

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Dear confreres and beloved sons,

This time, for obvious reasons, I write you a short letter. I believe that many of you need additional time for a careful reading of, a serious meditation upon, and a thorough assimilation of, the lengthy and weighty letter on Spiritual Direction which I sent you last January.

Even the letters written by some of you seem to bear this out. It might be interesting to present here a cross section of the comments received; but for the sake of brevity I will limit myself to just one quotation.

Spiritual direction is a call to interior life

“The reason for my present letter,” wrote one of the confreres, “is your own letter on Spiritual Direction in the latest issue of the Acts of the Superior Council. For me that letter was an earnest and convincing call to interior life. I feel that it has done me much good. I hope that many of the confreres holding positions of responsibility or, like me, belonging to the rank-and-file, will likewise derive much benefit from it, that is, a real conversion to the sacrament of Penance and to Spiritual Direction.

One of the things which I admired very highly in Monsignor Cimatti — the same confrere goes on to say — was his persevering and childlike submission to his Superiors, especially in things spiritual. Though he was himself a Superior and was in charge of a difficult missionary work, nevertheless he kept in constant touch with the Superiors in Turin, in particular with the Economer and with the Missions Councillor. Like a humble confrere, he used to send his rendicontos to his Superior from Japan. After he stepped

down, he continued to make them with the same candor and simplicity to his Provincial, who had been a cleric in training under him. Even after he left the office of Rector, never did he fail to make his monthly manifestation. If he was unable to make it orally, he would put it in writing and mail it to him. (His last Rector, Fr. Crevacore, was also his biographer.) The reason that he used to give for such conduct was that he needed guidance...

I, too, need guidance, dear Father — concludes the confrere — and I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for having reminded me and my confreres of this great need. I must confess that in the past I have been chronically inconstant in the practice of Spiritual Guidance. But I am now determined to get with it and get the most out of it ».

Dear confreres, it is my sincere hope that all of you share this confrere's feelings and resolve.

There is much talk about renewal today — so much that perhaps the very word has become an meaningless cliché or a term surrounded by hazy or even wild notions. But let us be convinced that there can be no renewal unless one's heart is its starting point and its main staging area. This is a truth that has been frequently stated by the Holy Father in many of his authoritative documents and has been restated over and over again by the Superiors and by the General Chapter, and has also been confirmed by experience, particularly within the last few years.

I pray to our Father Don Bosco that he may obtain from the Holy Spirit for all the Salesians, especially those directly in charge of the Confreres' formation, the grace to be firmly convinced of this truth and to take practical steps towards carrying it out both in their personal lives and in their pastoral activities.

The earthquake in Guatemala

I am sure that all of you have followed the news reports on the awesome devastation caused by the earthquake in Guatemala last February.

We are grateful to God that He has spared the lives of our Confreres and of the Salesian Sisters: they have all come out unharmed. Some of the buildings were damaged, however. With a promptness and generosity equal to that which Don Bosco displayed in similar occasions, our confreres organized relief services for the victims.

It would be pretty close to impossible or at least impractical for me at this point to mention the many initiatives which the Confreres, the Novices and the pupils themselves undertook at that time and are still carrying on at present to relieve the sufferings of the Guatemalan victims. We at the Generalate, besides sending direct financial aid to the Salesian Communities whose damaged buildings need repair work done to become operable again, sent a handsome contribution to the Holy Father in response to his personal appeals on behalf of the victims.

I am well aware that many of the Provinces and local Communities — some of which are themselves quite in need of help — sent generous contributions either directly or through the Center to that Central American Province, which was so severely tried.

On behalf of the Guatemalan confreres I wish to thank all of you for associating yourselves to their tragedy and doing so much to meet their needs and relieve their sufferings in a spirit of Christian charity and Salesian solidarity. It is indeed a comforting thought that the beneficiaries of charitable works are as much the givers as the receivers.

Missions Centennial activities

As you may have found out from the various Salesian news sources, there is in the Congregation a steady stream of activities for the celebration of the Missions Centennial. One thing that I find most pleasing and comforting in this regard is the confreres' concern to utilize this wonderful occasion for pastoral purposes, particularly to stir up new vocations.

Later in this issue of the Acts you will find a report on

several Centennial activities as they have been first reported in Provincial Newsletters. I hope you will find them interesting and inspiring.

Here I would only like to mention the two commemorations of Card. Cagliero, our first and great missionary and one of Don Bosco's beloved sons, held in Rome and at Frascati (near Rome) on the fiftieth anniversary of his death. I urge you to read his life. His exemplary spirit and missionary dedication will, I am sure, serve as an inspiration for all of us to be more strongly attached to Don Bosco's ideals and teachings and to our Salesian vocation.

Some data on Salesian vocations

I now would like to call your attention to some important facts on our Salesian vocations, and then make some considerations and finally draw some practical conclusions.

I will start from taking a look at the statistics on the number of novices for the year 1975-76. This year we have roughly 400 novices. Needless to say, this number is considerably below the number we have had over the past years. Besides, these 400 novices are scattered far and wide, over the five continents. I must say quite frankly and quite regretfully that side by side with some Provinces which have a rich crop of novices, there are others which instead have none at all. True, in some Provinces this is due to the fact that the academic curriculum has been lengthened or expanded, and this in turn has caused a delay in the candidates' entrance into the novitiate; but this situation has not been verified in several of the Provinces...

Fortunately, today in a good number of Provinces, where some years ago a critical downward trend was experienced, there is a noticeable and encouraging pickup in the number of novices, and there is hope that it will continue.

Some observations and considerations

These facts call for some serious considerations, because here we deal with a matter of vital importance and concern to all of us — to all of you, whether you are the Superior of a Province or a local community or the rank-and-file member of a community. I invite all of you to reflect upon the following points.

1. It is invariably true that there are no novices where the aspirantates have been done away with or are set up wrong or are being run with wrong methods and a bad environment, or are staffed with the wrong kind of personnel, or take in the wrong kind of candidates.

2. Many of the young men who enter our aspirantates or postulantates or Sons of Mary's programs and later the novitiate are the products of our own houses, schools, etc.

3. In not a few of the Provinces a fairly large number of vocations has come out of our youth movements. Ordinarily, this is the case of young men in their 20's, some of which have received their College diplomas and have held a job.

4. As a norm, the perseverance index among the novices hailing from our houses and youth associations is now consistently better than in the past.

Some conclusions

From these data and observations — which, I admit, are not necessarily valid everywhere nor applicable to all cases, but seem nevertheless to contain some truth and some validity — let us try to draw some brief and practical conclusions.

1. Complaining is of no avail. We must be persuaded that vocations will come, if we deserve them, if we work for them. We must seriously reflect on the fact that, whereas we get no vocations in certain areas where we have large foundations, other congregations do get them, and at times get many of them. We

should then ask ourselves in all honesty and seriousness why this is so... We have to admit that there are no pat answers, no easy remedies, no cure-all solutions. We have to acknowledge that the situation is different in different countries under many respects. There are, however, certain common things that should help us to come up with certain answers and certain practical conclusions.

2. Vocations are intimately connected with the inner nature of an individual community and its outer projection or image, and the individual community is — let us never forget it — entirely dependent on the kind of individual members that make it up. Now, young men are particularly sensitive to certain aspects of our vocation, to the way we live them and project them before them. Let me mention just a few of them.

3. Our consistency of character and conduct is important. Are we really what we say we are? In other words, do we show in our daily lives that supernatural sense which alone should inspire our vocation and transpire from our speech, from our prayer life, from our catechesis, from our liturgies, from our way of acting, from our dealing with the boys? By being consistent with ourselves we give direction and meaning to our vocation and mission, and inspire others to a similar vocation and mission.

4. Young men today are particularly demanding with regard to one form of consistency — that of individual and communal poverty. They want a poverty that embraces a simple and austere way of living and rejects the all-too-common creeping bourgeois mentality, that is, the mentality that seeks daintiness at the dining-room table, easiness at the work desk, comfort in clothing, lots of leisure, long vocations... Also here we must be quite persuaded that youth is attracted to where they can see generosity without bounds, austerity with joy, work without stint and an almost allergic disdain for material comfort and ease and pleasure.

5. Youth easily pick up our charity lengthwise. They quickly sense whether charity reigns among us or not, whether we truly

love each other or are indifferent to each other, whether we really work together with a spirit of solidarity or each goes his own selfish way. If charity is vigorously alive and active among us, then it exerts a powerful attraction on those who have the seed of vocation; otherwise, they feel repelled, and any desire to join with us is choked off. This shows us how great the power of this virtue is on the minds on the young — a power which is exercised in numberless, subtle and often unconscious ways.

6. Our cheerfulness in carrying on our responsibilities whatever these may be, our very joy of being Salesians are open invitations to many a young man who, particularly at certain delicate moments of his life, may be searching for a way to serve God in holy joy.

7. Another important factor in the Christian formation of youth, especially in the development of Salesian vocations is person-to-person contact, friendly exchange, direct concern for their welfare. In spite of its recognized value, personal contact is all too often neglected with incalculable harm to prospective vocations. Its negligence, besides being contrary to Don Bosco's will, must honestly be acknowledged as one of the chief reasons for our having so few vocations.

There are certainly several good reasons for adopting group approach in our apostolic activities; but should this be a valid reason for neglecting the individual approach? Let each Salesian study how he can eliminate the causes of his failure to achieve this person-to-person contact with his boys which he must have for pastoral and vocational effectiveness.

8. Let us speak of Don Bosco and of our Congregation, and let us speak with the affection of sons speaking of their father and mother. Obviously, the more our boys get to know Don Bosco and our Congregation, all the more they are going to love them. Let us talk not just about our little house and our Province, but about the whole Congregation, in particular about

our Missions. Boys are extremely interested in our Missions. We need not feel guilty of triumphalism, if we give them a factual, well-documented picture of what our Congregation is doing all over the world. I recently received the news that some youth groups have become very enthusiastic about Don Bosco and our work as a result of their having been introduced to them with enthusiasm and realism. Yes, we must speak about them intelligently and lovingly, most of all lovingly.

9. Last but not least, the young need to have the issue of vocation put squarely before them. This, of course, can be done only by one who knows them well and keeps close to them, one who knows to choose the right moment and to use the right technique. A religious education class is a good occasion for dealing with the issue of religious and/or priestly vocation. As a matter of fact, talks on vocation should always be part of religious education.

10. Though I have said nothing about praying for vocations, it is apparent that all human means, policies and techniques for getting vocations can be effective only if they are supported by prayer. Without prayer any work for vocations is bound to fail miserably, for it would be like expecting a living response from a lifeless body.

It is not enough to talk about vocations

My dear confreres, much is being said and written nowadays on the issue of vocations. But we should not stop at that, thinking perhaps that we have done everything we could do just by talking and writing about it. We must act. *Each* of us must act — in his own sphere of responsibility, in his own manner, out of his own conviction that he can either foster or stifle vocations.

May Our Blessed Lord give us the grace to work all together by word and deed towards this common goal in spite of many difficulties and soon to have the joy of seeing more young men

bring new blood into our communities, for this is indeed our crying and urgent need.

Please have a constant remembrance of me and of the members of the Superior Council in your prayers, and be assured of our prayers in return. My affectionate greetings to all of you.

Fr. LOUIS RICCERI,
Rector Major