

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Dear Confreres,

On behalf of the Superiors of the Council and myself I would like, in the first place, to thank those of you who sent us their cordial Christmas greetings. To help reduce the now prohibitively high mailing charges, we decided not to reply on an individual basis, but to use this circular letter to thank both individuals and communities for sending such greetings. We hope you understand. We appreciate your thoughtfulness and assure you of our prayers for the new year.

Family news

I now would like to give you some news items that concern all of us as a family.

My trip to Argentina for the Missions Centennial. In November I was privileged to fly to Argentina to take part in the week-long celebration at the conclusion of the Centennial of the first missionary expedition. I was in San Nicolás de los Arroyos, where our men first started the work that was to spread as far south as the southern tip of Patagonia and everywhere else in Argentina.

The whole celebration was a most magnificent event. Church and State authorities and huge crowds of people — especially youth — gave their jubilant and enthusiastic participation. The Salesians, the Salesian Sisters and all the other members of the Salesian Family gave their full cooperation, and thus made the

celebration a great success. I clearly saw on that occasion how much the Salesian Family has done over the years for the advancement of that great country, not only on a spiritual level, but on all levels, and in how many wonderful ways the Argentinians showed their gratitude to Don Bosco and his sons.

As I repeatedly stated during those unforgettable days, there is every reason for us to hope that that celebration will bear much fruit, especially in the form of vocations. These would indeed be the best reward for the generous efforts of all those who in some way contributed to the success of the Missions Centennial celebration.

Provincial Chapters. Consoling news on Provincial Chapters getting under way and doing their job is reaching us here at the Generalate.

In another section of the present issue of the Acts you will find suggestions for a more successful celebration of the Chapter. Here I will only remind you once again that it is only through the humble prayer and the strong determination of each Salesian to contribute his share to the renewal of the Congregation that all of us can be assured of success in carrying out its weighty mandate.

VDB's First General Assembly. This is certainly a happy family news you will be pleased to hear. The Volunteers of Don Bosco will hold their First General Assembly in the coming month of July at the Salesianum. They have come a long way since their beginnings in May 1917: they presently number 650 members and work in 14 countries. Their Assembly will deal with important matters — also in view of the forthcoming pontifical approval of their Institute.

Let us be grateful to the Lord for having blessed so abundantly this live and fruitful offshoot of the Salesian Tree. As you know, it was the God-inspired brainchild of our Servant of God Fr. Philip Rinaldi. Let us all pray that this First General Assembly of the Volunteers of Don Bosco be a success.

"The Salesians and Politics". I have received letters of congratulations and support on the circular *"The Salesians and Politics"*. Yes, dear confreres, we do need clear ideas to direct and enlighten our social action, which should be preeminently an evangelizing one. Such clear ideas are found in the Magisterium of the Church, in the words and examples of our Holy Founder, and in the guidelines of the authoritative bodies of our Congregation whose responsibility it is to issue them in accordance with our spirit and mission.

A topic dear to our Father Don Bosco.

In this issue of the Acts I would like to present to you some reflections on a topic which was so very dear to our Father Don Bosco and which today is more timely than ever, i.e. our life of consecrated chastity. It is my sincere hope that these reflections will not only fill a need for guidance for all of us Salesians — a need which seems to be widespread, judging from the number of requests received from many parts of the Congregation — but also provide matter for discussion in the Provincial Chapters, since they will deal with this and other important topics concerning our consecration today.

LIVING A LIFE OF CONSECRATED CHASTITY TODAY

1. THE CHURCH ASKS US THIS WITNESSING

One of the most disquieting signs of the confusion and of the breakdown of moral values which characterizes our age of transition is without doubt the way problems of human sexuality are set up and solved. There is certainly no lack of honest and scholarly individuals who face these problems out of a sense of deep responsibility and with real competence; but one needs only to take a quick look at the means of communication — both

“big” and “small” — to become aware of the fact that we are confronted with an unbridled and extravagant commercialization and instrumentalization of sex — for instance, through pornography —, as if man’s sexual dimension were his only dimension.

It comes as no surprise that in this stifling and obsessive atmosphere chastity has become a discredited and ridiculed virtue. However, I would like to add immediately that this great virtue — a sign of the victory of the Risen Christ — does continue to attract the attention of this sex-crazy culture of ours, for certain wild manifestations that we see today belie a regretful longing for this lost good.

Despite all the fuss against priestly celibacy and consecrated virginity in recent times, the clearcut stand taken by the Vatican Council and by Pope Paul VI in some important documents of his magisterium, indicates how highly the Church in the twentieth century esteems the virtue of chastity. The Pope’s teaching here is very firm, and it is because of his firmness that many of those who have strayed away are beginning — as recent inquiries show — to head back to base.

As sons of Don Bosco, we are fully identified with the Holy Father, we wholeheartedly embrace his teachings. But it seems to me that we should not stop at that. In this age of moral permissivity, laxity and confusion the Church, in my opinion, has a right to demand of us the special witnessing of Salesian chastity in order to present it to the world for imitation.

Whether we are fully aware of it or not, the destinaries of our mission cannot be deprived of the charism of Salesian chastity. Salesian chastity is not a tiny dim star lost in the firmament of the Church; it is rather a great bright light of which the Church cannot be lacking.

Don Bosco’s characteristic virtue

The more deeply we study Don Bosco’s life, educational method and spirituality, the more keenly do we become aware

of the value of chastity in the economy of the Salesian world.

Some of his peremptory statements are known to all of us. "Should chastity fade away, the Lord would scatter and disperse our Congregation".¹ "Chastity", our holy founder used to state unequivocally, "must be the outstanding trait of our Society, just as poverty and obedience are respectively the hallmarks of the Franciscans and of the Jesuits".² Chastity "must be the hinge of all our actions".³ "Chastity is the foundation of all the other virtues and the focal point upon which they converge".⁴ And the quotations could go on and on.

Some one here might say: "This is an exaggeration, a theological error! Chastity would thus become the first Christian virtue!". One who would say this would in fact be twisting Don Bosco's thought altogether. For Don Bosco was not lacking in theological precision; he instead had a keen sense of proportion and balance. Never did he dream of rating chastity over other virtues, especially the theological ones!

Let it suffice to refer to the Dream of the Mantle. In it the diamond of chastity shines undoubtedly with a particular light: "This diamond shone with peerless brilliancy", we read in the narrative of the dream, "and it attracted one's attention as a magnet attracts iron".⁵ Yet, in this vision, chastity is not ranked first.

Also in his listing of the vows, Don Bosco never placed chastity in the first place. He never hesitated to put obedience out in front. To do so he was prompted by heavenly inspirations and by the deep understanding — common to all great founders — of the vow of obedience as the synthesis of the other two. In the very draft of the Constitutions there is "a special sequence

¹ *MB* 13, 83.

² *BM* 10, 29; *MB* 12, 224.

³ *MB* 12, 224.

⁴ *MB* 12, 15.

⁵ *MB* 15, 183.

in the order of chapters on the three vows”, remarked one of our scholars. “In the first place he (Don Bosco) always placed the one on obedience, and then in the traditional order those on poverty and chastity ».⁶

His thinking was extremely clear: « ‘In true obedience,’ says St. Jerome, ‘lies the perfection of every virtue,’ » we read in his *Introduction to the Constitutions*. « ‘All religious perfection,’ says St. Bonaventure, ‘consists in suppressing one’s own will’ »—a paradoxical expression which Don Bosco immediately explains—« in other words, in the practice of obedience. ‘The speech of the obedient will always be heard,’ says the Holy Spirit. St. Gregory concludes that ‘obedience leads to the possession of all other virtues and likewise preserves them all.’ »⁷

The logic of Salesian life is above all the logic of obedience. Yet this logic does not prevent Don Bosco from laying a particular emphasis on chastity, from speaking about it in terms which could be regarded overemphatic, were they not stating a fact and a reflection of his deep convictions. « How beautiful this virtue is! — he told his sons in 1976 — I would love to dwell on it for days... Of all the virtues this is indeed the most charming, the most dazzling and, still, the most delicate! »⁸ « O chastity, how great a virtue you are! »⁹

If his reason and practical disposition, enlightened by faith, led him to emphasize the value of obedience in religious life, his heart and sensitivity inclined him to prefer the virtue of chastity. That luminous and transparent something enwrapping his whole personality during his life was, as we have been told by those

⁶ Pietro Stella, *Le Costituzioni Salesiane fino al 1888 (The Salesian Constitutions up to 1888)* in *Fedeltà e Rinnovamento (Fidelity and Renewal)*, LAS Rome, p. 31.

⁷ *St. John Bosco to his Salesians in Constitutions and Regulations* (1972), pp. 235-236.

⁸ MB, 12, 564

⁹ MB, 10, 1106

who lived very close to him, nothing but a reflection of his chastity.

A characteristic of Salesian spirituality

Don Bosco's special love of chastity was bequeathed to his sons and became a most precious heritage of his family. It is certainly not meaningless that Rector Majors and General Chapters have on repeated occasions felt it their duty to deal with this topic.

Let it suffice to call your attention to the circular letters of Fr. Albera and Fr. Ricaldone and the deliberations of the more recent 19th and 20th General Chapters.

I, too, in obedience to a clear dictate of my conscience, have felt the need to discuss this topic with you — not that I have anything to tell you that has not been said by our two General Chapters (those were Chapters of *aggiornamento* and renewal also with regard to chastity!), but because I wish to exhort you to practise what they said. At the same time I would also like to exhort you with this brotherly reflection to treasure what the Church said on this subject. It is very important, particularly in this age of confusion, that all of us have clear ideas and strong motives on this characteristic element of our educational method and spirituality.

The continuing drain of vocations

I cannot let it go without mentioning it that one of the reasons prompting me to discuss this topic with you is the fact — sadly, still continuing to date — of defections among our confreres. For your consolation and mine I must add, however, that the rate of drain, after reaching its peak in the years 1968-1972, has since been steadily declining. But, much to our chagrin, the laici-

zation of priests is still going on at a steady-trickle rate. This is a serious thing indeed, because each priestly defection — whatever its reasons, which we of course cannot judge — causes a kind of deep gash or laceration in the body of the Congregation as well as in the body of the Church.

Thus situations are created which seriously disturb the orderly functioning of our communities, delay the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth and adversely affect the welfare of our boys. Allow me, therefore, to exhort you to pray even more earnestly than ever before for the great gift of perseverance, and to do your level best so that, when temptation comes, we may be found strong and ready to meet it successfully.

One of the areas in our formation in which we must commit ourselves to do more and better is that of chastity. I noticed that among the various reasons adduced by priests who requested to be reduced to the lay state there was almost always the experiencing of difficulties in the observance of chastity. I do understand perfectly well that this is in most of the cases a symptom rather than a cause; but who would dare deny that a correct 'management' of one's own chastity could have worked the individual into a position of strength to help him withstand the onslaught of temptation?

Also in view of this, then, I believe that this exhortation to consecrated Salesian chastity I am addressing to you is quite timely.

In the name of Mary — our Mother and Teacher of Salesian chastity — let us begin with some preliminary considerations.

2. OUR TIMES DEMAND A NEW APPROACH

First of all, following the lead of the Special General Chapter, let us point out certain facts which in the past either were not given their due attention or were overlooked altogether, but which can be easily referred to that new cast of mind with which the

Church now views earthly realities and human values. "Vatican Council II sets out for us the most recent attitude of the Church to human values," we are told in the Acts of the SGC. "Dealing with the values of created things, it is easy enough to see that they are specifically related to chastity — sex, love and marriage. The Council is clear in its acceptance of such values, without any hint of pessimism or manichaeism."¹⁰

Here we should point out three things which by their nature are bound to affect the practice of our chastity. They are: a more positive evaluation of sexuality, a more positive evaluation of womanhood, and a more positive evaluation of love.¹¹

Let us consider each of these points briefly.

A more positive evaluation of sexuality

In *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*, a weighty document issued by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in 1974, we read this meaningful statement: "Christian pedagogy, in accordance with God's revelation, has its own proper perspective and evaluation of sex. Christianity sees sex as part of God's creation, a reality which does not have the body alone as its object, but involves the entire human being, a reality which has a determining role in the way a man matures... It sees sex as a reality which is actualized in personal encounter."¹²

As you see, the teaching of the Church is set in a positive perspective on human sexuality. This alone should be a sufficient reason to calm down any confrere who might feel so exasperated by the exaggerated exaltation of sex and by the lurid purveyance of pornography in today's society that he might be tempted to

¹⁰ *Acts of the Special General Chapter (ASGC)*, 560.

¹¹ See *id.*, 563.

¹² Sacred Congregation for Christian Education, *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*, Vatican Polyglot 1974, 27. Hereafter referred to as: *GFPC*.

reject *en bloc* human sexuality (its positive aspects included) and decide to turn his mind off completely and forever from anything connected with sex.

As educators, we cannot but give due consideration to the profound changes that have taken place in this field. In times past body and soul were seen in such stark antithesis as to leave little room for a vision of mutual integration and vital interdependence. Today instead we stress the latter type of relationship.

Man not only *has* a body, but *is* a body. This means that in practice human nature exists only as male or female. This fact marks and affects a person's whole being — not only his or her body, but also all his or her powers, so much so that there is a distinctly male way of imagining, thinking, feeling and acting, and there is a distinctly female way of doing the same things.

If we now apply this to a life of consecrated chastity, we must say that there are a male way and a female way of considering, understanding and practising it. In other words, the religious who consecrates himself or herself to God, does not cease being a man or a woman with all the consequences that follow. He or she must, first of all and at all times, know and accept himself or herself for what he or she is and has; he or she must reckon foursquare with his or her inclinations, needs, desires, etc., in order to be able to direct and discipline them in the light of reason and faith.

Acting otherwise means building on illusions and condemning oneself to suffer sooner or later the reprisal of nature, for you cannot impunely repress or twist or fool human nature. In such case even the most sublime religious thoughts, even the most ardent prayers for purity of life would avail nothing. Thus a young man's training towards a sensible and serene attitude towards women (and viceversa) becomes, in this perspective, one of the basic requirements for the building of a mature personality.

The Church has set out important guidelines on this matter, and all the confreres should get to know them and apply them as

needed. In the case of candidates to Salesian life, every effort should be made in each case so that they achieve emotional maturity at the right time and in the right manner. Without such previous maturation their choice of consecrated chastity would be a wrong choice.

A more positive evaluation of womanhood

Christian teaching confers equal dignity on both man and woman. It is apparent at the same time that only in our age is woman achieving that rightful social and cultural status she has been denied in past centuries. The advancement of womanhood is indeed one of the outstanding signs of our time: it is permeating our culture on worldwide proportions. Many countries in fact have already altered or are in the process of altering their constitutions and laws to put women on equal footing with men with regard to rights in education, politics, economy, and everything else. Also the Church is moving in the direction of giving women greater responsibilities in its organization, v.g. by acknowledging married women, widows, nuns as capable of performing special spiritual and apostolic ministries. It is not altogether meaningless that two women saints are numbered among the Doctors of the Church.

A result of this social evolution is the fact of mixed groups, which already drew the attention of the 19th General Chapter. This is not only a youth-related fact. It is a thing that nowadays affects in some way the whole structure and functioning of social life. Men and women meet daily at work, during leisure hours, in the performance of various tasks — including, of course, apostolic tasks.

As far as we are concerned, the Special General Chapter recognized that “our mission brings in its wake responsibilities that entail greater collaboration with women, religious and lay

alike”.¹³ In such cases the relationship that will necessarily be established and developed among men and women working together will have to bear all the traits of our Salesian spirit; in other words, it will have to be a relationship based on respect, esteem and delicate concern for woman’s psychology and vocation in the Church and in the world.

Our Special General Chapter spoke of “serene esteem of womanhood”, of attitudes that would help us, in the light of the Blessed among women, “to react always and everywhere as true Salesians without hesitation and without worries of conscience”.¹⁴

Certain reactions of aggressiveness or regressiveness with regard to women are, more often than not, a sign of emotional immaturity rather than a sign of virtue. In any case, such reactions would compromise not only every mutually enriching encounter between us and women, but even the very possibility of any cooperation.

True chastity is not an escape, even though it does entail renunciation and vigilance, for the charism of consecrated chastity — let us never forget it! — does not cripple our emotional makeup, but leaves it wholesome. “Treat the older women as mothers”, was St. Paul’s advice to Timothy, “and the younger women as sisters, in all purity”.¹⁵ A fine piece of advice even for us today.

A more positive evaluation of human love

Consecrated chastity has for some time been set side by side with marriage. Also in this there has been a remarkable evolution over the years. We all know how marriage and sexual love have been researched into to great depths and their Christian

¹³ ASGC, 559.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 559.

¹⁵ 1 Tim., 5: 2.

values have been emphasized.¹⁶ Pope Paul VI at his Wednesdays general audiences takes a great deal of pleasure pointing them out to the newly-weds in attendance. Who would today dare contest that the life of Christian marriage is a true path to sanctity?

This is a path that ought to be held in esteem by the religious, but that should not obscure their own chastity. The Council in fact says with regard to the training of seminarians: "Seminarians should be duly aware of the duties and dignity of Christian marriage, which bodies forth the love between Christ and the Church".¹⁷ But from the comparison with married love consecrated chastity should come out not weakened, but rather strengthened in its motivations. For the Council adds: "Let them (i.e., the seminarians) perceive as well the superiority of virginity consecrated to Christ, so that by a choice which is maturely thought out and magnanimous they may attach themselves to God by a total gift of body and soul ».¹⁸

A comparison is, therefore, all right, but it is to be made for the sake of seeing and maintaining an antithesis between married life and religious life. In this way each state of life will hold on to its own identity: that is, conjugal love in the case of the former and consecrated chastity in the case of the latter. "Virginity and marriage — the Acts of the SGC tell us — are both to be promoted as two different yet complementary ways of sharing in the mystery of Christ's union with the Church".

Dangers and ambiguities

We have briefly pointed out the positive values of sexuality in the light of the Church's teachings. We must now realistically

¹⁶ See *Lumen Gentium*, 41; *Gaudium et Spes*, 48-50.

¹⁷ *Optatam Totius*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

admit that with regard to human sexuality there are ambiguities and deviations of which we must be aware and wary.

As our General Chapters have stated, chastity, “the virtue that is supremely necessary, the great virtue, the angelic virtue”,¹⁹ is also the virtue “most undermined today”.²⁰

Dangers, ambiguities and temptations — the Capitulars have told us — are by far more numerous today than in the past. This more difficult and testing situation demands of us greater determination, greater commitment and first of all clearer awareness of the perils and pitfalls awaiting us. Here I will mention three of them.

On a practical level

On a practical level today’s religious must live a life of chaste love in a permissive society, in pervasively paganized environs which make it difficult even for married people to practice conjugal fidelity to their spouses. A mounting wave of eroticism and sexual licence is engulfing our mores, our families, our free time through practically all the mass media. Contemplatives could remain unscathed by, and even aloof to, this raging wave; but active-life religious, such as we are, that is, religious who must keep in touch with the realities of the surrounding world, cannot but feel implicated in, and buffeted by it. Beset and beleaguered by the Evil one, we need to be safeguarded from him,²¹ we need to be clad with the armor of God so that we can “stand up against the Devil’s evil tricks”.²²

¹⁹ *St. John Bosco to His Salesians in Constitutions and Regulations*, p. 240.

²⁰ *Acts of the XIX General Chapter*, p. 84.

²¹ Jn 17: 15.

²² Eph., 6: 11-12.

On an intellectual level

That is not all. Today consecrated virginity as well as priestly celibacy are for various reasons being contested also on an intellectual level by people of all walks of life, even at times by people who call themselves Christians. Chastity would make the religious who profess it strangers to their fellow men; it would detract from their personalities; it would prevent or stifle their normal development, and so on.²³ In certain places you could almost sense the worldlings' heavy breath of sullen contempt or ill-disguised commiseration being poured on a man or a woman who has not made sexual experiences.

In this lascivious world of ours our chastity is therefore far from being lavishly admired by everyone in every place. This challenges us not only to speak in its defense, but to witness in actual life that it is indeed "a choice of a real life, unique and well worthy of a man who is called to it".²⁴

On a moral and legal level

We notice, finally, that in secularized societies there is a constantly widening gap between what is moral by Gospel standards and what is merely permissible by civil law. This fact underscores the need for all of us to clarify the issues at hand and to train our consciences in order to take the right stand. When one can no longer perceive the difference between legality and morality, he runs a serious risk of considering entirely legitimate whatever does not run against his country's civil laws and common opinion. Divorce and abortion, for instance, are legally permissible in some countries; premarital sex, unnatural sex, conjugal

²³ See *Lumen Gentium*, 46; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

²⁴ *ASGC*, 563; see 575.

infidelity and even “weaknesses” in a consecrated man no longer cause a stir in certain quarters; on the contrary, they are seen as normal by those who derive their morality from the so-called “public opinion”.

This permissive mentality is worming its way into the poorly trained consciences of certain Christians — typical is the case of the wild reaction to the recent Holy See’s *Declaration on some questions of sexual ethics* — and sometimes even into the consciences of some religious, in which the true sense of consecration and of its obligations has become obscured. In this way these people, under the pretext of being modern, consent to being worldly.

Today more than ever it is absolutely necessary for us to exercise discernment of spirits; in other words, we must discriminate between the true values and the fake values presented to us by modern-day researchers and writers on sex, womanhood, love, man-woman relationship, married life, etc. We must accept and thank God for all that is true and good. We must reject errors, beware of exaggerations, and keep in mind the Gospel demands on renunciation. “Put all things to the test; keep what is good, and avoid every kind of evil”.²⁵

It is in this context that we today have to live our lives of consecrated chastity. It is no doubt quite a different context from that which was known to Don Bosco and the first generations of Salesians. We could long for the happy old days; but we cannot ignore our present-day situation. It is God’s will that we live in it, and it is also God’s will that we live chastely, with renewed fidelity to our religious consecration and to the spirit of our Society.

All this does not imply a lax attitude. On the contrary, as a result of the considerations made on this historical context we

²⁵ 1 Tess. 5: 21-22.

ought to show a deeper understanding of, and a greater dedication to, our choice of Salesian chastity.

3. THE TRUE MEANING OF OUR SALESIAN CHASTITY TODAY

As I have already said, it is not my intention to expound anew on all the meanings and dimensions of our chastity. Document 10 of the Acts of the SGC sums them up very neatly where it says that our chastity is evangelical and paschal, ecclesial and eschatological.²⁶ Here instead I would like to call your attention to some aspects which are less “classical”, but, in my judgement, nonetheless useful in the present circumstances.

A renunciation accepted with wide-opened eyes

A life of consecrated chastity is definitely “a choice of a real life”²⁷ and “a deeply Christian way of loving”.²⁸ “Instead of involving the renunciation of the capacity of human love and its enrichment, a life of consecrated chastity places the religious in a deeper and more vital relationship of love with God. Far from diminishing and frustrating a man it can fulfil him. It can deepen in him a capacity for dialogue and communication”.²⁹

Now all this is very true. But we must be realistic about it: to bring this theory, lovely as it is, down into practical life is no easy thing! In practice, how can we achieve this great love? How can we sublimate human love? There is not the least shade of doubt that consecrated chastity implies a real mutilation. One needs the courage to look straight into the renuncia-

²⁶ See *ASGC*, 567-571.

²⁷ *Id.*, 563.

²⁸ *Const.*, 75.

²⁹ *ASGC*, 562.

tion it involves. This is so difficult a thing that people in the Old Testament did not understand it and did not accept it. By consecrated chastity a religious renounces the most common expressions of human love and sex and the very natural tendency to such expressions.

I have already pointed out that in these realities — human love and sex — there are involved values of the greatest importance for the social development of a person, and that in consecrated chastity there is involved a “mutilation” — according to the violent tenor of the image used by Christ — “for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven”. But certainly the Lord gives the consecrated person other sublime values and other wonderful opportunities for maturation; nevertheless this detracts nothing from the stark reality of this hard renunciation, harsh privation.

Now, above and beyond all the nice and edifying expressions, the accepting of this renunciation brings with it also experiencing it in daily life. It entails not being surprised or frightened if and when, especially in some moments of depression or sluggishness or loneliness, its heavy burden on one’s flesh and heart is really felt. Consecrated chastity is a solid chunk of one’s cross,³¹ and at times it may become one’s sharing in Christ’s agony in the Garden.³² Consequently, as *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* remarks, “an inclination towards marriage and family life, which makes their renunciation painful, ought not to be regarded necessarily as a contradiction to a celibate vocation. Even if the pain is lifelong, this does not prejudice the genuineness of the call to virginity, provided one can live exclusively for God with full and free assent of the will. Celibacy is a call from God that can well include the continuing sacrifice of a strong propensity for marriage”.³³

³⁰ See Mt. 19: 12.

³¹ See *ASGC*, 568.

³² See Mt. 26: 37.

³³ *GFPC*, 48.

It would seem correct to me to say that a certain number of confreres who left their lives of consecrated chastity in order to get married, have done so because they were not prepared to face up to this painful renunciation. Then one day they became sharply aware of it, and perhaps egged on by some wild theories, they became little by little convinced that they were "abnormal". In the midst of their frustration they lost sight of the incomparable riches Christ promises and gives "already in the present age" to those who leave everything to follow him.³⁴ And then a little dreaming about marriage did the rest.

A conscious and courageous acceptance of renunciation will help us to be not only faithful, but also generous in God's service. When instead we look exclusively at the negative aspect (renunciation, that is), we unconsciously tend to look for compensations for our own frustrations.

So it can happen that after renouncing married love and physical fatherhood, we may be tempted to take back what we have put away, and resort to a selfish search for, for instance, unhealthy emotional involvement with women, mushy sentimentality, excessive desire of approval, harsh or high-handed or selfish wielding of authority, and so on. A psychologist made the remark that also in little communities based on all the members' option to live together there can be an ambiguously motivated search for intimacy and emotional outlets.

All of us, therefore, need to gain a clear understanding of ourselves — to look at ourselves with wide-open eyes! — and to be generous in our commitment. Let us not take back what we gave the Lord!

³⁴ See Mk. 10: 28-30.

Consecrated chastity sets us free — and binds us together!

The very fact of renouncing something implies a choice: if I renounce certain values, it is because I prefer others. History teaches us that voluntary celibacy appears only in advanced cultures, where there has developed a high sense of personhood. By promoting consecrated virginity, the Gospel has set us free from the stereotype of *de rigueur* marriage, and at the same time it has maintained a positive evaluation of sexuality (God created man and woman as such, not automatically as husband and wife).

Voluntary celibacy bears witness to the fact that man is free in the use of his inmost energies and in the choice of his lifestyle. He thus shows his capacity to live his personal, sexual and emotional life in a manner different from the customary. His choice would be of little value though, were it to be prompted only by his whimsical, conceited or stoic desire to flaunt his autonomy or unconventionality. As it was initially prompted by love, so his choice must be continually oriented towards love. For voluntary celibacy is freedom for the purpose of a kind of union. It is an opening towards a kind of love bonds which have their own warmth and intimacy — of a different nature, of course, from the warmth and intimacy of the married love bonds.

A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy expresses this thought in concise and felicitous formulas: “Sexual fulfilment achieved in marriage is not necessary for the emotional formation of the human personality; nor will marriage in itself bring about harmonious development of emotions. On the other hand, man is capable of sublimating his sexuality and finding fulfilment in non-sexual emotional relationships”.³⁵ And further on: “A celibate is called to express his ability to love in a special way... Celibacy chosen “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”

³⁵ *GFPC*, 27.

... is falling in love. (It) is a vocation to a special kind of love".³⁶

What kind of love? If we look at married and family life realistically, we see that, as some recent studies have pointed out, the very close bonds that hold the family members together are not free from uncertainties and conflicts that pressure them to fly apart. It is the purpose of these bonds to promote the maturation of the couple and their offspring through the various expressions of, and a commitment to, a true and liberating love; but human weakness and sinfulness render the achievement of this goal and the performance of this task an awfully difficult one. Or else, how would you explain today's mad stampede towards divorce courtrooms?

The consecrated celibate freely renounces "having" a wife and children, so that he can open himself to less possessive and more universal relationships. He gives up the satisfaction of his conjugal and parental love, and by so doing he is enabled to turn to all the others without any restriction or exception, and love them for their own sake, with a self-sacrificing love that fully guarantees their independence as persons. From this we can draw the conclusion that it would not be worth for us to sacrifice the values of married life, unless we firmly decided to live up to our own relationships as fully and disinterestedly as possible.

The consecrated celibate makes himself available to others, first interiorly, in his heart and mind, and then also exteriorly, by taking up works in the service of others and by investing his time and energy on their behalf — a thing that would hardly be possible were he burdened with the responsibility of caring for his own family.³⁷

The consecrated celibate, therefore, accepts a certain amount of solitude for the sake of this deep union with God and with

³⁶ *Id.*, 31 and 51.

³⁷ See *Const.*, 75.

the others. Isolation is a negative, harmful thing; but solitude is different; you might almost call it its opposite. Solitude is like the silence that precedes speaking and makes it fruitful. Even if solitude is a real burden that we have to bear, it enables us to relate to others in such a way that we accept them from God's hands just as they are and love them for their own sake.

The consecrated celibate is one who holds his arms wide open to embrace all while renouncing to close them around one alone — a wife he could have chosen to marry, — and this for the purpose of keeping himself available to all who come to him for help. This is our vocation as Salesians.

Capacity for loving and serving

Our profession of chastity, therefore, means our commitment to a “preferential love of Jesus Christ”,³⁸ which is expressed in a self-sacrificing love of our neighbor, that is, the confreres of our community, and the young of our mission. Our chastity, inspired and nourished by Christ's charity, will enable us to establish a relationship of true and generous friendship with our confreres and boys.

Allow me to touch briefly on how chastity can help us to bring about a brotherly union and fulfil our apostolic mission.

Chastity and brotherly union

The SGC documents insist on the relationship between brotherly union and chastity to make us understand that the two support each other.³⁹ In the light of the considerations made above I would like to emphasize how much true chastity can

³⁸ ASGC, 575; see also 562.

³⁹ See *Const.*, 51, 71, 78; ASGC, 569 and 574.

help us towards building “a true community of persons”.⁴⁰

Many inconveniences, misunderstandings and conflicts in our communities derive from individuals seeking to defend themselves against the others or to dominate them or to manipulate them for their own selfish interests. Chastity does away with this type of relationship among the confreres; it opens them to selfless love and to honest communication, and makes them understand the meaning of religious community, in which they live together as brothers not so much because of a personal choice, but because of a common call: “By calling us to live in community, God gives us brothers to love”.⁴¹ Yes, to love, and not just to tolerate! In this perspective, “chastity opens us to mutual love as brothers in the spirit”,⁴² by overcoming natural tendencies to pursue selfish interests.

Showing daily concern for the brothers’ needs, refusing to act out of aggressiveness or bitterness, smiling at them and joking with them, and dealing with them patiently, forgivingly and thoughtfully — these are the signs and fruits of chastity earnestly practiced. This is well expressed in *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*: “Voluntary celibacy makes sense”, the document says, “when it is viewed in a context of relationships with others lived in a fraternal community where one can ‘reach’ others without ‘having’ them, that is, when it is an exercise in non-possessiveness. It is a sign of celibacy rightly assumed when one can create and maintain worthwhile interpersonal relationships while experiencing the presence of friends even in their absence, refusing to impose oneself on them, and showing that need of them is limited”.⁴³

In this perspective we can understand something which is rather new among us, that is, the SGC’s insistent invitation to

⁴⁰ *Const.*, 50.

⁴¹ *Id.*, 51.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *GFPC*, 49.

the confreres “to promote (among themselves) deep authentic friendships” — not maudlin, but virile, not exclusive-club-type, but open-to-all friendships —, because these create “the climate which enables a confrere to feel at home and esteemed for his own sake”.⁴⁵ Chastity properly understood is in fact just what makes it possible for us to carry on among ourselves an in-depth dialog — a thing so much spoken of today.

Chastity and apostolic mission

At the same time a “well-balanced chastity... opens (a confrere’s) heart to a spiritual fatherhood... The Salesian who is really chaste... can the more readily love all whom Our Lord entrusts to him, especially boys in need... Chastity enables us to show them true love so that they are ‘aware that they are loved’ ”.⁴⁶

By dealing about loving kindness and chastity within the same article,⁴⁷ the Constitutions help us understand the close relationship existing between the two virtues. There is no Salesian loving kindness without chastity, because a “truly personal and affectionate” love, one in which a Salesian shows “himself to be a father and a friend” to his boys, is to be understood as a sincere desire for their good without seeking any personal gain from them. Likewise, there is no chastity without loving kindness, because the confrere’s renunciation of certain expressions of love and emotional involvement are precisely for the sake of a deeper and more universal love. This in reality means that he

⁴⁴ *Const.*, 78; see also 53 and 111; *ASGC*, 483, 487, 574 and 680.

⁴⁵ *ASGC*, 487.

⁴⁶ *Const.*, 45, 71 and 76.

⁴⁷ *Id.*, 45.

has to live his spiritual fatherhood in its true nature and to its full extent.⁴⁸

Let us try to understand this great truth better by illustrating it with two articles of our Constitutions. "Chastity", art. 76 tells us, "is a compelling virtue: it makes us witnesses to the special kind of love Christ had for the young". More indicative still is art. 2 which attempts to define the very identity of the Salesians as "signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are the poorest and most in need".

Let us make it unmistakably clear: our chaste love of the young has our love of God as its divine wellspring. For we must love our boys not only out of a natural liking, but in the name of Christ the Good Shepherd and in the name of God the Eternal Father, that is, with a love that takes its inspiration and strength from them, a love that is totally chaste, single-minded and selfless, a love that seeks the good and the salvation of the young with a dogged, almost violent determination, and finally a love that had its highest expression in the Father giving his Son to die for us on the cross and in the Son giving us himself entirely, in life and in death. This is indeed the tremendous love that ought to inspire us, and this is also the love we must reveal to our boys!

Are we serving our boys or are we using them?

At this point we should clearly see the necessity to verify from time to time the quality of our relationship with them and, if need be, to purify it of any dross. We should ask ourselves, for instance: which are our inmost motivations in dealing with our boys? on what criteria do we make the final decision to work for this or that group, on this or that pastoral undertaking? how do we deal with them in practice? how do we react to success and failure?

⁴⁸ See *GFPC*, 32.

If we are brutally sincere answering these and similar questions, we will probably have to admit that in many, very many occasions we have used our boys instead of serving them. We have loved them with an enslaving rather than liberating love. We have loved them for our own sakes, for the satisfaction of getting their admiration or affection. We have loved them out of our covert despicable will to dominate them and manipulate them, out of a narcissistic desire to shape them to our own image. Even the expressions we employed at times, such as *my* group, *my* boys, *my* past pupils, *my* parishioners, could point to a glib and self-indulgent paternalism or other forms of ill-disguised self-gratification.

A chaste lover, instead, helps his boys grow up for their own sake, according to their own ideal, according to their own rate, and does so with humility, respect and patience, without seeking a reward for his dedication, without expecting too much too soon. He guides them and helps them to become what they choose to become and what God wants them to become. Don Bosco's extremely fine sensibility in speech, looks and deeds was nothing but an expression of his infinite respect for the person and liberty of his boys, and a consequence of his immense faith, which enabled him to see in every boy "a brother for whom Christ died"⁴⁹ and a son of God who is unique and capable of an inner dialog with his Father.

We must be mature to educate boys to love

I will add that a chaste love is particularly necessary for us Salesians in view of our task of educating boys to a right understanding of human sexuality and a spirit of reverence for girls, women and love.⁵⁰ Especially today, in these difficult times of

⁴⁹ 1 Cor., 8: 11.

⁵⁰ See *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1.

ours, we as educators stand in need of much discernment, much level-headedness, much sensitivity in our zeal. Boys in turn stand in need of enlightening and convincing witness from their educators. For purity and love are taught little by words and explanations, much by reflection and sensitization, and very much by the example of those who live with them.

We realize what an important role “the personality of the educator and his own past emotions” and experiences play on his rapport with his charges, particularly in the field of sexual education.⁵¹ How could an educator expect to train them to love, to self-control, to fighting against evil, or how could he guide them out of their own confusion, bewilderment and frailty, or how could he prepare them for engagement and marriage, if he himself is not thoroughly chaste, well-balanced and mature? How could he ever be a “bearer of (Christ’s) message of liberating purity”?⁵²

Everybody knows how exacting today’s youth are on the point of consistency from their elders, and how upset and really put out they feel especially by the inconsistency of their educators. We also know how saddened — sometimes even to tears! — Don Bosco was at the thought of the disastrous effects on the boys’ souls of a Salesian unfaithful to his commitment to chastity. Maturity here means responsibility for oneself and for others.

4. LIVING A LIFE OF CHASTITY AS MATURE SALESIANS

This brings us to reflect, finally, on problems of training and practical conduct. The difficulties encountered in the practice of chastity stem chiefly from two causes: first, ignorance and uncertainty on the true meaning of consecrated chastity, inadequate

⁵¹ See *GFPC*, 39.

⁵² *Const.*, 76; see *ASGC*, 125, 556, 576 and 578.

understanding and appreciation of its human and Christian, mystical and practical values, and misunderstanding of its limitations; second, lack of determination at the time of Profession and/or later to practice it as a life-long choice.

It is therefore necessary for us to hold chastity in high esteem and — allow me the expression — to be crazy in love with it (without, of course, disparaging other valid life-long choices). We must choose it daily with vigorous determination, without ever looking backward. If we allow doubts and compromises to enter our minds, we then soon turn into abnormal beings, victims of constant conflicts, because we are deprived of the wonderful returns both of a lay vocation and of consecrated chastity.

The first training of a consecrated celibate

The often-quoted *Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* makes some important points which are fully valid also with regard to the religious as a group. “The history of priests who have defected — the document states — is often that of men somehow lacking; of personalities without unity or integration where one would look in vain for maturity and balance”. “Errors in discerning vocations are not rare — the document goes on —, and in all too many cases psychological defects, sometimes of a pathological kind, reveal themselves only after ordination to the priesthood (here we could add: or after the perpetual profession). Detecting defects earlier would help avoid many tragic experiences”. “An excessively affectionate nature, an over-sympathetic temperament, and an inclination to emotional attachments are not suitable for a celibate life ».⁵³ How could such a con-

⁵³ *GFPC*, 25, 38 and 51.

frere arouse in any boy a desire to consecrate himself to God? ⁵⁴

Back in his own days Don Bosco was already of the same idea. He used to say that those who by temperament were inclined to laziness, over-emotionalism, sensuality or scrupulosity were no candidates for the Salesian way of life.⁵⁵ To be admitted to profession, a young man must have achieved — as they put it today — an adequate emotional and sexual maturation: “an adequate psychological and affective balance”,⁵⁶ through a regular training by which it is ascertained he possesses self-control, clear ideas and sound motivation on the values of celibacy and a sensible way of dealing with women as befits a consecrated man.⁵⁷ Moreover, a verification should be made to determine whether a candidate has received from God the gift of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom, because, according to St. Paul, the decision to lead a consecrated life is in the number of charisms given to some for the benefit of all.⁵⁸

Novitiate and first profession

Now we can see the seriousness of a candidate's admission to the novitiate and first profession and the necessity for him to have a definite period of preparation (the Superior Council has issued detailed guidelines on it).⁵⁹ Evidently, any candidate who is still troubled by sex hangups or shows a noticeable lack of emotional maturity must be denied entry into the novitiate.

⁵⁴ See *ASGC*, 576.

⁵⁵ See *Const.*, 77; and old *Regulations*, 292.

⁵⁶ *Const.*, 77.

⁵⁷ See *ASGC*, 563, (in cross reference with *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12 and *Optatum Totius*, 10) and 573.

⁵⁸ See 1 Cor., 7: 7.

⁵⁹ See *Acts of the Superior Council*, No. 276 (Oct.-Dec. 1974), pp. 45, 61-73 on *Immediate Preparation for the Novitiate*. In particular, the criteria for admission to the novitiate are indicated.

Moreover, it is very important to make good use of the several-years long span between first and perpetual profession. This time is needed for the young Salesian to continue his maturation within the framework of the life he has chosen; this he should do with a vigorous effort, with all the means at his disposal, “with the help of the community and a suitable guide”⁶⁰ who is to aid him to be true to himself.⁶¹

In this process the role of the Master of Novices is of paramount importance; so is also that of others in charge of the novices’ training, in particular the confessors and spiritual directors. These must themselves be mature and balanced men, in command of an adequate preparation, — which today must absolutely include, but not be limited to, a psychological preparation.⁶² Besides, they must make use of that most wonderful pedagogical tool given them by the Church and already referred to many times, i.e. *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*. It is their bounded duty to study it accurately and make the necessary adaptations to the Salesian consecrated life.

Education to chastity in a Salesian atmosphere

A certain climate or atmosphere is needed for a consecrated person to mature properly and to persevere in his life of joyous and generous self-dedication. And the Salesian atmosphere fills exactly that need. In fact chastity, as it was taught by Don Bosco, is intimately bound up with such fundamental values of the Salesian spirit, as awareness of God’s presence, loving kindness, availability to others, steady and tranquil joy...

Paradoxically, we could say that we will succeed in observing

⁶⁰ *Const.*, 114.

⁶¹ See *Acts of the Superior Council*, No. 276, pp. 73-78.

⁶² See *GFPC*, 39.

our chastity if we will not be too uptight about it, if we will only busy ourselves with it to a reasonable extent. « Even when confronted with ignorance or mistaken notions about sex, one has to avoid an over-emphasis in which sex is made to appear the sole, or the most important, element of human motivation”.⁶³

Our Lord did not say much about chastity, but he, above everything else, lived and asked us to live a life of loving rapport with his Father and his brethren. The more strongly determined we will be in our vocation, the more strongly dedicated we will be in our loving service of God and of our boys and the less troubled we will be with our chastity. Chastity will then become a carry-over of our charity. “Purity cannot be mastered by concentrating on it as a fixed and isolated idea, but only by including it in a wider view of life that includes justice and charity, elements absolutely necessary to give any life meaning and value... In this area a training is needed to form the candidates into men who love with charity all human beings”.⁶⁴ Too many times in the past has chastity been isolated from the influence of charity.

In fact charity, better than any other virtue, can because of its dynamic nature marshal all the energies of one’s personality, integrate them, develop them and make them highly productive. “The workings of the theological virtues”, says the above mentioned Church document, “give a new and higher significance to chastity and even change its very nature. It becomes a gift from God with a power that enables the will not so much to suppress sexual desires as to integrate the sex drive into the entirety of the Christian personality”.⁶⁵ This agrees perfectly with what our Constitutions declare to be “the very heart of our Salesian spirit: a young and alive pastoral love”.⁶⁶ So here is the basic problem about chastity: to spark and then to keep

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*, 40 and 47.

⁶⁵ *Id.*, 27.

⁶⁶ *Const.*, 40.

aflame in us that “ardent apostolic drive which makes us ‘seek souls and serve God alone’ ”⁶⁷ — that charity which finds “its model and source in the heart of Christ, sent by the Father and on fire with ‘zeal for his house’ ”.⁶⁸ Consequently, the key to Salesian chastity is Salesian charity. There is no chastity apart from charity. Only chaste love exists. We Salesians do not choose chastity for its own sake. We choose Jesus Christ (though we are first chosen by him) and we choose to serve others for the sake of his Kingdom; and within this framework we choose chastity and accept its inner logic and all its consequences.

This perspective accounts for the particular tone or style of our Salesian chastity. Our chastity is lived in an atmosphere of serenity and cheerfulness, youthful buoyancy and sprightly resoluteness, clear-eyed discernment and unyielding trust in life and finally attentive perception of God’s presence in us. Despite his strong practical unpoetic bend, Don Bosco used to wax lyrical whenever he spoke about chastity: from his own experience chastity stood out as the beautiful blossom of charity. Now all these characteristics can be applied quite properly to our dynamic Salesian charity.

There follows that whatever in us fosters and strengthens charity, — as for instance heart-felt prayer, the twin “table of the Word of God and of the Eucharist”,⁶⁹ fraternal charity and daily humble dedication in the service of our boys — at the same time also fosters and strengthens chastity. Viceversa, whatever weakens and stifles our pastoral charity, also threatens our chastity and makes it little by little burdensome and uncomfortable. As long as the Lord will send us zealous Salesians, — I said ‘zealous’, and I did not mean restless activists or agitated workmaniacs —, we will have luminously chaste Salesians.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*, 41; see 101.

⁶⁹ See *Const.*, 79.

Moreover, we will have Salesians who will be interiorly strong, ready to stand up to evil, and therefore ready to face difficult and delicate situations whenever necessary. Our work brings us into contact with a world which is full of temptations and is seemingly becoming... fuller by the day! Even though we exercise prudence (an always necessary virtue!), we cannot avoid them altogether: "Father, I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but I do ask you to keep them safe from the Evil One"⁷⁰.

What will enable us to keep ourselves chaste? The inner strength of our love of God and of youth. It is basically the same thing that enables a married man, constantly battered by vicious examples and foul seductions, to stand loyal to the woman he chose — that is, his love of her. Outer defenses will be of little benefit unless there are inner defenses built up and maintained by loyalty and love. During the Council a group of religious women presented this remark to the Commission in charge of drafting *Perfectae Caritatis*: "Fearful isolation can be no solution. Formation to chastity consists less in setting up protective distances than in improving our rapport with God, for it is in the fulness of God's presence in us that we find strength and security for our chastity"⁷¹.

A steady progress towards maturity

I hope no Salesian uses these considerations of mine for imprudent behavior or disturbing experimentation, for this would be a sign of immaturity. Besides, it is not enough to have clear ideas to solve a problem.

A healthy and mature chastity, no less than true and mature

⁷⁰ Jn 17: 15.

⁷¹ Remark presented towards the end of 1964. See Tillard-Congar, *Il rinnovamento della vita religiosa (Renewal of Religious Life)*, Vallecchi 1968, p. 340.

love, is the end of a long journey which invariably takes us through the Cross. Neither conjugal nor consecrated love can be achieved without a deliberate acceptance of asceticism and conversion, that is, without going through a lengthy, gradual and unavoidably painful process of purification that will lead us out of easy but sterile self-love into selfless love of God and neighbor.

It is no easy thing to get out of ourselves, to leave our cozy little nest, to make an exodus from ourselves and venture out towards God and people. "Love and self-denial complement each other, since self-denial frees man and makes room for love; love, in turn, induces one to self-denial... Maturity and freedom can only be attained by means of a long and uninterrupted practice of self-control and self-giving throughout the years of formation".⁷² It would be very naive of us indeed were we to believe that we could overcome our temptations and control our desires without entering upon the paschal mystery of Christ our Savior, without "facing death every day!"⁷³

Our religious profession, even when it is preceded by a thorough preparation, does not usher us into an angelic life, but it leaves us to contend with our human nature. It does not automatically set us free from either sensual drives or our tendency to refer people and even God to ourselves and to seek to be loved rather than to love. Neither does it offer us a guarantee against possible psychic or spiritual regressions.

Our profession, therefore, is not a treasure that we come into possession of one happy day and then lock into a safe-deposit box for perpetual safekeeping. It is a value, instead, which is written — by God's grace — into the very fibers of our living nature and enmeshed with the texture of our persons and the development of our personalities. In other words, it is a value that we have to discover, take up, and preserve every day in

⁷² *GFPC*, 53 and 55.

⁷³ 1 Cor., 15: 31.

ever varying situations, in ever shifting circumstances. For this reason each of us must know himself ever more clearly and learn to control his life of chastity progressively better. Evidently, to attain this it is necessary for every confrere to get help from a wise and experienced spiritual guide, at least during the confrere's first years of profession and at specially difficult moments later; it is useful for him to do so at any other time in his life; and, on special occasions, it may also be useful to get professional help from a psychologist or the like.⁷⁴

Our Special General Chapter embraced this historic perspective on Salesian chastity in its entirety. "Chastity is not something acquired once and for all", our Constitutions tell us. "It has its moments of tranquillity and moments of difficulty. It is a gift which because of human weakness is fragile and vulnerable and needs a daily pledge of fidelity".⁷⁵ Even a mature and balanced Salesian in his 30's or 40's may quite unexpectedly be overtaken by a squall... We have already said that this should cause him no surprise, but he should make use of it as an opportunity for looking into himself and his commitment to chastity more deeply.⁷⁶ The document on formation in priestly celibacy invites him to face such eventual crisis with sound realism and with a lively and humble faith.⁷⁷

St. Paul's "castigo corpus meum, I chastise my body"

A typically Salesian observation is called for here. Don Bosco and our tradition have always recommended, as a means for observing chastity, the joint use of natural and supernatural means. But, for pedagogical reasons, the means of ascetic nature have always been assigned the first place.

⁷⁴ See *GFPC*, 38 and 42.

⁷⁵ *Const.*, 79; see also *ASGC*, 564.

⁷⁶ See *Const.*, 119.

⁷⁷ See *Const.*, 67-69.

For instance, in his *Introduction to the Constitutions*, Don Bosco spoke only of means of mortification or self-denial (though, undoubtedly, such means are inspired by love of Christ on the cross). And this he did for a good reason. His pastoral pragmatism had convinced him that the most fervent prayers and the most assiduous reception of the sacraments were next to useless for the one who did not accept St. Paul's program of "*castigo corpus meum, I chastise my body*",⁷⁸ which he quoted in his *Introduction*.

"*Castigo corpus meum*" today consists largely in rejecting every kind of intemperance. The field, in which Don Bosco calls us to exercise self-denial with his strong and challenging program of Salesian temperance, is today fraught with no less potentially dangerous and tempting situations than then — to point out just one, the easy use and abuse of alcoholic drinks. But there is an area in which it is absolutely necessary for us today to reject every kind of intemperance for the defense of our chastity — I mean the area of mass media. It is not true that we may look at everything, read everything, listen to everything.

It goes against sound psychology and plain common sense for one to believe that giving indiscriminate freedom (license, that is) to his senses will have no effect on his imagination, on his thoughts and finally on his actions. As this is a matter of human nature, it applies to every man, particularly to a man who has to maintain the fragile balance of chastity. This balance is, in fact, based not only on God's holy grace — which is not to be lightly presumed! —, but on a constant and difficult striving towards self-mastery through self-denial. He who wants to be spiritually healthy, must breathe in clean air and steer clear of the miasma of this decadent culture of ours which, unfortunately, is invading our world. (As educators, let us not forget our

⁷⁸ 1 Cor., 9: 27.

responsibilities in this regard, especially in the choice of shows for our boys' theaters).

Vatican II has likewise reminded us that we "should take advantage of those natural helps which favor mental and bodily health".⁷⁹ For mental fatigue, resulting from overwork or excessive pressure, sooner or later leads to physical or psychic exhaustion, and this in turn becomes a fertile ground for temptations. Sufficient sleep and relaxation are needed to preserve emotional balance.

Our relationships with externs

I would now like to touch upon some aspects of our relationships with externs. In the first part of this letter, when I was talking about the new social and cultural context in which we have to live our chastity today, I called to your minds a thought of the Special General Chapter: a mature practice of chastity "presupposes a genuine and serene reverence ...for sexuality ...human love ...and women".⁸⁰ A consecrated life is no negation or fear of, or flight from, social relationships; it is a special, but genuine, manner of communicating with people, women included. Besides, as the same Chapter remarked,⁸¹ the evolution of our pastoral praxis leads us today, in certain environments, to take on larger responsibilities towards women and girls. The very renewal of our Salesian Family issued a call for "intercommunication and collaboration" among its various groups, so that "through sharing and collaboration, we (can) live the experience of the gospel to our mutual enrichment".⁸²

All this supposes that the Salesian of today has learned the proper manner of dealing with women. If he has not, this could

⁷⁹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

⁸⁰ *ASGC*, 563.

⁸¹ *Id.*, 51 and 355; *Regulations*, 7 and 12.

⁸² *ASGC*, 174; see 692.

bring disaster upon him, his community and the people concerned.

It is, therefore, important for us in this regard to have clear ideas, if we want to conduct ourselves properly. To put it in a nutshell, we must make a double effort: first, to understand, and second, to be honest with ourselves as men and as Salesians.

An effort to understand

For obvious reasons it is particularly necessary for us to understand that our renunciation here touches us in one of the most sensitive areas of our being and, consequently, it will be all the more natural to look consistently and albeit unconsciously for compensations.

Earlier in this letter I invited you to check from time to time on the deep-seated motivations and the external qualities of your relationships in the apostolate. Such check deserves to be made more accurately with regard to our relationships with women. For instance we should ask ourselves: Why in this circumstance do I want to meet with this woman or girl or female group? Do I really intend this meeting for her or their good and for God's Kingdom or for my own satisfaction? With what delicacy and tact do I deal with them?

Leaving aside other obvious considerations, we should take into account the negative, albeit unexpressed, reaction of people around us to an improper and 'free' behavior in this regard. I recall a remark a Superior once made: "We're now planning our apostolate for the summer. We'll organize several camps — some for boys and others for girls. I'm having a hard time finding enough Salesians to work for the lads; but for the gals I've got too many volunteers!"

My dear confreres, Don Bosco wanted us to be specifically oriented towards boys and young men: it is them that we have to look for, because they are our natural destinaries.⁸³ Yes,

⁸³ ASGC, 51.

the Chapter recognized that “in certain kinds of pastoral responsibility” there arises “a need for an integrated (mixed) education for our young people”. But this is a matter of providing for an educational need in circumstances and environments that must be well defined, and not a reason for an indiscriminate (or nearly so) opening towards boys and girls, which would cause our works to lose their precise character of male institutions. This is no doubt such a momentous and delicate problem that we will have to responsibly reflect on it at the proper time and place.

Something else we ought to understand is the prudence or reserve which is required in this delicate field. All the Salesians should have a suitable “instruction in the character and psychology of women as it is affected by the sort of life they lead and by their age”.⁸⁴ I am afraid that some of them sometimes are not aware of the subtle processes of transference or fixation which they, out of a seriously imprudent naïveté, risk to trigger in women.

For instance, a young Salesian — Coadjutor Brother or cleric — should realize that a girl is naturally inclined to see in him the ideal “man” (male, that is), endowed with many wonderful talents, etc. and for every little problem she comes up with she is likely to turn to him, thus developing a sort of attachment and dependence on him. A priest should in turn realize that his ministration to a married woman or a married couple invariably brings a new element into the husband-wife relationship and could give rise to difficulties and problems, even serious ones.

What balance is, therefore, required in giving spiritual or pastoral assistance! What a remarkable capacity for discernment and self-mastery, what a sense of responsibility, and what a forthright faith-inspired intention are needed in dealing with women! There is indeed a great deal of truth in the statement made in the church document already referred to: “A good and healthy relation-

⁸⁴ *GFPC*, 60.

ship towards women cannot be a matter of improvisation. It has to be achieved through a slow and delicate training process”.⁸⁵

An effort to be honest with ourselves as men and as Salesians

I would not want to insinuate by these reflections that the problem of our relationship with women should degenerate into an obsession. Just the opposite! I spoke of the need to be honest with ourselves as men and as Salesians. “As in all human relationships, so too in the relations between (ourselves) and women, the correct course to follow is that of truth and sincerity. Genuineness in behavior automatically excludes everything that is fake and artificial”.⁸⁶

The goal for us here is to attain a serene and “natural, unequivocal and clear attitude”.⁸⁷ Our very family spirit invites us to avoid anything stiff and stilted and to be genial and cordial without mawkishness in dealing with people. “The Salesian’s manner of action is to seek to do all things well, with due measure and simplicity. He is open and cordial, ready to make the first advance and to receive people with kindness, respect and patience”.⁸⁸ In this we should take for our guideline Don Bosco’s way of dealing with his women benefactors as it is revealed in his letters to them. These letters are, as Fr. Aubry has recently described them, “masterpieces of human and priestly tact, a marvelous blend of reverence and affection, savoir faire and candor, pastoral daring and discretion”.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *Id.* On this point the document offers excellent guidelines. Read carefully 57-61, 65, 87-88. The special importance assigned to the educative influence of the spiritual director — to whom young religious in particular are invited to go for guidance — is worth noticing.

⁸⁶ *GFPC*, 59.

⁸⁷ *ASGC*, 675.

⁸⁸ *Const.*, 45.

⁸⁹ *Scritti Spirituali di S. Giovanni Bosco (Spiritual Writings of St. John Bosco)*. edited by Fr. Joseph Aubry, Città Nuova 1976, vol. 2, p. 70.

I will add that there is a sign by which we can tell whether a consecrated man behaves as he should when dealing with women: it is the genuineness of his fraternal charity within his community. We at times see a Salesian who is sweet and kind with externs, and gruff and mean with his confreres. A tendency to overfriendliness with women coupled with a shying away from the community would be a sure sign of a disorderly emotional condition.

In particular our immaturity in this regard would make it especially difficult, if not impossible, for us to promote the welfare of the Salesian Family. It is my sincere hope, instead, that all of us bring their honest contribution to it in a true family spirit, that is, by helping each other as brothers and sisters to love and serve the Lord and the destinaries of our mission better and better. On this point our Special General Chapter issued an appeal "to be authentically 'ourselves'": "A truer consciousness of the religious aspect of our vocation will make us better fitted to help the Cooperators and other lay groups to live their vocation with a more penetrating sense of the Gospel and of the Beatitudes".⁹⁰

Some practical situations

Just before closing allow me one quick reference to some practical situations in our Salesian life.

First of all, *the employing of female personnel in our houses*. Here we should ask ourselves to what extent this is needed or useful, and in any case we should ask ourselves whether by doing so we could still say that we are, as individuals and as communities, within the true Salesian spirit and style.

Next a word on *the atmosphere needed to build up a Salesian*

⁹⁰ ASGC, 126.

community. A religious community needs — no less than a home or an individual, rather still more than they do — what the English-speaking people call privacy. In fact a religious community is a family, but not just like any other family; for it is a family of consecrated men; and as such it has its particular need for intimacy and reserve. Such need is fulfilled by reserving certain places of the house and certain times of the day for the community members only. It is true that we must be ready to welcome people; but this does not mean that our house should open the door of every room to everyone every hour of the day.⁹¹

Lastly, *our relationships with our families*. A significant evolution has taken place here. The Special General Chapter presents contact with the family as a sign and outlet of legitimate affection (especially when it is a case of visiting one's parents); moreover, it considers it as an aid to maturity and balance, and as an opportunity for witnessing. Naturally, all this should be done with moderation and discretion — two typically Salesian virtues.⁹²

We should never forget, however, that, as consecrated men, we must give our mission the absolute priority. Except for emergency cases of assistance, the love of our family members takes the second place after the needs of the Kingdom of heaven.⁹³ It is our duty to delicately educate our dear ones on this Gospel truth we have accepted and believe in.

Two perennial sources of light and strength

As you see, I touched upon many aspects of our consecrated chastity, and also made many references to practical situations.

⁹¹ See *Const.*, 52.

⁹² See *ASGC*, 674; *Reg.*, 40; *GFPC*, 85.

⁹³ Lk 9: 59-62.

I am confident that you will take them to heart and do your very best to put them into practice. As a concluding exhortation I believe it could be useful to call your attention to three deliberations proposed by the 21st General Chapter to all the Salesians on the matter of chastity.

“1. Both as a congregation and as individuals, Salesians must be acutely conscious of the fact that they have a special message of purity to transmit to the modern world. They have a special mission towards the young whom they must train to be vigorous in their practice of purity. For such a mission, they themselves must in a special way be invincible in their own purity.

2. The Salesian must loyally admit the necessity of mortification and prudence, virtues which, especially in this field, are authentic expressions of personal love for Christ and are, besides, the condition required for a balanced interior life. He must exclude everything of a doubtful character (books, films, etc.). He must be discreet in spiritual direction. If he is obliged to exercise his apostolate towards women, he should do it with simplicity and delicacy and in full accord with his superior.

3. The Salesian should give the Blessed Virgin her rightful place in his personal life. Thus his affections will have their fruitful supernatural outlet and his purity its proper radiance”.⁹⁴

This brings my letter to an end.

Dear confreres, please receive these considerations with simplicity and openness, and try to draw profit from them, both by personal meditation and community reading. You will do well to take them in their entirety, without emphasizing some points to the disadvantage of others, so as to ensure a balanced view.

Let us pray to the Holy Spirit to enlighten us with his gifts. Our consecrated chastity is in fact possible, most of all because

⁹⁴ *Acts of XIX General Chapter*, pp. 84-85.

it is gift of God, “a precious grace”,⁹⁵ that we must accept with gratitude and develop as a joyful and loving return in kind.

There are two perennial sources of light and strength at our disposal: the Holy Eucharist, where we meet the loving Christ as our Victim and Nourishment, and where we can communicate, body and soul, with his Saving Body and Blood;⁹⁶ and a filial devotion to the Virgin Help of Christians, blessed among women, Immaculate, wholly consecrated to her Son, and foundress of our Salesian work on her day, 8th of December.

Cordial greetings and heartfelt prayers — and thank you for your own prayers.

Affectionately,
Fr. LOUIS RICCERI
Rector Major

⁹⁵ *Const.*, 75.

⁹⁶ Our interior attitude is well expressed by this liturgical prayer: “Cleanse our spirit, O Lord, and renew it with this sacrament of salvation, so that also our mortal bodies may receive the seed of resurrection and of new life”. (*Postcom. of Tuesday of the 4th week in Lent*).