confreres, who have gone before us and still accompany us with the faith, courage and optimism of our Father. And especially we have One beside us who is living and powerful, walking with us as He walked with the disciples to Emmaus, One we do not see but who loves us and shares our struggles, our suffering and our pain. And He can be our strength and our joy, as He was for the two disciples, whilst we await our reward.

And so, when we feel in our hearts a sense of resentment, or sorrow, or doubt, let us draw closer to Him and repeat with faith and affection: 'Stay with us, Lord Jesus, lest darkness overwhelm our minds.'

In so saying, let us unite our voice with Mary's. She is the Help of Christians, Mother of the Church and of our Congregation: she is our hope.

Fr. LUIGI RICCI  
*Rector Major*