

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

THERE IS STILL GOOD GROUND WHERE THE SEED CAN FALL

- Introduction. - 150 years since Bartholomew Garelli. - A pressing appeal of the GC23: faith and vocation. - The new perspective of youth pastoral work. - Challenges of the present day. - Reawakening of transcendent values and processes to be developed. - Communities with ideas. - Making the journey of faith something personal. - Fostering experiences that develop maturity. - Knowing how to call and follow up. - Conclusion: those who bear the primary responsibility.

Rome, Solemnity of Mary Immaculate
8 December 1991

My dear confreres,

My cordial greetings to you, together with those of the members of the General Council. Some weeks ago we came back from the Holy Land where we made a special annual retreat and were able to live a deep experience contemplating the history of salvation.

We were able also to celebrate the centenary of Salesian work in Palestine with our well-deserving Salesian confreres and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, of those provinces which have been so sorely tried. We prayed for all our communities

and for every single confrere, as we became absorbed with Mary and Joseph in the mystery of the Incarnation and felt ourselves involved in the Passover events of the passion and death of Jesus, his resurrection and the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit.

We came back with Christ in the forefront of our minds and a renewed determination to commit ourselves to the fulfilment of his mission in history.

With what great joy would our father Don Bosco have contemplated so ardent an experience in the land of the Holy Family and the Apostles, if on his visits to Rome he had already shown such interest in the witness of the early Christian martyrs and the tomb of St Peter. His first successor, Blessed Michael Rua, went twice on pilgrimage to the Holy Land (in 1895 and 1908) as an expression of gratitude and in search of a sure stimulus for the Congregation's future.

We too felt ourselves in the Holy Land as representatives of Don Bosco's whole Family. The conferring on the Rector Major and Mother General of honorary citizenship of Bethlehem was a symbolic gesture which brings all of us more closely together with the Lord's davidical roots.

For my own part I asked for the Congregation in the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem the gift of being able to bring about an efficacious renewal in the vocational dimension of our pastoral work.

The Holy Land is the home of the richest and best documented story of vocations. God gave preference to this region when taking on his human experience. He called many collaborators who differed widely one from another: patriarchs, leaders, prophets, judges, kings, priests, champions, men and women for specific missions. He called them at all ages, from the mother's womb (as John the

Baptist) or in the fullness of manhood (like the twelve Apostles and Saul of Tarsus).

It was exhilarating at Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem, to meditate on our Lord's exhortation: the harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest insistently to send out labourers to his harvest.¹ It is inspiring to think that Jesus himself is the first of the workers in the vineyard, looking always for collaborators; he it is who taught us in the parable of the sower that some of the seed fell on good ground and bore fruit. We need to realize that throughout the centuries, and therefore also in our own day, there is still good ground where the seed sown by the Lord, who is always alive and active in his Church, can germinate and bear fruit.

¹ cf. Mt 9,37

150 years since Bartholomew Garelli

On 8 December this year, the Solemnity of Mary Immaculate, I was at Turin to commemorate the 150th anniversary of that humble event that Don Bosco always looked on as the beginning of the work of the Oratories. He was always convinced that at the origin of the work there had been the motherly intervention of the Virgin Mary. She did everything, he would say later. Through Mary's intercession Don Bosco's meeting with Bartholomew Garelli had been like the tiny mustard seed which had developed into a profuse charisma in the Church; a charism which, among other things, entrusts to the Madonna the entire vocational guidance of the young. She it was who guided Don Bosco himself in the foundation of a Congregation with the involvement of youthful vocations: those

twenty-two young men who, on 14 May 1862 made together with him the first Salesian vows, are the best historical proof of the vocational dimension, sustained by Mary, which is present in the whole Salesian future. Don Bosco gave himself intensely to the promoting of vocations, not only for the work of the Oratories but for the entire Church in all her different ministries, charisms and services.

In his tireless vocational activity our Founder was also pioneering and creative, especially in the maturing of candidates. He took care of so-called "late vocations"; despite the numerous difficulties met with (even on the part of Mgr. Gastaldi), he set up the Work of Mary Help of Christians, precisely for the cultivation of the vocations of young men already mature in age. Philip Rinaldi was one of them, and later became an excellent former of others.

It is true that times have greatly changed since then, but the creativity of the Holy Spirit and the motherly help of Mary will never be wanting to us: the sower will always cast seed on good ground.

A pressing appeal of the GC23: faith and vocation

The last General Chapter presented faith to us as the energy of life and as the apex of our educational activity, enlivened and crowned by an atmosphere of spirituality.

One of the chapter deliberations reminds us that "the journey of faith of the young demands that the Salesian community give particular attention to their vocational guidance."²

The text speaks of the "journey of faith of the young" in its unity and totality, i.e. the whole of the

² GC23 247

journey, considered in every phase of educative activity; if at some stage of the journey vocational guidance were to be left aside, our work of education to the faith would no longer be genuine.

For quite some time the theme of vocations has been the object of careful reflection by our General Chapters; Fr Luigi Ricceri, as Rector Major, wrote a special circular letter in this connection.³ The GC21⁴ in particular presented a summary of the situation which is still valid at the present day; and, following up one of its indications,⁵ the Youth Pastoral Department offered in 1982 a useful aid to the provinces.

The novel element introduced by the GC23 is that of inserting the vocational dimension into the journey of faith of the young, and of having understood the journey itself as a gradual and progressive response to a personal call. Think of the four areas indicated by the Chapter; they are simultaneous, even though with different emphases and intensities. Each of them has vocational overtones, while the fourth one – that of commitment for the Kingdom – concentrates explicitly on the vocational call as an indispensable condition for the authenticity of the entire journey.

And so, from the very beginning of education to the faith attention is directed from a pedagogical point of view to the vocational dimension: the steps the young person is taking towards human maturity (first area), the objectives at which he is aiming in his knowledge and sharing in the mystery of Christ (second area), his gradual insertion into the life of the Church (third area), should all lead him to a personal interest for the Kingdom (fourth area) “committing his own life to the cause of God, the Saviour of mankind.”⁶

³ ASC 273

⁴ GC21 106-119

⁵ *ibid.* 119d

⁶ cf. GC23 149 ff.

The vocational process is not to be equated with a single final fortuitous and vintage moment of a quite exceptional nature, but the main axis of the whole journey and of each of its stages.

Vocation and vocations

It is useful to recall, albeit briefly, that at the origin of the life of faith lies the sacrament of Baptism: it implies a fundamental option for Christ and involvement in the working plan of his Kingdom.

Vatican II has brought out the baptismal foundation of the common vocation of all the People of God, thereby upending to a certain extent the former manner of understanding the vocational reality. This must be considered, in fact, starting from God's overall plan for the salvation of mankind. At the foundation of this there is Christ and his Church with its mission of leading humanity to the goal of salvation: the building of the Kingdom.

The sacrament of Baptism brings about incorporation to Christ and the Church, investing every Christian with the great vocation of the People of God. Being a lay person, becoming a priest or religious, means adopting a special way for serving the common vocation and collaborating in the Church's mission. All "vocations" have their root in the one fundamental vocation which gives light to them. This is of special importance with regard to the planning of our pastoral work for vocations.

It is true, of course, that when we speak of "vocations" we refer in particular to that of the various groups of consecrated life, of the priestly ministry, or of a lay person explicitly committed in a concrete manner. For the care of these vocations it is

but a generous collaboration with Christ to enable man to attain the fullness of his potentiality. The world without Christ would mean the total defeat of history; vocation and vocations exist to avert such a catastrophe. There is nothing more precious for the course of human history than the vocation of Christ and the vocations of his disciples.

The new perspective of youth pastoral work

If we look at Don Bosco and at the objectives assigned to our Congregation, we see that the vocational perspective is at the centre of our educational concerns. The Constitutions in fact indicate that “special attention to apostolic vocations”⁸ is one of the purposes of the Salesian mission.

And then, speaking of those to whom the mission is directed, they go on to say that among these a privileged place is occupied by those who show signs of a special vocation;⁹ they further point to vocational guidance as indispensable in the content of educative plans for the service of all young people.¹⁰

The GC23 rightly considers the “salesian community” as the overall subject of vocational commitment; the community involves each of its confreres in active communion with the Provincial and Rector, in following out a detailed educative and pastoral plan at both provincial and local level. It is a youth pastoral plan for education to the faith, particularly permeated by efficacious vocational guidance.

It is clear that a present-day approach to the problems of the “new evangelization” and the “new education” must include the consideration of

⁸ C 6

⁹ C 28

¹⁰ C 37; cf. R 16-17

more than a few innovations in drawing up the plan of youth pastoral work, and hence also of vocational guidance. It will not be sufficient merely to continue with the methods of the past; there is an urgent need for new communal reflection and intelligent creativity in the search for new initiatives in the vocational field. We could say that the yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of Christian pastoral work for the young is its vocational results! Unless the common Christian vocation is formed and special vocations cultivated in its service, all education of young people to the faith will remain sterile!

And so in our case it becomes more urgent than ever to give our minds to the development of specific vocations for the groups of the Salesian Family, and in particular to those for our own Congregation: clerics and brothers. The parable of the sower should imbue our hearts with hope.

It is true that many new obstacles have arisen, but there are also consoling motives for revival. The times have become particularly difficult, but the power of the Holy Spirit is stronger than the difficulties; and rightly do we speak of Mary Help of Christians as the "Madonna of difficult times".

But let us see in what sense the outlook has become darker for vocational possibilities at the present day.

Challenges of the present day

Without any doubt there are contexts at the present day which make the birth and growth of vocations difficult. There is a web of negative con-

ditions, even though accompanied by new resources, which call for our communal attention and the planning of systematic (not just sporadic) activity to provide new and appropriate responses which are not mere repetitions of statements that have now lost their incisive effect. Contexts vary from one region to another, but it should be kept in mind that everywhere is growing to some extent a type of culture with certain universal characteristics. Some of the difficulties we shall list briefly below will be present with greater intensity in some places than in others, but to consider them will provide us with some reflections useful everywhere for planning vocational guidance.

— We may begin from the *secularization of society* which is spreading throughout the world like an oil-stain on water.

In the past many social and cultural expressions were permeated by a religious dimension. But now, whatever is religious is becoming increasingly more irrelevant in society, a situation which renders more difficult and prolongs the process by which faith matures, both as regards its content and still more as a living practice.

To be Christians, i.e. to live out the baptismal option, in a pluralist society becomes just one manner among many others to which every citizen has a right. The result can be the development of a climate of relativism, of the obscuring of traditional ideals, of a loss of the sense of life: many young people seem to be afloat in a ship without a compass. They lose the perspective of what is transcendent, which is the firmament of faith, and cocoon themselves in short answers about the sense of life which are quite insufficient for meeting the great yearnings of the human heart. Even the responses

offered them by science finish up meaningless, because they have no connection with the ultimate end of life and the global sense of history.

We must urgently help them to feel the need for the experiences of silence and reflection, to pray and hearken to the mystery, to face up to the truly meaningful events of existence so as to meditate on them in the depths of their spirit.

— Another difficulty is caused by the *multiplicity* of messages, with an abundance of suggestions, based on various philosophical and religious concepts, combined with an acceleration in changes in nearly every social field: politics, economy, science, ethics, life-style. Bombardment by so many messages, some of them contradictory, renders vocational discernment particularly difficult. The consequence is a concept of freedom as a “possibility always open to new options”, which carries with it a marked disinclination for making definite options; it is easy to be generous for a limited period, but very much more difficult to undertake to be so “for ever”, because the continual changes taking place could at some future date produce some other novelty with a greater appeal.

In such a fluid atmosphere two extreme reactions are possible: in many it will be “indifferentism”, because no ideal excites any enthusiasm in them; in others it will be the gut reaction called “fundamentalism”, i.e. the feverish desire to recover lost certainties by the wishful reaffirmation of old styles of judgement, without any regard for the objective demands of the signs of the times.

Neither indifferentism nor fundamentalism provide a favourable backdrop for Salesian vocational guidance.

— Another difficulty is caused by the cultural fact of the *lengthening of the period of youth*, which leads to personal decisions being customarily deferred. The traditional phases of Christian initiation, considered in the past as opportune moments for a personal faith-plan, frequently appear at times that are inappropriate and insufficient. In fact, the situations which determine life choices (entry into the world of work, university, etc.) now take place at a period well after adolescence. The experiences and evangelical content associated with Christian initiation retain all their importance, but they do not cover (at least systematically) the period of youth. And so in a certain way the “young” are not specifically followed up in the period when they are in full evolution, in the years when they are thinking about their future lives.

On the other hand they have a higher cultural level, as regards both studies and experience, and so need a more adequate follow-up, and moreover one that will be different for different individuals.

Hence vocational guidance needs to be much more consistent and convincing, witness needs to be crystal clear and suggestions more concrete and convincing. And this is certainly a challenge to the ability of our communities to dialogue with young people to promote the maturing of their faith into plans of life.

— Another challenge that can lead to difficulties starts from a fact that in itself is very positive, but not always fully enlightening as regards its consequences. It is what we might call the challenge of “*generator themes*”: they are new values which stir up enthusiasm among young people at the present day — like peace, solidarity, justice, ecology, the

world brotherhood of man, the plight of the down-trodden, etc. They open up fascinating panoramas but could affect conscience only in a horizontal perspective, fostering a temporalistic attitude that can easily become prey to exploitation, passing fashions and ideologies which very soon lead to disappointment and embarrassment.

Vocational guidance must not outlaw such "generator themes", but must be able to enlighten them with the supreme and absolute value in which is rooted every faith option. It is indispensable to link these themes with the person of Christ, the only true Liberator: his resurrection, which makes him the Lord of history, is the greatest innovation of all time.

— Finally we must not overlook among the present difficulties a widespread *loss of social esteem* (at least in the West) in respect of specific ecclesiastical vocations. The crisis in the priesthood and religious life over the past decades has led in various environments to disaffection and suspicion. Even our own communities have not always presented an attractive, welcoming and apostolic appearance, they have not always proclaimed with clarity and enthusiasm the identity of their own particular gospel plan of life, they have not always fostered the development of leaders in the Christian commitment of the young. And so the correlation with vocation and vocations, instead of being something compelling, has become progressively weaker and less positive, until in some cases it has lapsed into a passive silence. It is evident that in such a case reaction is needed with all the strength that can be mustered: conversion is imperative. Without living witness valid care for vocations will inevitably become a dead letter.

The multiplicity of problems and difficulties is a clear indication to us of the urgent and indispensable need for a new and careful community reflection on vocational guidance, with a view to drawing up new and practical plans for the following up of vocations, plans that must be continually submitted to verification.

Reawakening of transcendent values and processes to be developed

The difficulties are far from few, but there are also promising signs of revival. The religious horizons of the young are showing a marked reawakening to new possibilities. It is a revival which is not universal nor entirely clear; it shows a certain ambivalence but it is opening up ever more to the search for a transcendent perspective. The event of Czestochowa (August 1991) was of great significance and the harbinger of an increasing number of young people who are discovering with contagious enthusiasm the mystery of Christ.

An esteem for religious experience is growing among many youngsters as a noble quality of human existence; it appears in a strongly subjective form, it is true, but is nevertheless an invaluable opening to the transcendent. There is also an intensified search for meaning, seen especially in groups that are closely knit and well motivated; it is a factor which disposes others for moments of reflection and spirituality. Participation in solidarity initiatives of various kinds, some of them of an apostolic nature, are becoming more widespread. It is clear,

in fact, that an atmosphere of innovation open to the Gospel is spreading; and this leads almost naturally, and hence in a form that makes it easily accepted, to a series of vital questions concerning the sense of life.

In such a climate it is not difficult to insert the question of vocational guidance. Many youngsters allow themselves to be challenged; and if the matter be introduced with sensitivity and openness to the positive innovations already referred to, it awakens real interest.

It is also possible to see the present crisis in vocations as being itself linked with the signs of the times, and hence permitted by God to reawaken in Christian communities a dynamic conversion, a sense of creativity and innovation which will tailor the care for vocations to the social and cultural challenges.

And so let there be no giving way to discouragement nor any relaxation in our efforts; let us be determined to intensify vocational guidance within renewed pastoral work for youth centred on objectives appropriate to the present times!

Among particular points of reference suggested by the religious situation through which we are living, we may list the following:

- the presentation of the mystery of Christ as the central value in history, accessible to everyone through a life inspired by the evangelical values of love, service, austerity and universality;
- the attraction of fraternal experience within a group, as a manner of introduction to ecclesial communion;
- esteem for ideals of service, such as a preferential option for the poor, the pursuit of justice, the courage of non-violence, peace initiatives, etc.;

- the urge to be a leader in taking on practical responsibilities in respect of projects useful to society;
- experience of volunteer work with its demands in the fields of organization and sacrifice.

The possibility of making an efficacious suggestion to today's young people to undertake a Christian commitment in a vocational journey is linked in the first place with our own genuine spirituality, as individuals and as communities, so as to manifest in unequivocal terms the value of life in Christ. From this will derive the quality of our education of young people to the faith; to this must be added a special and constant attention to those who show signs of a special vocation.

Spirituality, pastoral quality and vocational follow-up are three aspects that are both necessary and inseparable. If even one of them be missing, the vocational process becomes sterile.

I think it opportune therefore to indicate some practical points which call for a renewed effort in the houses for the proper application of the directives of the last General Chapter. But for this purpose we must first of all keep in mind some basic principles which constitute the practical guidelines for every vocational commitment.

- The first and foremost is that every vocation is an initiative on the part of God and the gift of his love; hence all activity must be supported by prayer, and its spiritual nature never forgotten.
- To God's initiative must be joined the *indispensable and active part played by the young person* in the whole vocational process; he personally must enter into dialogue with God and he personally must make decisions; hence the importance of enlightening his freedom and fostering his

ability for reflection and discernment.

- Hence also the need for appropriate educative mediation both of individuals and of the community. To make proposals and to call by name is the mark of the good educator who feels his role as a mediator chosen by God to reveal his noble plan to the young person.

These principles must be kept carefully in mind during the vocational journey one hopes to make together with the young. They are an invitation to us, as individuals and communities, to make a careful examination of our vocational guidance in our pastoral work for the young.

Here then are some practical points on which to concentrate our attention and planning.

Communities with ideas

A first point is strongly emphasized by the GC23 itself: the Salesian community as a “sign” and “school of faith” and as a “centre of communion and participation”. It is in fact the place and form of life to which is invited the young person who shows signs of a vocation. It is a mediating factor of importance: in its daily routine it becomes an attraction which helps the youngster to feel that it is close to him and to accept and interpret God’s interior call; it offers him concrete points of reference for the realization of his desire for self-donation. It puts at his disposal a web of relationships, imbued with family traits and commitments, and an environment of sharing, in which the young person can live and better develop his own faith, feel the fascinating attraction of the mission, and

come to understand too that the defects of himself and others are not an obstacle to the realization of a life-plan authentically linked to Christ and evidently efficacious in doing good.

But the community cannot be just a topic to be explained when speaking to young people about vocation; it must be a living and shared reality. From this derives the need to give careful attention to the various concrete ways in which we express our community, religious and apostolic life. For this purpose it may be well to re-emphasize some aspects of Salesian common life already fully set out in other documents; it will not be difficult to study them once again in community, especially that of spirituality.¹¹ Here we shall limit ourselves to referring to only a few of them.

¹¹ cf. AGC 334

A first aspect to think about from the standpoint of practical renewal is that of centring our attention on what characterizes our community, i.e. on the vitality of our mission to the young. The community is called upon to create and give life to an “environment” and a wider “educative community”, where young people come in contact with each other and with adult Christians who are aware of their own baptismal option or, in other words, of the common vocation of the People of God. The environment will become fertile ground for the seeds of particular vocations if it involves the young people as active participants in the common mission of all in the Church, providing possibilities for dialogue on current problems in evangelization and initiatives for harmonizing human growth with Christian commitment, and becoming a centre for meeting and for inculcating in the locality a feeling of solidarity and the willingness to be leaders in the face of concrete needs.

This brings us to the question of *participation in the life of the local Church* (parish, diocese, bishops conference), which projects Christ's mission on all those living in the territory concerned, as well as on courageous missionary activities. In the local ecclesial environment an invitation to specific vocational commitments is more easily understood and finds more willing response. Proposals for doing good to those near and far are more easily put across, as are messages about the sense of life, about religious experiences of prayer, meditation and apostolic preoccupation. The very premises are effective factors, as are its symbols and of course the persons who are its representatives.

It is not difficult to make comparisons between the strength of the Church's appeal and that of other worldly attractions whose worth in the search for meaning is objectively irrelevant. The Church makes up for the limitations of witness and apostolic decisiveness in individual educators. Young people become aware that in the global mystery of the Church there is a living energy which surpasses that of its agents. To feel and act with the Church is therefore, as far as vocational objectives are concerned, a strongly efficacious method that our communities would do well to keep very much in mind.

And then, in recent years, several houses have made positive experiments in welcoming into our community young people showing signs of a vocation. They share in community prayer, apostolic responsibility, fellowship and the joy of Salesian life. This is an initiative used also by other congregations of both men and women, active and contemplative. This is evidently not the first phase of a vocational process, but it is certainly an opportune

experience for those already showing precise intentions and ability, and able to share responsibly in a communal way of life. It also gives the community an idea of the reassessment and revision to which it needs to submit itself.

Summing up, we are invited to revise in the community itself its role as the cradle and nursery where the seed of vocations can be planted and germinate. In the gestures of the community and the attitudes of its members, in the values it expresses, in its apostolic concern, and above all in its spirituality in the following of Christ, the young person finds the nutrition that guarantees a strong and undisturbed growth of the seed sown in baptism.

Making the journey of faith something personal

The grace of Baptism automatically carries with it vocational energy, even in respect of special vocations: God calls and the baptized person responds – there is a gift and its willing acceptance, an invitation that meets a positive response, a proposal and a plan.

This faith dialogue finds a growing concrete expression as the believer gradually comes to understand the reason for his own existence and decides to play his part in the history of salvation. This in turn gives rise to motives and enthusiasm for choosing more radical commitments. If the baptismal faith is not fostered and fails to mature, not only is the personal vocation neglected but vocations in others do not flourish either.

But what are the conditions for the birth, preservation and growth of faith in today's young peo-

ple? We have already indicated some phenomena that prevent it maturing.

The GC23 sees the response to this complex situation in a *gradual "journey"* which keeps the sense of faith in continual communication with the life of the young. The chapter document draws its inspiration from the event of Emmaus: walk in the company of Jesus.

The image of a journey suggests the drawing up of travel plans that include personal follow-up, especially in the case of young people whose faith is more mature. They must absorb values and proposals in such a way that these develop into a clear guiding light for their future and the energy to pursue it. Beginning a journey means thinking about the starting point of each of the travellers, but also not stopping at intermediate stages nor moving at the pace of the slowest; it means rather pressing always ahead with those who can keep up, presenting further goals until a solid and consistent personal spirituality is attained.

To render a journey personal for each traveller, there must be in the environment interaction between basic proposals for those just beginning and more demanding ones suited to the possibilities of individuals and groups.

It sometimes happens that in our work explicit vocational suggestions are by no means lacking and may indeed be abundant, but the response is poor; at the same time one may observe other ecclesial experiences that are much more fruitful. A key for overcoming sterility is certainly the "personalization" of growth in faith. When an individual has not been prepared for listening to the Lord's voice, and followed up in giving attention to it, suggestions and mediations prove meaningless because

they are not understood. This is why we think it urgent to check up on the consistency of the education to the faith that we offer to young people; we must go further than working for the whole group (valid though this be, and even indispensable), and follow up each individual at the level he has reached.

The different rates of progress of young people on the journey means that a personal dialogue is called for in every case. We must aim at the maximum overall development, which is vital in every sense: as a baptized person in dialogue with Christ, as the maker of one's own decisions, as an intelligent observer seeking to discern God's will. To suggest a plan for the journey helps the person to pass from vague desires and first notions about faith to a systematic initiation into the mystery of Christ and the Church, and from this to a practical and organic spirituality.

To make the journey something personal means also to involve the "traveller" more directly, as he passes from gospel values in general to a responsible contact and dialogue with Christ, and then on to true friendship with him and the conscious sharing, albeit gradual, of his mission in the world.

In connection with this assistance in following a path leading to mature faith, more importance needs to be given to sacramental experience with Christ for the laying down of solid foundations of evangelical convictions and attitudes. Special vocations are the result of God's free choice; sometimes the latter may be made evident suddenly, like a flash of lightning, but this is exceptional. Normally it happens calmly over a period, through a slow maturing process. A pedagogical effort is required to enlighten the young person by the word of God,

by experience of the sacraments, and by the contacts of communion with other believers; and this implies a plan of prayer, ascetical purification and eucharistic life. Spontaneous generosity, the desire to spend oneself for others, a taste for evangelical values can all be short-lived unless they are integrated into a consistent personal process leading to the placing of the mystery of Christ at the centre of one's own existence.

And so if it is true that a process of vocational guidance involves different aspects, all of which are important for the giving of a fully conscious response, it is equally true that the key to the whole process is to start the freedom of the young person growing towards a conscious spirituality.

It is precisely here that mistakes must be avoided; it is here that the efforts of the community and the individual educators need to be concentrated.

Fostering experiences that develop maturity

An assessment of vocational efforts made in the Congregation in recent years shows that in the journey of faith some particularly fertile moments are to be found: they are like so many refreshing oases or filling stations, or like lofty vantage points from which new panoramas can be seen. Young people who are led to them discover very forcibly the characteristics of a plan of life with Christ, and are attracted by its beauty and by its novelty and depth. Such moments are like a desert experience, far from the racket and uproar of the city, where it is easier to find those moving experiences which touch an individual deeply. They were experiences

of which even Jesus and his disciples were fond. They respond to the desire of youngsters to have direct contact with the transcendent, to set their gaze on the immense firmament of the heavens, on lights that far surpass the neon signs blaring out propaganda in the streets of our cities.

¹² AGC 338

In the circular letter on "Charism and prayer"¹² I pointed out how ecclesial Movements attract through their capacity for personal involvement, for faith commitment and for conscious sharing. An analysis of the Salesian Youth Movement animated by our own spirituality is objectively positive in this sense. What we have to do is increase the experiences that develop maturity, giving depth and consistency to their constituent elements, and making them something permanent in daily life and not events that occur at sporadic intervals.

Let us recall some experiences of this nature:

— One of them is what is called the "*school of prayer*": learning to listen to God and converse with him. Prayer and mental prayer are genuine expressions of faith; they move a person from the periphery to the centre of his existence, to the place where he meets his very self, where he discovers the significance of what he really is, with its transcendent and social dimensions. It is not a question of lessening the importance of practices of common prayer in use in the environment, but of coming to realize the indispensable need for an apprenticeship and experience lived and felt in a truly personal way.

It is certainly a good thing that these prayer experiences and schools of the word of God should be multiplying among young people. They are times, places and groups which serve to open the individual to the voice of the Spirit who lives within him,

to learn different forms of dialogue with the Lord, to feel himself permeated with the truths of salvation. Young people are going in search of such experiences as special occasions for getting themselves together interiorly and deepening the sense of what they really are.

Such moments, if they are well prepared, give rise to a positive effect in the flourishing of vocations. In some cases the main theme of such events may be explicitly vocational, even in a radically evangelical sense. Prayer leads spontaneously to a dialogue of discernment and to spiritual direction. In this way centres of prayer become also centres of vocational guidance, complementing other initiatives in the journey of faith.

— *Diligent use of moments of special significance is also a particularly effective factor in developing maturity.* Among us such use is traditional, and is usually an experience of conversion and renewal. The fruitful results of retreat houses and centres of youth spirituality, that have grown up in many provinces in recent decades, are widespread and encouraging, especially when the houses concerned are organized not as holiday homes, but as true spiritual centres with an efficient team for guidance, prayer and special celebrations of revision of life and of reconciliation. In particular they offer a deeper and more frequent use of the sacrament of penance which plays a role of extraordinary importance in vocational guidance.

— Another experience that develops maturity is found in a variety of *initiatives of service and of apostolate*. If they can get away from the temptation to mere activism and be solidly based on motives of faith and evangelical solidarity, such experiences open youngsters to the great needs of peo-

ple and of the Church, and lead to a clearer understanding of the strength of the love Christ showed us.

— The *animation of environments* or activities, *various commitments* of a cultural and social kind, *volunteer work at home or abroad*, *collaboration in work for the missions*, etc. are all opportunities and stimuli for a reflection on one's own existence and openness to others. In all these initiatives a pedagogical and spiritual follow-up is indispensable if their use is to become a process of growth and not end up as a flash in the pan. An important maturing initiative is that of the "group": it is a special experience which takes in some of the initiatives already mentioned and puts them in a context of shared organization and responsibility. The groups can be of various kinds, but should be permeated by a spiritual atmosphere; it is worth our while to point out as particularly fruitful in our own case those of the Salesian Youth Movement and the Young Cooperators. Statistics confirm what is already obvious at first sight concerning the effect of group experience on the birth of vocations. But, as I have said already, it is not a question of just any kind of group, but of those that promote a feeling of belonging, an ecclesial sense, rooted in faith and apostolic preoccupation.

In the activities of these groups, in fact, various factors converge, all leading to vocational maturity. Seeing and judging together, realizing well organized activities, are things that create a reflex action of analysis and discernment. Apostolic activity in particular leads to self-donation, putting those concerned in contact with the situation of those in need. Personal contact with the animators (priests, religious, lay people and the better prepared among

the youngsters themselves) strengthens the possibility of choice.

In this way every committed group becomes “vocational”, not only in the general sense that it fosters membership and active participation in the baptismal option, but in a specific sense too, because it offers a road to clarification and initial experiences.

Not without reason did the GC23 dedicate a practical guideline to the “group”¹³, pointing out the effect of group activity on the maturing of faith.¹⁴

¹³ GC23 274-283

¹⁴ *ibid.* 143-145

We have work to do in this regard; we shall recover a vital oratorian aspect of our youth pastoral work.

Knowing how to call and follow up

Silent testimony and implicit invitations are not always sufficient to awaken vocations. The witness of Jesus himself was completely transparent and he prompted a fascination in others, but he gave a direct and personal call to each of the apostles.

The Pope and the teachings of the Bishops speak explicitly of the “courage to make the call”; and our GC21 had already invited us “to have the courage to expose young people also to the most challenging vocations”.¹⁵

¹⁵ GC21 113e

There has been unfortunately, and maybe it still lingers on in some confreres, a doubt or negligence about giving appropriate open expression to personal invitations. Failure to do so becomes, in fact, a pernicious “vocational silence”; one might even speak of cowardice or unawareness in respect of one’s own ministry, because a young Christian has

an objective right to know of the Church's vocational possibilities. The excuse for this lazy attitude is usually given as respect for freedom: vocational decisions should be left to mature on their own. But this is just an irresponsible rationalization. It is not the teaching of Jesus and the Church. We may recall the concrete invitations that Don Bosco used to make, and his tireless dedication to hearing the confessions of his boys, especially the older ones, even when he was old and sick. We can think of the extraordinary way in which he called Philip Rinaldi – an exceptional case certainly but one which reveals his normal practice in this regard, always carried out with keen discernment.

The courage to give the call stems from faith, from spiritual fatherhood, from a conviction of the beauty and indispensable nature of Christ's mission in history, and from an intimate knowledge of the candidate. "Calling" is the noble action of one who has something of great value to offer, of one who is concerned about developing the maturity of the young person called, of one who feels concern for the greater good of society and the Church.

This courage is already expressed in a general way in the organic vocational activity that forms a living part of youth pastoral work; it is addressed in the first instance to all, but attention tends to be more progressively concentrated on, and more specific care given, to those who show certain indications.

This is the direction in which the GC23 leads us when it indicates¹⁶ the phases of vocational growth in the young: the discovery of their own possibilities,¹⁷ their training in generosity,¹⁸ vocational suggestion,¹⁹ explicit invitation,²⁰ discernment²¹ and initial choice.²²

¹⁶ GC23 151-156

¹⁷ *ibid.* 151

¹⁸ *ibid.* 152

¹⁹ *ibid.* 153

²⁰ *ibid.* 154

²¹ *ibid.* 155

²² *ibid.* 156

The appeal to be courageous in making a call is addressed not only to the Rector but also to the other confreres. It takes for granted that in everyone a keen eye and family style of life will lead to the identifying of signs of a vocation, so as to begin or bring about a personal dialogue. "Do not be afraid to call", the Pope has told us. The new vocational climate is marked by Christian loyalty and by candour in presenting to young people vocations of special commitment. Many of them will not succeed in interpreting the Lord's voice unless they are helped through a specific suggestion. Today, unfortunately, disinformation about priestly ministry, religious life and other forms of special commitment, makes it difficult to obtain an objective knowledge of their social and ecclesial importance. They may appear to young people as things remote from their own existence and even extraneous to the emerging culture. And thus many generous dispositions remain without expression, even in the presence of very valid testimony; it is therefore necessary to show in a convincing manner the ways and settings which ensure and endorse the quite extraordinary validity of special vocations for the future, and to make them flourish once again.

To abstain from giving invitations would be an outdated manner of abandoning our pastoral and educative ministry. The Lord continues to place in our path boys and young men with admirable dispositions, sometimes already fostered in their own families and matured through early catechesis. An educational friendship, a combined seeking process, the request for spiritual direction, the sharing of some apostolic commitment, provide us with an enviable opportunity for crowning the sequence with a suitable personal suggestion.

To the courageous giving of a call must also be added the planning of a careful, constant and friendly "*follow-up*". In the final document of the 2nd International Congress for Vocations (1981) it is stated that "when a young person or an adult has become aware of the divine call and has asked for and received advice, he feels the need and value of a helper and guide to discern the right path with greater clarity and to follow it: this is the question of follow-up."

As well as the organization, where possible, of specially suitable environments (aspirantates of a new kind, reception communities, etc.), personal follow-up before the pre-novitiate has become more and more indispensable, and may indeed be at times the only possibility because of certain local and cultural requirements, or because of age or family circumstances.

The criteria to be applied in such circumstances need to be decided and agreed at community level, so as to obviate any risk of arbitrariness and individualism regarding aspects that are central to the development of a vocation.

Convergence and agreement should be sought especially with respect to three requirements: the authenticity and consistency of motivations, the proper presentation of the spiritual life, and the ability for relationships. To follow divergent criteria in meeting these requirements will sooner or later prove harmful to vocational maturing of a Salesian kind.

The follow-up must also help to overcome possible limitations in basic Christian formation, which may appear in some candidates as lacunae regarding either necessary knowledge or Christian living. A healthy follow-up can also prevent the pernicious

tendency to continually put off the making of a decision; fickleness and indecision, so widespread at the present day, lead unconsciously to an abandonment of the goal.

In a word, follow-up is a delicate task, but one that is most effective; it leads to the consolidation of some key principles essential for the further vocational process.

In drawing up the educative and pastoral plan for the province it will be well to assign space also to the criteria that should guide the follow-up process, the objectives at which it aims, and the gradual nature of the process to be followed.

Conclusion: those who bear the primary responsibility

In concluding these reflections, dear confreres, I see the importance of adding a further word on three factors which are vital for our pastoral work for vocations: the role of the Provincial, the responsibility of the Rector, and contact with candidates' families .

– In the role of the Provincial (with his council) the exercise of the pastoral ministry is linked naturally with vocational commitment. The ensuring of the future of our charism, the preparation of new generations of confreres, the regeneration of resources of personnel, are vital aspects of his animation and government. It would be quite pernicious were his ministry to be reduced solely to considering how he could best deploy the forces already existing without considering whether the fronts on

which we are working are apt for the generation of new members.

Concern for vocations can never become something merely marginal in the exercise of government. On the contrary it must be the subject of deep thought and practical measures which have their effects on the local communities, the persons of the confreres and the functioning of our works. It is a matter of converting communities and confreres into animators. The ability to provide animation is the clearest sign of the conciliar renewal of our mission, our ministries and charisms. Thanks to the practice of animation a new stage has begun in the Church, in religious Institutes, in Movements, in Associations and Groups. It would be incomprehensible were the same not to take place in our own settings.

It is a question of motivating confreres and communities, of stimulating and preparing them so that each one is able to carry out a work of guidance in his own field of labour; of backing up vocational initiatives by suitable aids; of relaunching spiritual direction and the practice of the ministry of the confessional; of programming ongoing formation to produce better pastoral competence.

– The responsibility of the Rector is well set out by the GC21: “Because of his position as community leader, the Rector is the first one responsible for vocation promotion on the local level: in a climate of faith and prayer let him periodically make a thorough study of the vocation apostolate.”²³

He makes the effort to effectively involve the whole community, according to the duties of each confrere. It is not a matter of delegating a particular person but of getting each one to accept respon-

²³ GC21 114

sibility in a common plan, by bringing about the assimilation of criteria for discernment and agreement on forms of intervention, and by indicating the kind and gradual nature of his own personal action. He will be careful to follow up attentively the choice and coordination of enterprises in the field of youth to ensure their sense and purpose, and will see to it that initiatives to promote vocational guidance are not lacking.

For the Rector and his community it would also be reckless and wanting in foresight to think only of the functioning and extending of the work, allowing less influential sectors to have supremacy over the maturing of young people in the Christian sense of life.

The role of the Rector also includes in a particular way, his ability and availability for personal conversations with the youngsters, especially those who are more mature and show signs of a vocation. "The Rector," says the GC23, "must take to heart the personal encounter with the young people, and especially with those who are approaching a point of decisive importance in their lives."²⁴ This is in fact an invitation to recover the pedagogical method proper to the preventive system and of the pastoral figure Don Bosco wanted the Rector to present.

²⁴ GC23 287

– Finally, contact with candidates' families has a specific importance in the following-up of young people heading towards a Salesian vocation. Those bearing the real first responsibility for the vocation of their children are the parents themselves. At the level of youth pastoral work in general there is already a movement in the Church towards a greater complementary relationship with pastoral work for the family; the point is made in the Apos-

tolic Exhortation "Familiaris consortio" (cf. especially n. 74).

Our obligation also to bring about the effective functioning in our own works of the educative community and the lay project (especially in respect of our many Cooperators and Past-pupils) is an invitation to a greater and constant harmonization between pastoral work for the young and for the family.

In an atmosphere of greater coordination, the result of the conciliar ecclesiology of communion that is so difficult to spread, a special vocational importance attaches to knowledge of the candidates' families, and to contact and dialogue with them. Motivations are deepened, some unfortunate difficulties come to light, but especially an effort can be made to foster the radical interest of the family in the same setting in which baptismal faith was born. Contacts of this kind lead to greater quality and cooperation and to the avoidance of surprises. The life style of parents, their educational action and their witness, are indeed the best ground for the growth of a Salesian vocation. Christian parenthood is one of the prime objectives of pastoral work in the Church at the present day. How many vocations have been and continue to be born in the Church in believing families. Rightly is vocational pastoral work concerned also, in communion with the efforts of the local Church, to provide serious help to families in their renewed Christian awareness and their educational task. To launch initiatives in this sense, to foster the faith of interested parents, to bring them into the orbit of our charism, to recall and develop what Don Bosco said in their favour, is certainly a fertile field to which we should give greater consideration.

There is a growing need today to help families to resist the subtle secularist atmosphere which is spreading in society. Only a broader pastoral work of cooperation will nurture the tiny seeds, rich in promise, that are becoming ever more numerous in this springtime of the Church. The Gospel, though teaching us that children are not the property of parents, proclaims that they are a gift of God entrusted primarily to the parents for the renewal of society through the mission of Christ. Even Jesus himself, the Word incarnate, was entrusted for the good of all to a holy family.

Let us look with admiration on Joseph and Mary, and invoke them with trust and constancy. They are undoubtedly the main intercessors on behalf of a more efficacious pastoral work for vocations. Let us entrust to them the present needs of the Church and the world; let us speak to them of the immensity of the harvest, of the growing need for education of the young; let us thank them for what they have already done for the benefit of Don Bosco's charism, and let us ask insistently for their assistance in helping us to increase the number of labourers in the vineyard.

The final document of the above-mentioned Congress of 1981 called the Virgin Mary the "mediatrix of vocations". "model of each one of those called", and "Mother of all vocations". Let a special recourse to her, dear confreres, be always at the foundation and centre of the renewal of our pastoral work for vocations.

I wish all of you a fruitful new year in your labours and hope. The Gospel assures us that "some seed fell on good ground, where it took root, grew and bore fruit."²⁵ Let us therefore dedicate our efforts to the better cultivation of the good ground. I

²⁵ Mk 4,8

offer to all of you my best wishes that you may
have more numerous vocations.

Affectionately in the Lord,

Don F. Vifano