

## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### THE POPE'S APPEAL FOR THE MISSIONS

- Introduction.- The missionary heart of Don Bosco.- He dreamed of sons in the South and the East.- Ours is a missionary Congregation.- The Pope's message in the Encyclical "Redemptoris missio".- Enthusiasm for the "mission" stems from the mystery of God.- Missionary activity has pride of place in evangelization.- The missionary is invited to a renewal without deviation.- A glance at Don Bosco's missions at the present day.- Salesian spirituality for our missionaries.- Everyone - in communion and active participation.- The Lord is preparing a new springtime of faith.

Rome, 24 February 1991

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you in the liturgical atmosphere that prepares us to relive once again Christ's paschal mystery. We look to him as the centre of our existence and of all human history. He is the Good Shepherd, "sent" by the Father to give life to an entirely "missionary" Church among the peoples. In it he raised up also our own vocation as a special charisma of evangelization.

I want to use the opportunity offered by the Pope's recent Encyclical to invite you to reflect on our missionary dimension in the Church.

In my preceding letter we meditated together on the ecclesial event of the most recent Bishops' Synod to prepare ourselves to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the priestly ordination of Don Bosco.

This time I think it will be opportune to consider together another ecclesial event: the publica-

tion of the Encyclical "Redemptoris missio". It is well that we should be in harmony, in our prayer and reflection, with the directive events of the Church.

The Encyclical deals with a theme that is a vital one for all; it is of special importance also for us.

In addition, in Lima, the Peruvian capital, the Fourth Latin-American Missionary Congress (COMLA-4) has just taken place to give new strength to the missionary commitment in those countries whose culture is christian. This too is an event that prompts us to reflect on the importance of the missions.

Furthermore our own GC23 considered the missionary dimension of the Congregation, and produced a concise guideline for a review and progressive coordination of the new salesian foundations in Africa.<sup>1</sup> This guideline has been carefully studied by the Rector Major with his Council, who have made certain decisions now being put into effect.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> cf. GC23 310

<sup>2</sup> cf. AGC 335, pp. 65-66

This combination of circumstances, as well as the numerous "missionary journeys" planned by the Rector Major and various Councillors for this year, are an invitation to us to concentrate our attention on a truly vital theme, and one which fills us with enthusiasm at the courageous commitments the Congregation has made. But it makes us think more deeply also of a particular characteristic of which the Pope has reminded us more than once: that we must be everywhere true "missionaries of the young". There is something about that word "missionary" that takes us to the very roots of the faith and makes us understand more explicitly the true significance of our salesian vocation.

Before going into the more substantial aspects of the Encyclical, it may be well if we consider to-

gether the missionary dimension of our Congregation (and Family). Among ourselves this is a characteristic that is taken for granted, but it is not so clear in other contexts. There are some lists, for example, that are more or less official, which do not include us among missionary Institutes – with the corresponding consequences.

Let us first look briefly at the missionary heart of Don Bosco, and then at his prophetic missionary dreams, so as rightly to assert the missionary dimension of our Congregation.

### **The missionary heart of Don Bosco**

We may safely say that Don Bosco can be listed among the great missionaries of the 19th century, even though he was never personally on the missions “ad gentes”.

“It can be said”, wrote Eugene Ceria, “that the missionary idea grew in him”.<sup>3</sup> It is an idea that is intrinsic to his vocational plan as a Founder, and coextensive with his whole existence. At first it was present in embryo and he was hardly conscious of it, but then it gradually took on a form that became progressively clearer and more distinct.

The same thing is said in more incisive or delicate terms by both Fr Paul Albera and Fr Philip Rinaldi, who trace back Don Bosco’s missionary vision to his dream at the age of nine.

The foreign missions, wrote Don Albera, “were always a burning aspiration in Don Bosco’s heart, and I am quite sure that Mary Help of Christians, from her first motherly revelations to him while he was still a boy, had given him a clear intuition in this regard... He spoke about it continually to us his first sons; we were filled with wonder and felt

<sup>3</sup> E. CERIA, *Annali I*, p. 245

ourselves carried away by a holy enthusiasm... At the bedside of young John Cagliero who was dying, Don Bosco saw the Patagonians waiting to receive redemption at Cagliero's hands, and he foretold his recovery and revealed in part what the future had in store for him".<sup>4</sup>

And Don Rinaldi said in his turn: "In commemorating that first dream of our venerable Father we have implicitly celebrated the centenary of the beginning of the whole of salesian work; because we may say that it was in that first vision that he was consecrated as the apostle of youth, the father of a new religious family, a missionary to non-christian peoples; that vision it was that stirred up also in his heart a lively desire for religious life and the evangelization of pagans".<sup>5</sup>

The missionary ideal in fact, that had been alive in him from the time of his secondary school studies,<sup>6</sup> developed and matured with the passing of time.

At the end of his period of pastoral formation in the College of St Francis of Assisi in Turin (1844), he was thinking of entering the Oblates of the Blessed Virgin, who had opened a flourishing mission in Vietnam, so that he could soon become a missionary, and for this he began to prepare himself by prayer and the study of the appropriate languages. Don Cafasso, his spiritual director, let him go along on this line for a while, but then at an opportune moment said a decisive "no" and bade him stay in Turin, where he found him a post at the refuge of the Marchioness Barolo, where he could concern himself with large numbers of young people. He obeyed, and Providence guided his steps. But his apostolic work among the young, far from quenching his missionary zeal, shed fresh light on it and gave it a new and original slant.

<sup>4</sup> D. Albera, Circular Letters, pp. 132-133

<sup>5</sup> ACS, 24 June 1925, p. 364

<sup>6</sup> cf. BM 1, 246

<sup>7</sup> cf. BM 3, 257

We know that missionary undertakings, reported in the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*<sup>7</sup> – one of his favourite sources of reading material – made a deep impression on him. There were so many souls to be saved, and he felt that in some way he shared the responsibility for them.

<sup>8</sup> BM 3, 257

From 1848 Don Rua and others had heard him exclaim more than once: “Oh, if only I had lots of priests and young clerics! I would send them to preach the Gospel in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego...”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup> BM 3, 383; BM 4, 294

He was often seen, during those same years, looking at a map and heaving a deep sigh at the thought that “so many regions were still lying in the shadow of spiritual death”.<sup>9</sup>

When after indescribable sacrifices he was finally able to launch his missions (1875: the Congregation’s greatest enterprise!) his missionary heart exulted, and he seemed to give them the whole of his eager attention.: “From then onwards”, wrote Don Albera, “the Missions were at the centre of his heart and he seemed to live only for them... He talked about them with such enthusiasm that we all marvelled and were deeply edified by his burning ardour for souls”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> D. Albera, *Circular Letters*, p. 134

With no less intensity Don Rinaldi, drawing on memories of the distant past, wrote: “In his great heart there had been accumulating for years on end the apostolic ardour of a Francis Xavier, nourished by a heavenly flame that was revealing the future to him through dreams... For me there has never been a missionary as zealous and tireless in his propaganda as he was. I can still see him, the loving Father, in the distant memories of my salesian vocation, precisely in those years when his missionary fervour was at its height; and it has left

an indelible impression on me: he was a true missionary, an apostle devoured by a passion for souls".<sup>11</sup>

But Don Bosco was not satisfied to keep the missionary ideal to himself; he passed it on to his Congregation (and Family) as an essential element of his spiritual and apostolic patrimony. A memorandum he sent in 1880 to Pope Leo XII is quite explicit: "The foreign missions have always been a cherished concern of the Salesian Congregation".<sup>12</sup>

It was his wish therefore that his foundation should be also truly missionary "ad gentes".

It will be worth our while to consider, albeit briefly, some of Don Bosco's dreams that manifest very clearly his plans as a Founder.

### He dreamed of sons going to the south and the east

Don Bosco had many dreams: not without justification has he been called "the dreaming Saint".

Their classification is a ticklish problem, and their interpretation still more so. We still lack a critical and scientific study of them, nor is it easy to make one.<sup>13</sup>

But this does not mean that some of his dreams lack historical and prophetic importance; they have given substance to his charismatic personality and prompted him to undertake courageous initiatives inexplicable from a purely human point of view.

Commenting on the so-called dream of the diamonds,<sup>14</sup> I said that one can speak of Don Bosco's dreams at a level that is different and more vital than scientific criticism (though the latter is also desirable for a serious investigation); it is the level of the existential influence they had on the mind of the Founder and in the life of his followers.

<sup>11</sup> ACS, 24 June 1925, p. 367

<sup>12</sup> BM 14, 501

<sup>13</sup> cf. FAUSTO JIMENEZ: *Los Sueños de Don Bosco*, Madrid 1989

<sup>14</sup> cf. ASC 300

Some of the dreams must be considered as revelational in character; they cannot be explained merely by an analysis of the personal inner feelings of the Saint.

Fr James Costamagna (who later became a bishop and had verified at first hand in Latin America the charismatic value of various dreams) saw clearly in Don Bosco a “prophetic personality”; after reading of a missionary dream in 1885 he wrote to Don Lemoyne and told him of a phrase said to him in confidence by the good Father: “among all the Orders and Congregations, ours perhaps has had the greatest guidance from God”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> MB 17, 305

Among the dreams containing ‘revelations’ there are five that refer specifically to the missions “ad gentes”:

- one in 1872 on Patagonia; this was the one that made Don Bosco begin his missions;
- a second in 1883 which describes a journey through Latin America: it relates many details that were unknown not only to Don Bosco but even to scholars of the time;
- a third in 1885 about the lower part of South America; this was the one that led Don Costamagna, who was already in America, to write back and quote the phrase referred to above;
- a fourth, also in 1885, on Africa, Asia and Oceania; we look upon this one with special wonder and interest at the present day, because we are already witnessing its prodigious realization;
- and the fifth in 1886, on the journey by air from Valparaiso to Peking: I have checked the geographical details myself during various journeys I have made, so as to encourage all of us to renew our hope as we courageously approach “Project China”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> cf. ASC 323

These missionary dreams help us to understand the mind of our Founder, his magnanimity and the boldness of his initiatives. In them the Congregation clearly appears as being among the ecclesial groups committed as such in the mission “ad gentes”, and this precisely in the South and East of which the Encyclical speaks: they foretell the flourishing of vocations among native peoples and provide scope for verification – in 500 years time!<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> cf. MB 17, 645

The period from the first missionary expedition (1875) to the present day shows that such dreams have come true, even though prospects of further growth still remain open, especially in China where, for that matter, salesian missions were launched with unhopèd-for success and bedewed with the blood of our first martyrs.

They are dreams which – and this perhaps is a fact unique in history – have traced some decades in advance what would be done later by his followers. And not without reason Don Bosco is felt today, in the most widely separated places on earth, as a fatherly and forestalling presence friendly to local culture and a powerful protector.

In many intercontinental journeys I have often been able to verify to some extent the prophetic element in these dreams, which always incite us to press on towards a fascinating future. I have found this to be true in Latin America, in Africa and Madagascar, in Asia, Japan and the Philippines, in Australia and Oceania. As our confreres in those regions read these dreams once again, they consider them as so many providential prophetic messages. In some places I have even been asked to settle heated discussions about some geographical point.

They are dreams which have had a real influence on missionary life in the Congregation, and



continue to do so. In their own way they provide confirmation for the constitutive aspect of the salesian vocation itself in the Church.

### **Ours is a missionary congregation**

The mind and heart of the Founder and the uninterrupted tradition in our Family are an open confirmation of the fact that the missionary dimension is an “essential feature” of our charisma.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> cf. C 30

For us Salesians the missions “ad gentes” are not just so many works on a par with others, the only difference being that they are carried out in distant countries with different cultures: no, no. They represent something very much deeper: an essential aspect, a particular dimension of our identity as Salesians of Don Bosco in the Church. It is true that the Congregation is not listed in the Pontifical Yearbook among the “Missionary Institutes” strictly so-called (i.e. among those dedicated solely to the foreign missions); but in it, and this precisely by ecclesial institution, the Founder wanted there to be a true commitment to missions “ad gentes”. His was a truly providential plan. Today we cannot but recognize the fact that the missions have been the historical means for bringing about the inculturation of the salesian charism in the world on a universal scale. And that is something deserving of great merit.

From the very beginning we have fostered missionary vocations in the strict sense, i.e. the care of those confreres – and they are many – who have been enriched with the “special vocation” which is the characteristic note of every true missionary. Such a special vocation is not something that makes them exceptional in respect of other confreres, but rather a more lively and generous expres-

sion of the vocation of all. It manifests, in fact, a condition inherent in the nature of the common charisma; every confrere is fundamentally available to go to the missions if obedience should take him there.

It is no more than 100 years since we began our missions in Latin America; 50 years later we turned to Asia and finally (after another 50 years!) we have committed ourselves in an overall fashion to Africa and Oceania. We can say that we have directed our attention, as the Pope suggests, towards the South and the East,<sup>19</sup> where the greatest demographic growth of people is taking place: so many of them young and in conditions of such great poverty.

<sup>19</sup> cf. *Redemptoris missio* (RM), 40

Our missions are a standing demonstration, in three great and successive stages and at world level, of the practical preferential option of the Congregation for the young who are poor and in such great need.

The last two decades have seen a relaunching of missionary activity among us. This is something providential which is giving new life to our charisma and leading us forward into the future with hope. In my letter on "Our African Commitment",<sup>20</sup> I said that the opening of this new missionary frontier was inherent in our living tradition and would be the harbinger of great blessings from the Lord. We are witnessing the truth of that statement. The missionary commitment is freeing us from the dangerous trend towards a soft and easy life, from superficiality in spiritual matters, and from genericism. In the missions we get a taste of the origins, we experience the perennial validity of the oratory criterion, and we seem to see Don Bosco once again in the authentic beginnings of his mission to the young and the poor.

<sup>20</sup> ASC 297

The GC23 directs our attention in a special way to Project Africa, but I would like to invite you to reflect at the same time on all our other missionary frontiers, some of which are the result of recent initiatives, like that of the "high altitudes" missions in Latin America, those of Papua New Guinea and the Samoan Islands, the new openings in Indonesia and Cambodia and, with due hope and preparation, the return to the immense Chinese mainland.

With regard to our work in Africa, we may say that we are beginning a new phase, marked by a clearer and growing awareness of the need for our insertion in the culture of those peoples, for the consolidation and development of our work, for an ever more appropriate method of evangelizing the young, and especially for the care of local vocations and their adequate formation by creating the necessary structures. We are making great steps forward which should help us to review and deepen the significance of all our commitments.

To go ahead wisely and efficaciously in this new phase it will be well for us to build up a more genuine missionary mentality, not only in those directly involved but in all the confreres.

An opportunity to do this is offered us by the recent important Encyclical on the missions. The definition of what is still today specific missionary activity deepens and makes practical the significance of the whole of the new evangelization. We all need to do some rethinking about the authenticity of faith: that of the apostle and that of the catechumen.

The Holy Father insists that the Encyclical has as its goal "an interior renewal of faith and christian life. For missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and christian identity, and offers

fresh enthusiasm and incentive”.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> RM 2

Let us try to esteem these reflections and authoritative guidance. In all of us there is a radical missionary instinct which prompts us to pass on our faith to others. The GC23 too has reminded us that our apostolate goes from faith (ours) to faith (of the young) under the impulse of salesian spirituality, the driving force behind our journey.

John Paul II reminds all of us that “faith is strengthened when it is given to others”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> RM 2

### **The Pope's message in the Encyclical “Redemptoris missio”**

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Vatican II decree “Ad gentes” (December 1965), the Holy Father has published the Encyclical “Redemptoris missio” as a clear endorsement of the perennial validity of the Church's missionary mandate. The document represents a great appeal by the Pope to face up with greater responsibility to the missions “ad gentes”. It also offers reflections and provides clarifications, in the light of important developments that have taken place in recent decades.

The title of the Encyclical takes us back to the proclamation made to all by John Paul II at the beginning of his pontificate: “Open the gates to Christ!”. It was a cry that found ample comment in his first Encyclical “Redemptor hominis”, in which he declared that “man is the primary and fundamental way for the Church”. To this and other appeals the Pope has added his personal testimony in the way he has carried out Peter's ministry. Because of his many apostolic journeys he has been rightly called “the first missionary of the world”.

One may say that the exhortation to open the

gates to Christ has been the fundamental theme of all his pontificate; in particular it is the principal objective of this new Encyclical: "the mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still only beginning! ... we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service".<sup>23</sup> We need only look at contemporary humanity: of more than five thousand million people on earth, only one third know Jesus Christ, and of these only 18% call themselves Catholics (and among Catholics not all are true believers). In Asia, the home of 60% of all humanity, the baptized are less than 2%. And everywhere to some extent the number of those who do not know Christ is growing faster than those who follow him.

Missionary concern, therefore, is in urgent need of relaunching; it will prompt a renewal of all commitments to evangelization and will present the Church as the true sacrament of salvation in the world.

The Encyclical takes into account the developments that have been made, and opens up new perspectives.

We can indicate some of them: a new item stemming from Vatican II is the dense theological content of the concept of 'mission'; another is the difference between specifically missionary activity, pastoral care of the faithful, and the re-evangelization of countries that at one time had a christian tradition but are now heading rapidly down the road to secularization; the new criteria for the specific description of missionary activity – criteria that are not only geographical but also cultural and sociological; the novelty of the prominence given to young Churches, still in need of further maturing; the novelty of the including of promotional com-

<sup>23</sup> RM 1

mitments for the development of peoples through the education of conscience.

What the Encyclical tells us, to put it in a nutshell, is that missionary activity helps the Church to respond to the immense challenge of an epoch-making transformation without parallel in history for its vast extent, depth and rapidity. In such a transformation missionary commitment appears as "one of the Church's fundamental activities: it is essential and never-ending".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> RM 31

I invite each one of you to read this pontifical document with care and attention. Here we shall reflect on some aspects of it that will help us to be courageous in harmonizing ourselves with the missionary heart of Don Bosco.

### **Enthusiasm for the "Mission" stems from the mystery of God**

The concept of 'mission' is at the foundation of all the ecclesiological renewal introduced by Vatican II; it is intimately connected with the very nature of the Church, the mystical body of Christ in history. Its missionary dimension is rooted in fact in the relationships of mission in the Trinity itself: in that of the Word sent by the Father to become man and, through the resurrection of Christ, in that of the Holy Spirit. The Church, the universal Sacrament of salvation, combines in itself in organic harmony the two Trinitarian 'missions' and so becomes the great evangelizer of all peoples.

The Council, in proclaiming the missionary nature of the Church (especially through the constitution "Lumen gentium" and the decree "Ad gentes") affirms the extraordinary vitality of this innate dy-

namism she has, especially with regard to the present epoch-making change "which gives rise to a new situation for mankind".<sup>25</sup> Not only is there in the world a new emerging culture which in itself is not of christian origin, but peoples themselves are on the move, and the number of those who do not know Christ is continually increasing; horizons are widening, as also are the possibilities for missionary commitment. Missionary activity in the Church is a long way from being complete; indeed, says the Pope, it is only beginning. The "farthest ends of the earth" indicated by the Gospel are not simply geographical, and we may say that instead of coming nearer they are getting farther away. Hence the urgency for missionary activity. All believers are asked to broaden their outlook so as to embrace the vast horizons of the non-christian world.<sup>26</sup>

This vision of the Council has brought a new enthusiasm to the Church. In a certain way it has brought about a convergence of the "missions ad gentes" with the unique and fundamental "mission" of evangelization (proper to all the People of God), thus bringing about an organic incorporation of missiology in ecclesiology. This serves to shed more light on all the evangelizing activity of the Church and strengthens the strict relationship it must cultivate towards contemporary man, to whose insistent challenges it must be able to give the response of salvation.

It is in this global perspective that is born the need of a "new evangelization" to guide the entire renewal of ecclesial activity at the present day. Everything is rooted in the Trinitarian missions which are incarnated and founded historically in the one fundamental mission of the Church.

<sup>25</sup> AG 1

<sup>26</sup> cf. RM 40

**Missionary activity has pride of place in evangelization.**

In the light of this unifying vision of the Council, there are some who have wondered whether it be still opportune to speak of specific missionary activity; would it not be sufficient to speak simply of the missionary aspect inherent in all ecclesial activity?

Certainly one must acknowledge that if the mission of the Church is unique, this aspect must be concretely present in every form of ecclesial action. But it does not follow that all these forms of activity are of the same kind. The Encyclical is concerned to emphasize the fact that missionary activity "ad gentes" remains indispensable and fundamental. "Care must be taken", says the document, "to avoid the risk of putting very different situations on the same level and of reducing, or even eliminating, the Church's mission and missionaries 'ad gentes'."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> RM 32

The conciliar decree had already said that differences in the evangelizing activities of the Church do not flow from the inner nature of the mission itself, but from the circumstances in which it is exercised. These circumstances depend either on the Church itself, or on the peoples, classes or men to whom its mission is directed.<sup>28</sup> And so within the one mission various evangelizing activities can be distinguished: everything is evangelization and indeed, after the Council, everything must be "new evangelization"<sup>29</sup> – but it remains necessary to distinguish from each other some activities with particular characteristics.

<sup>28</sup> cf. AG 6

<sup>29</sup> cf. ASC 331

The decree "Ad gentes" had already distinguished specifically missionary activity from pasto-



ral activity (addressed to the faithful) and ecumenical activity (aimed at restoring unity between christians).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> cf. AG 6

The recent Encyclical presents in general three different forms of evangelizing activity: a) "missionary activity" among people who do not know Christ; b) "pastoral care" of the christian faithful; and c) the "re-presentation of the Gospel" in countries of earlier christian tradition which have now become secularized.

It is not easy to define hard and fast boundaries between the three forms; certainly these activities cannot be identified one with the other, but neither are they mutually exclusive in such a way that each could be enclosed in a watertight compartment. There is intercommunication between them, but on one condition: that specifically missionary activity must be, even for the others, the first and defining quality of all evangelization: "without the mission 'ad gentes', the Church's very missionary dimension would be deprived of its essential meaning and of the very activity that exemplifies it".<sup>31</sup> Lack of concern for it, or allowing it to become weak, would be evidence of lack of fervour and a sign of a crisis in faith.

<sup>31</sup> cf. RM 33, 34

And so in the Council's view of the one mission, to distinguish specifically missionary activity from the others does not weaken it or make it seem less important, but rather strengthens its identity and consistency, and emphasizes the great value of the service the first gives to the others, of which it constitutes the foundation and driving force.

How then at the present day are we to specify the proper characteristics of the missions "ad gentes"? This is a question to which it is difficult to give a simple reply. There are at least certain ele-

ments that help in making a judgement in different situations; they help above all in asserting as a basic principle the importance of two aspects that are interconnected: i.e. that all evangelizing activity proceeds from the Church's unique mission, and that specifically missionary activity is the root and primary impulse behind other kinds of evangelizing activity.

The Encyclical, in an organized manner, goes more deeply into the meaning of missionary activity in its specific sense. "It is distinct from other ecclesial activities inasmuch as it is addressed to groups and settings which are non-christian because the preaching of the Gospel and the presence of the Church are either absent or insufficient".<sup>32</sup> Its central objective is that of founding christian communities "sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups".<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> RM 34

<sup>33</sup> RM 33

Consideration must be given therefore also to social and cultural aspects: "here we are speaking of a great and lengthy process, in which it is hard to identify the precise stage at which missionary activity properly so-called comes to an end and is replaced by pastoral activity".<sup>34</sup> To the geographical criterion we used to employ at one time to indicate "mission territories" – and which still remains partly valid (the Encyclical speaks of the South and East) – there is added a criterion of the sociological order which takes account of some of the big transformations which characterize today's social prospects (e.g. the demographic explosion in some parts, the worlds of youth and of work, urbanization and migration, refugees and exiles, etc.). There is also another criterion proper to the emerging culture where there appear, as the Encyclical

<sup>34</sup> RM 48

puts it, modern equivalents of the Areopagus (a symbolic reference, in the company of St Paul, to the Areopagus of Athens, the cultural centre of the citizens), such as the vast area of social communications, women's liberation, international solidarity, commitments for peace freedom and justice, the complex areas of scientific research, etc. When one considers the criteria mentioned in the Encyclical it becomes immediately clear that specifically missionary activity has become at the present day both pluriform and flexible; it cannot be enclosed in a particular territorial area, nor be reduced to a romantic vision of lonely work in a jungle. "Religious and social upheaval", says the Encyclical, "make it difficult to apply in practice certain ecclesial distinctions and categories to which we have become accustomed".<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> RM 32

But sociological and cultural differences do not lead to a loss of the elements which characterize specifically missionary activity and distinguish it from either pastoral work or the re-evangelization of groups that have become secularized.

It is of interest to us to explore a bit further this elasticity in the concept of specifically missionary activity as applied to our own charisma. For the moment it is enough for us to know that the Encyclical assures us that it is permanent, and even that it "is only beginning".<sup>36</sup> Before going further in that direction however it will be of interest to highlight some new dimensions that are very positive; in their regard the Encyclical dispels certain doubts and ambiguities that have arisen and accompany them.

<sup>36</sup> RM 30

### **The missionary is invited to a renewal without deviation**

Among the innovations which the Encyclical endorses and emphasizes, there are three of particular significance: the conciliar vision of the "Kingdom of God", more extensive than that of the Church; the process of evangelization which deepens the values of subjectiveness, avoiding in evangelizing activity whatever smacks of proselytism; and the new and demanding values of either ecumenism, or of inter-religious dialogue and the urgent need for the inculturation of the Gospel.

There are some recent perspectives which have become an important part of the new evangelization and which must be adopted in every apostolic activity of the Church. The missionary, for instance, is called upon to renew himself following the line of Vatican II: he must be able to incorporate in his evangelizing work the values that promote the Kingdom; he must use a method able to move personal freedom and conscience; he must avoid a polemic tone of apologetics so as to make possible an intelligent and well prepared inter-religious dialogue. He can no longer content himself with a kind of magic sacramentalism.

Like all innovations, these too that I have indicated have been accompanied by ambiguities and have given rise to doubts of a kind previously unknown.

The Encyclical provides new light that clarifies them. Superficial interpretations concerning missionary activity would pretend to emarginate and weaken it in various ways rather than renew it.

Let us follow the Encyclical in its clarification of the three more significant innovations we have listed.

— *The danger of fostering a reductive sense of the “Kingdom”*

<sup>37</sup> cf. LG 5

Vatican II has made a necessary distinction between “Church” and “Kingdom of God”.<sup>37</sup> The incipient reality of the Kingdom can be found outside the confines of the Church in the whole of humanity; the People of God indeed has the mission of coordinating and perfecting also the evangelical values of cultures and the temporal order in relation to the mystery of Christ: the Church in fact is the “seed and beginning” of the Kingdom in history.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

This explicit vision of the Council ensures a horizon that is wider than missionary activity, and for us serves to give prominence to the salesian style of interchange and mutual relationship between evangelization and human advancement.

But there are some who have misinterpreted this distinction and have put forward in recent years a secularist concept of the Kingdom. They concentrate attention on the human values of the temporal order and undervalue the specific mission of the Church (because, they say, all ‘ecclesiocentrism’ must be avoided). While going more deeply into the values of the created order (something evidently positive), they overlook the mystery of Christ the Redeemer (thereby depriving christianity of its very nature). By concentrating only on the rich values of the lay element in the historical reality of cultures, they conclude that “what counts are programmes and struggles for a liberation which is social and economic, political and even cultural”, in view of a progress that is purely earthly.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> RM 17

In the light of this kind of ideology any specifi-

cally missionary activity is ruled out of court; the primary objective to be attained would no longer be the proclamation of Christ but that of social justice, especially among people most in need. This is a danger that must be avoided, but avoiding it is not enough; the missionary must be able to incorporate the innovation of this conciliar vision into his activity as one sent by the Lord.

The new evangelization, in fact, involves a commitment to give greater value to the mystery of creation;<sup>40</sup> this must evidently be done in full and indispensable correlation with the mystery of the redemption, highlighting the novelty of the Gospel and the historical and theological necessity of the cross.<sup>41</sup> The Kingdom of God, says the Pope, "is not a concept, a doctrine, or a programme subject to free interpretation, but is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God".<sup>42</sup> It is in him and through him that the new evangelization fosters the social dimension of charity.<sup>43</sup> It is precisely the mystery of Christ that saves and gives value to the temporal order. Vatican II has stated explicitly that "the work of Christ's redemption concerns essentially the salvation of men, but it also takes in the whole of the temporal order... permeating and improving it with the evangelical spirit".<sup>44</sup>

From the mystery of Christ, creator and redeemer, stems and grows the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the world and the urgent need for an adequate formation of their conscience. What new horizons are opened in this way for the activity of the missionary!

The correct vision of the Kingdom takes nothing from the importance of missionary activity; rather it requires a more updated realization. In

<sup>40</sup> cf. AGC 331

<sup>41</sup> cf. Final Report of Synod-85

<sup>42</sup> RM 18

<sup>43</sup> cf. Strenna 1991; Commentary of Rector Major

<sup>44</sup> AA 5; cf. 7

other words, an authentic perspective of the historical reality of the Kingdom does not weaken but rather strengthens and broadens the foundations and objectives of missionary commitments and throws light on our “evangelizing by educating”.

— *the temptation to be unconcerned about “conversion” and “baptism.”*

Another ambiguity clarified by the Encyclical is the temptation to reduce christianity to the status of just one religion among many others. Since in every religion possibilities of salvation can be found, there would be no sense in activity for conversions. A person who has grown up in a culture opposed to the mystery of Christ, but with a certain religious foundation to it, should not be disturbed in his beliefs but made to grow in them to strengthen religious transcendence; to try to convert him would be “proselytism” and threaten his dignity as a person. And so respect for freedom and conscience would exclude all missionary activity as being essentially directed towards conversion.

Furthermore, even in the case of individual conversions to Christ, this should not necessarily lead to the administration of the sacrament of baptism (which in particular cases gives rise to suspicions of a social kind), and would be no longer necessary for salvation. God would supply for it by the positive elements in the various religions. And an interpretation of this kind should be offered to missionaries as an anthropological updating to be followed in their programmes.

The Encyclical makes us reflect on the totally original nature of christianity: it is not simply a *religion* (born of human research), but a faith that comes down from on high through historical

events. No human religion is, in itself, a bearer of salvation; only the Christ-event can be so: "no one comes to the Father, but by me".<sup>45</sup> The "good news" of this historical event is not a cultural concept alien to the various mentalities of people who have not yet heard of it, but a fact to which they too have not only a right but even an urgent need of it. Hence the missionary importance of its proclamation – one cannot remain silent about it; "necessity is laid upon me", says St Paul; "woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"<sup>46</sup> And then, it is possible for all people to perceive in some way the mystery of Christ, because it is not expressed in abstract concepts but by the narration of real events of his life (he was born, did good to others, taught the truth, suffered, died and lives again). No cultural structure is an obstacle to the understanding of this "good news", which is indispensable for every individual and belongs to all peoples. The faith is concentrated entirely on the historical reality of Jesus Christ; only in him can it be known who God is and how he exists; only through him is there a way of escape: "there is no salvation in anyone else".<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Jn 14,6

<sup>46</sup> 1 Cor 9,16

<sup>47</sup> Acts 4,12

And it is precisely this objective fact which is the fundamental reason why the Church is of its nature missionary.

The Encyclical goes on to show why the proclamation of Christ and bearing witness to him, made in a manner that respects consciences, are something offered to man (who remains free) to foster and perfect his dignity.<sup>48</sup> Conversion to Christ is a gift of God; every individual has a right to it, because through the very fact of his existence everyone is personally called to salvation. Peter and the Apostles proclaimed in explicit terms the urgent need to turn to Christ: "be converted!"<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> cf. RM 7

<sup>49</sup> Acts 2,37-38; 3,19



<sup>50</sup> cf. Mt 28,19

Conversion was connected with the sacrament of baptism by Jesus himself.<sup>50</sup> To separate the two would be to obscure the genuine significance of the christian faith. Christ willed to remain concretely in history (for the benefit of every individual) through the Church as his Body, the sacramental bearer of all the vital elements necessary for salvation, and the “place” where it is possible to meet him frequently and with certainty.

<sup>51</sup> cf. RM 46,47

Baptism is the great “sacrament of the faith”; it incorporates everyone, in an objective and organic manner, into the Church as the Body of Christ existing here and now.<sup>51</sup> It is true that around the celebration of Baptism there may have grown up sociological considerations (and even superstitions), but this is always one more reason for explaining more clearly its true nature and indispensability from a theological point of view.

Hence missionary activity, thought out afresh and relaunched in line with the criteria of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, is called upon to renew its methods, not least with an eye to a deeper understanding of the subjective nature and characteristics of every culture; it must keep always in mind the conscience and freedom of the person addressed. But for this very reason it is prompted by Christ himself and by the centuries-old practice of the Church, to foster by intelligent pedagogy the conversion of people to Christ. This must be accompanied by an appropriate preparation for Baptism, as the sacrament that generates the new life which brings about incorporation into the community of believers for the building of the local Church.

— *The risks of religious relativism.*

The fact that after the Council there has been an

intensification in ecumenism between the various christian denominations – because of their common baptismal values – and in dialogue with other religions (especially Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam) – because of the seeds of evangelical truth present in them – has led some people to suppose that specifically missionary activity could be substituted in some areas by appropriate inter-religious relationships. Considering then that some religions are strongly embodied in the cultures of those who profess them, it has been suggested that to inculcate the faith among such peoples it would be necessary to accept much of their ways of life, even in delicate matters of personal, family and social conduct, because (as is true) the Gospel is not properly a textbook of morals.

The Encyclical warns against interpretations of this kind which misrepresent the Church's missionary activity.

In the first place ecumenism must be understood and practised in its full meaning; it is not to be identified merely with meetings for discussion and a certain degree of collaboration, even though these are things that form part of it and express its nature. Initiatives of this kind can prove positive in some regions and less so in others; they can also have defects. The ecumenism launched by the Council implies a personal change of mentality, an attitude of seeking for the truth, and this is inherent in the very concept of the new evangelization; it is "a fundamental dimension of all the Church's activity". It requires an adequate formation on the part of all, including missionaries themselves, to re-think and deepen their knowledge of the Gospel with a mental attitude of understanding for the other churches while being aware of one's own

Catholic identity. This implies a special formation for the believer that, instead of making him polemic, will enable him to take part in discussions with an eye to finding common points of truth; a formation of this kind also enriches the way in which missionary activity is carried out, giving due value to the wealth held in common in Baptism and the Scriptures. Obviously it is necessary to avoid falling into a harmful irenics, especially in the case of sects motivated more by vague religious ideas rather than by true faith in Christ.

As far as "dialogue with other religions" is concerned, an attitude is needed similar to that of ecumenism as regards the positive values present in every religion. This requires a knowledge of those religions and relationships of dialogue; getting together with them around a table is certainly enriching for both parties. This is not just a change of tactics; it is a matter of understanding that in other religions too there are so-called "seeds of the Word" that can grow and flourish with the help of prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit. Rightly does the Encyclical declare that "other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the sign of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all".<sup>52</sup>

It is not easy to acquire a mentality of this kind and the corresponding ability in discussion, but it is certainly an attitude inherent in the new evangelization launched by Vatican II, and which must therefore be a constituent part of the Church's renewed missionary activity.

And then there has to be a courageous dedication to the inculturation of the faith, but avoiding any form of superficial interpretation made without proper discernment and without serious criteria of communion with the local Church.

In every culture (and in the human religious ideas that permeate it) there are many positive values, but alongside them there are also negative values and errors; in particular there can be a pre-Christian outlook which has taken no account of the historical factor of the event of Christ. It is a question therefore not only of cultures of all centuries, rich in so much human experience, but also of a form of religious thought that has remained static at a point over two thousand years ago (insofar as it lacks the experience of faith begun in Christ). If on the one hand the Church is urged to inculturate the Gospel in the vast number of different local Churches, on the other she is sent by Christ himself to "evangelize cultures" and therefore to discern their positive values and purify them from their negative aspects; and this is something that brings with it misunderstandings, difficulties and even persecutions. All the Apostles died as martyrs. The mystery of the incarnation of the Word, while showing us the boldness and realism of "becoming truly man" speaks to us also of the courage of bearing witness and of patience (passion and death) in proclaiming the truths of salvation. Christ corrects and also purifies, but always in a manner consistent with his role as Saviour.

Well knowing that ecumenical and inter-religious activity has a long and difficult road ahead of it (especially with Islam), the Pope encourages missionaries to persevere with faith and charity in their daily witness, convinced that "dialogue is a

path towards the Kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father".<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> RM 57

### **A glance at Don Bosco's missions at the present day.**

Nowadays missionary activity has become more varied and flexible: to the geographical criterion have been added others of a sociological and cultural nature. There has been, therefore, an evolution and mobility that does not lend itself easily to the making of fixed lists and categories. But the Pope insists that the substantial elements that specify missionary activity remain clear.

It will be useful for us to meditate on this evolution and permanence, with reference to our own missions.

Today, in fact, through the merits of a large number of missionaries, several particular Churches have come into being among people who a few decades ago did not yet know Christ. Nevertheless in those same regions "there are still very large areas where there are no local Churches or where their number is insufficient in relation to the vastness of the territory and the density of the population";<sup>54</sup> in other words, areas where the phase of "planting the Church" has not developed sufficiently; "the growth in the number of new Churches in recent times", says the Encyclical, "should not deceive us".<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> RM 49

<sup>55</sup> RM 37

And so, in such areas the task remains very much alive of forming christian communities which will be a real sign of the presence of Christ in human life, even though a basic diocesan structure

may have been already established: the work of deeper evangelization must continue.

On the other hand there may be sectors of the population or special cultural and social environments which do not yet know Christ.

And this brings to mind another aspect to which we must give serious thought: that of the different charismata (our own, for example) approved by the Apostolic See for the universal Church, which have been bestowed by the Spirit precisely for the evangelization of particular social sectors or cultural environments.

Our own charism has been created for the benefit of youth and the poorer classes. "You may say", said Don Bosco, speaking of the missions, "that in those distant lands there are already other Congregations. That is quite true; but remember that we are going there to help them, not to take their place. In general they are concerned with adults; we are going to care for the young, and especially those who are poor and abandoned".<sup>56</sup>

\* MB 18,49

The Congregation, in fact, takes on primarily the task of contributing to the young Churches of these distant countries the gift of its particular speciality in the field of evangelization: i.e. the ability to educate to the faith needy youngsters and the poorer people. This is clearly something we give so as to collaborate in building in the local Church those sectors or environments where the Gospel is particularly lacking.

It is true, of course, that the same kind of situation can occur also in Churches that are sufficiently well established; in fact the three different levels indicated by the Encyclical (missionary activity, pastoral care, and re-evangelization) are frequently found together and overlap, even in so-called christian countries.

But if this is so, do we not become missionaries wherever we are working?

The answer is 'yes' in a general sense, that of the fundamental mission of the Church, which stimulates our apostolic zeal to make Christ and his Gospel known to young people: everywhere we are "missionaries of the young". But not everywhere are we so in the proper and specific sense of the missions "ad gentes". To be missionaries in this strict sense, *some other particular conditions are necessary*, even in our own Congregation, and especially the following:

- to live personally (by inspiration or by disposition of religious obedience) *a vocation that has the character of a mission "ad gentes"*: "Christ the Lord has always called from the number of his disciples those whom he has chosen that they might be with him so that he might send them to preach to the nations"; and so missionaries "have a special vocation";<sup>57</sup>
- to be sent by lawful authority to take the faith to those who are far from Christ;<sup>68</sup> this implies, in fact, *leaving one's own country and culture*;
- to be generously committed in the service of *integral evangelization* without limits of energy or time;<sup>59</sup>
- to be constantly striving, even at personal cost, to *insert oneself into the people and culture* of those to whom one is sent;
- to desire that the *commitment be for all one's life*; this is an aspect, says the Encyclical, which still retains all its validity at the present day: "it is the model of the Church's missionary commitment, which always stands in need of radical and total self-giving, of new and bold endeavours,... without being daunted by doubts, misunderstand-

<sup>57</sup> AG 23

<sup>58</sup> cf. AG 23

<sup>59</sup> cf. RM 65

ings, rejection or persecution".<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> RM 66

If we look back over the hundred years of missionary activity realized by our Congregation, we see that in some areas it has been dedicated (and in some cases is so still) to the "planting of the Church". But generally, and especially in recent years, it has gone to insert itself in young Churches in Southern and Eastern parts, to carry out there the particular mission to the young and the poor that is Don Bosco's charism. In some cases too, after building the local Church to a certain maturity (with the establishment of dioceses) it has changed its presence from one of overall responsibility to a concentration on that of its own particular charism.

What is worth emphasizing is that all these specifically missionary activities have not been carried out by single individuals, working on their own and following personal plans, but by confreres who by virtue of their same salesian vocation have been sent to collaborate in a common missionary plan, drawn up by the Congregation. The latter, being an Institute of consecrated life, has a missionary soul and generously takes on responsibilities; among other things it looks after the missionaries themselves: their special vocation, their formation, their destinations, and follows them up throughout their commitment "ad gentes".

The Founder has bequeathed to us the conviction that in the Church we Salesians have a missionary task to promote and carry out, and he himself has given us the example through great sacrifices.<sup>61</sup>

Already the Council decree "Ad gentes" had asked us to consider seriously whether in the present state of affairs we were able to extend further our

<sup>61</sup> cf. ASC 297; "Our Founder saw Africa"



<sup>62</sup> cf. AG 40

missionary commitment, perhaps by reshaping our work in christian countries so as to reinforce missionary work.<sup>62</sup> By God's grace we can say that we have responded generously to this appeal: a large number of provinces have led the way with courage and sacrifice, and they continue in their commitment.

But certainly it is always possible to do more and to do it better, and this is the appeal we want to discern in the new Encyclical.

It is not only a matter of intensifying our sacrifices, but also of a true and abundant enriching of our salesian authenticity.

The GC23 has asked us in general to improve the pastoral quality of our work. The Encyclical assures us that by increasing our specifically missionary activity we shall find the secret and incentive for reaching a higher level in all our pastoral activity: it is in the missions, in fact, that one experiences more clearly that the Gospel is the precious "good news" for the present day, and that the faith of the confreres themselves becomes reawakened as they proclaim the events of Christ.

Missionary activity helps us also to rediscover the originality of our particular form of youth pastoral work. We need only think, for example, of the salesian oratory. In some well-deserving dioceses there are wonderful examples of parish oratories for the children of christian families in the local community, and they do a great deal of good. But Don Bosco's oratory is conceived with a missionary perspective for young people without a parish because "the Church's mission is wider than communion";<sup>63</sup> in it a group of young people more mature in the faith become apostles of their companions ("youth for the young"!), while the confreres invol-

<sup>63</sup> RM 64

ved feel themselves to be really “missionaries of the young” to whom they have been called.

And so, the Congregation’s missionary commitment is called at the present day to grow in quality and intensity and also to stimulate the pastoral quality of all our foundations, and to relaunch Don Bosco’s oratory as a permanent criterion for the discernment and renewal of all our activities and work.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> cf. C 40

### **Salesian spirituality for our missionaries**

Missionary activity is not founded directly on human abilities, even though these may play an important part in it. The protagonist of the entire mission of the Church is the Holy Spirit: he calls, enlightens, guides and gives courage and efficacy; his work shines out in eminent fashion in the mission “ad gentes”.<sup>65</sup> The missionary is invited to enter into a special harmonious relationship with the Lord’s Spirit.

<sup>65</sup> cf. RM chap. 3

In its final chapter, the Encyclical deals precisely with missionary spirituality. If we read carefully the brief paragraphs, we can apply their contents to the spiritual legacy left us by Don Bosco, as described in my Letter on “salesian spirituality for the new evangelization”.<sup>66</sup> For us missionary spirituality is not of another kind, but our own – intensified and given new light by the aspect of being sent “ad gentes”.

<sup>66</sup> AGC 334

In the first place there is the fact that our missionaries feel themselves “rooted in the power of the Holy Spirit”; he it is who has rendered the whole Congregation missionary. That implies in the missionaries an intensification of the experience of faith, hope and charity, which enables them to live in a constant attitude of union with God and in a

penetrating feeling of exodus that makes us think of the kenosis and incarnation of the Word. The Encyclical puts as the first condition that of "allowing ourselves to be led by the Spirit": "the mission is difficult and complex, and demands the courage and light of the Spirit:... we must pray".<sup>67</sup> And the Pope adds: "My contact with representatives of the non-christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation".<sup>68</sup> It will never be superfluous to insist on the need for meditation on the Word in connection with the mentality and situations of peoples, and on the continual effort to build "community" with a constant and adequate preaching of the Gospel.

With regard to the principal elements set out in the letter previously referred to, we may note that:

- *internal apostolic conviction*, characterized by the charity of "da mihi animas" (with its "grace of unity" and internal synthesis of consecration and mission), places the salesian missionary in a position to be able to translate his contemplation of God into the "ecstasy of action". His available and practical faith stems from that of Abraham, the father of believers, who leaves everything and sets out; an exodus that carries with it the pouring out of his own interior dispositions to spread in the world a concrete "youthful spirituality";
- *the central position of Christ, the Good Shepherd*, which demands of the Salesian a particular pedagogical and pastoral attitude, will help the missionary in his approach to those to whom he is sent - beginning with the poor and abandoned - through a dialogue of kindness in imitation of

<sup>67</sup> RM 87

<sup>68</sup> RM 91

Jesus the apostle of the Father. The Encyclical emphasizes in fact the need to live the mystery of Christ, the one sent to evangelize, as described by St Paul: "he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men". An emptying which expresses the love that makes him all things to all men,<sup>69</sup> living with those to whom he is sent not as objectives of his work but as brothers in Christ in the same communion of hope;

<sup>69</sup> cf. RM 88

- *educational commitment as our mission*: this is a characteristic note that proceeds from the very nature of the salesian charism: it is a question of a spirituality which gives prominence to educational aspects with the strategy of Don Bosco. It prompts the missionary to take seriously the many elements in the process of human maturing that do not hinder evangelization but rather promote it in realistic fashion. In this connection it would be interesting to glance briefly at the concrete tasks undertaken by our first missionaries in this sense: think, for instance, of the works of development in Patagonia, or the example of Mgr Cimatti who toured the main cities of Japan giving music concerts. The Encyclical speaks of promoting development by the formation of consciences.<sup>70</sup> The Pope furthermore, writing to the Religious of Latin America, reminds them that many missionaries lived with the native peoples and "became labourers, carpenters, builders of houses and churches, school teachers and apprentices of the indigenous culture, as well as promoters of original arts and crafts".<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> RM 58

<sup>71</sup> Oss.Rom. (Eng.edtn) 30  
July 1990

The salesian style of education implies also the ability to live among the people, austerity of

life, a pedagogical sense of attention to daily duty, and a climate of fellow-feeling and simplicity;

- *the need to be practical in ecclesial matters* situates every Salesian at the heart of the Church, because the missionary lives and works in the Church and for the Church, especially in the delicate work of its development. Convinced adherence to the teaching of the Pope and the Bishops is for us a strong spiritual legacy that we cultivate in every local Church. The Encyclical declares that “only a profound love for the Church can sustain the missionary’s zeal. This love, even to the point of giving his life, is a focal point for him”;<sup>72</sup>
- *joy in hard work* reminds us Salesians that we were born on the Hill of the Youth Beatitudes, and that happiness is a characteristic note of our youthful spirituality; the missionary feels himself constrained to spread around him an atmosphere of christian joy. The Encyclical recalls that every missionary must be a man of the Beatitudes: “the characteristic of every authentic missionary life is the inner joy that comes from faith. In a world tormented and oppressed by so many problems, a world tempted to pessimism, the one who proclaims the ‘good news’ must be a person who has found true hope in Christ”;<sup>73</sup>
- *the Marian dimension*: all salesian activity, and with greater reason missionary activity, is considered in the Congregation as a participation in Mary’s ecclesial motherhood, invoked as the Help of Christians. The Encyclical expresses the hope that on the eve of the third millennium the whole Church may find itself gathered (like the Apostles) “in the Upper Room ‘with Mary the

<sup>72</sup> RM 89

<sup>73</sup> RM 91

Mother of Jesus', in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength and courage to carry out the missionary mandate...: Mary is the model of that maternal love which should inspire all who cooperate in the Church's apostolic mission for the rebirth of humanity"<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> RM 92

If the missionary dimension is really an essential element in our charisma it means, on the one hand, that it demands of our spirituality a special light and force to make it present and operative in the missions, and on the other that the missionary aspect deepens and renders more genuine salesian spirituality itself.

### **Everyone – in communion and active participation**

The salesian missions, from the time of Don Bosco himself, have had the support of a responsibility and cooperation that go beyond the direct commitment of the missionaries; they involve all the Congregation and, through it, the great Salesian Family.

It is important to give due prominence to these two aspects of wide responsibility and vast cooperation.

If our Congregation is missionary, it means that all its members share the responsibility for this -not only those in it who have a role of animation and guidance (and especially the Rector Major and General Council, the Provincials and Provincial Councils), but also local communities and every single confrere. A sense of convinced solidarity must prompt all of us to promote initiatives of information, prayer, support, help and sharing.

In particular those Provinces, and they are many indeed, which are concretely committed in

some region overseas should follow with serious attention and generous collaboration the indications for coordination which, by the will of the GC23 and the decision of the Rector Major and his Council, will be given by the Councillor General for the Missions.

We said in this regard that a new phase is beginning. This does not mean any lessening or suspension of the commitment of the provinces, but rather a more coordinated manner of growth. And this will call for still more generous and competent services of support and intervention, especially as regards the formation of native personnel.

Among the initiatives to be developed in the provinces and houses in view of a large-scale cooperation, there is one very dear to Don Bosco – that of reawakening missionary sensitivity in the various groups of the Salesian Family, through channels of information, youth groups, pastoral work for vocations and, in general, through people who have an admiration for the missions.

And here I think it a duty to recall the importance that has always attached to the Salesian Bulletin in making our missions known. Today it needs to be circulated more widely than ever before, and the missionaries themselves should feel themselves personally involved in this by sending in interesting reports and well chosen and expressive photographs, as is required by modern editorial technique.

Another aspect to be attentively promoted is that of volunteer work, not only among the young but among adults as well. We already have some very positive examples in this regard.

Worthy of praise and further development are the various Procures or Mission Offices which, in their different ways, have helped and sustained in

providential ways so many missionary activities, but which have also become centres of information and animation.

Finally it is worthwhile pointing out that the Encyclical gives pride of place to spiritual cooperation: "Prayer should accompany the journey of missionaries so that the proclamation of the word will be effective through God's grace... Prayer needs to be accompanied by sacrifice. The redemptive value of suffering, accepted and offered to God with love, derives from the sacrifice of Christ himself... The sacrifice of missionaries should be shared and accompanied by the sacrifices of all the faithful... I therefore urge those engaged in the pastoral care of the sick", says the Pope, "to teach them about the efficacy of suffering, and to encourage them to offer their sufferings to God for missionaries. By making such an offering, the sick themselves become missionaries".<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> RM 78

We need to recognize that dedication to the missions gives us a good spiritual shake-up, and brings us more closely into the mystery of Christ.

### **The Lord is preparing a new springtime for the faith**

The Holy Father recognizes that the Church is facing a task that is very complex and one that exceeds its unaided strength, but he uses in the Encyclical a tone that is both enthusiastic and optimistic. It is not that he has lost sight of the problems and the aspects that are difficult and not very encouraging: "If we look at today's world", he says, "we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism". But if our glance is powered by an authentic faith and the contemplation of the



merciful goodness of the Father, the immeasurable solidarity of Christ, and the presence and transforming power of the Spirit, then a perspective opens up of great hope. And the Pope manages to put this hope across; he sees in the great jubilee of the year 2000 a concrete point of reference: "As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for christianity, and we can already see its first signs".<sup>76</sup>

We may indeed think that the Second Vatican Council was the great sign of what is coming, followed by so many other indications.

Our own GC23 too describes with optimism in a rapid survey the journey already followed by the Congregation towards the new evangelization.<sup>77</sup> And the Encyclical adds that "the whole Church is even more committed to a new missionary advent:... the missionary task must remain foremost, for it concerns the eternal destiny of humanity and corresponds to God's mysterious and merciful plan".<sup>78</sup>

On the eve, then, of the third millennium we feel ourselves prompted towards hope, to renew with joy the enthusiasm of the beginnings, to commit ourselves even further, to base the relaunching of all evangelizing activity on our missionary work, to feel infected by what the Council proclaimed to the young, presenting to them the rejuvenated face of the Church which, "rich with a long past ever living in her, and marching on towards human perfection in time and the ultimate destinies of history and of life, is the real youth of the world. She possesses what constitutes the strength and the charm of youth – the ability to rejoice with what is beginning, to give oneself unreservedly, to renew oneself and to set out again for new conquests".<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> RM 86

<sup>77</sup> GC23 1-14

<sup>78</sup> RM 86

<sup>79</sup> Message to youth, 8 December 1965

The stimulating statement that “missionary activity is only beginning” is to be interpreted in the light of this attitude of hope for living these “beginnings” with the strong impetus of the origins (of both the Church and our own charism). “The horizons and possibilities of mission are broadening”, but we are living in a special time of the Holy Spirit who is the true “protagonist of the mission”.

We are asked to imitate the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room “with Mary” to implore and obtain the Spirit’s presence and power.

The Holy Father entrusts all missionary work to the motherly love of the Virgin Mary. We place our filial trust in her as Mother of the Church and Helper of all people.

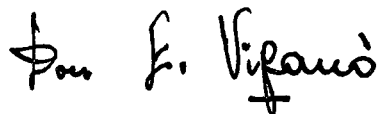
Don Bosco had given to Fr John Cagliero, the future Cardinal who headed the first missionary expedition, a document dated 13 November 1875 containing recommendations for missionary confreres; they included this exhortation: “Do the best you can; God will do what we cannot do. Leave everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians and you will realize what miracles are”.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup> BM 11, 369

With this trust, which is for us a sacred heritage, let us everywhere intensify our commitment for Christ and his Gospel: by multiplying our missionary endeavours all of us in the Congregation will become all the more “missionaries of the young”.

To all of you, and especially to the missionaries “ad gentes”, I send grateful greetings and the assurance of a daily remembrance in the Eucharist.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Don F. Viganò". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The "D" is large and loops around the "on". The "F" is tall and thin. The "V" is also tall and thin, with a small loop at the top. The "i" is small and sits between the "V" and the "g". The "g" is tall and loops around the "n". The "ò" is tall and thin, with a small loop at the top.