

AN INVITATION TO BEAR GREATER WITNESS TO OUR CONSECRATION

Introduction: importance of the next Synod Of 1994. - A difficulty. - An authoritative aide for its preparation. - The unfinished renewal. - Ecclesial aspects in our post-conciliar experience. - The great open horizons. - Demands of the New Evangelization. - We await from the Synod a renewed presence in the world of the mystery of Christ. - Conclusion: Mary, Model and Helper of the consecrated life.

Rome, Birthday of the Virgin Mary
8 September 1992

My dear confreres,

Today, the feast of the Birthday of the Virgin Mary – the Father’s gift for our salvation, I invite you to reflect on God’s generous initiative in our vocation, on his constant presence and the precious gift of his grace, freely bestowed on us throughout our lives. I think of all of you, immersed as you are in work, animated by that ‘pastoral charity’ which the Holy Father describes so well and profoundly in the Apostolic Exhortation “*Pastores do vobis*” in Chap. 3: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”.¹ It is a masterly indication that lights up our ‘apostolic consecration’, making it the living centre of all our interior life.

Before long there will be a new ecclesial event which will concentrate attention on the nature and mission of the consecrated life among the People of

¹ *Pastores dabo vobis*,
19.33

God: the Pope has called the Bishops to an ordinary Synod (the ninth) towards the end of 1994; it will deal with this specific theme, which he considers vital for the renewal of everyone. There is an urgent need in the world for a more intense spirit of the beatitudes to which consecrated persons bear witness.

The Synod will approach the theme from the standpoint of the universal Church, as distinct from other particular Synods (e.g. the 4th Assembly of the Latin-American Bishops or the coming African Synod) whose purpose is to provide a pastoral response to the challenges of their particular contexts. They are both means of pastoral guidance, equally indispensable and mutually complementary: one investigates more deeply the values of their identity for all the People of God, the other – in the light of the common ecclesial identity – deals in practical terms with the various cultural and social challenges of people: unity and plurality in a pastoral work which is at one and the same time one of transcendence and incarnation.

Without any doubt the general vision of the 94-Synod will become translated into particular aspects of both various Institutes of Consecrated Life and the cultural demands of different regions. But its importance antecedes such consequences and furnishes them with guidelines.

If we look at recent Synods of universal level (e.g. the extraordinary Synod twenty years after the Council, the one about the Lay Faithful, and the one dealing with the formation of priests), it becomes immediately clear in what consists the aspect of ecclesial unity and its importance for application to different contexts.

The successors of the apostles will be concerned

to reflect from a pastoral point of view on 'consecrated life' in today's world: on its many forms for tending towards holiness and its various roles of witness and service. There is need to enter into the heart of the Church's mystery the source of all the energy of sanctification; if consecrated persons – in whatever country of the world – do not concentrate their efforts on this aspect they expose themselves to the danger of beating the air. It is not enough to work feverishly and live among the people; they need urgently to proclaim to those people the prophecy of the resurrection in an existential and practical manner.

The next Synod will reimpose on us and on everyone else our ecclesial obligation of giving "outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes".² I think it will be particularly beneficial to the Congregation if even now we begin to foster awareness of the importance of this Synod, of its preparation and its celebration.

What about our own personal and communal participation in the Synod? What form can and should it take? It is not easy to give a simple reply suited to everyone. We have to look back over and summarize the laborious research we have worked at and lived through over a period of thirty years; we shall look again at aspects we have already affirmed and more than once, but to consider them from a different standpoint. Of its nature that is not the easiest of tasks, but it will be stimulating and rewarding. But I think that on at least two points we cannot fail to make our contribution: a renewed commitment to live in a convinced and consistent manner our salesian vocation, as authoritatively re-defined and brought up to date in our Rule of life;

² LG 31

and a lively and assiduous interest in everything that will be done in the Church so as to prepare adequately for the coming event. This letter of mine offers some indications designed specifically for the involvement of all of us, individually and collectively, in both directions.

On 2 February last, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, it was my good fortune to be able to concelebrate with the Holy Father in St Peter's Basilica, which was packed to the doors with men and women religious. The traditional offering of candles took on a special significance. In his homily the Pope said: "Today, in lighting these candles which signify the light of Christ, we are also beginning preparations for the next Assembly of the Synod Of Bishops, which, as you know, will deal with consecrated life and its involvement in the Church and the world. On the threshold of the year 2000 it will deal with your life, your consecration, your way of participating in evangelization and, as a consequence, the Church's missionary activity. Support the preparations for it with your prayers! Actively participate in the consultations addressed to you. The successors of the Apostles want to help you to be Gospel leaven and evangelizers of the cultures of the third millennium and the social ordering of peoples".³

These last remarks of the Pope make me think of the notable evolution of consecrated life in the decades that have followed the Council. despite the defects that are never absent from human endeavours; we are living through the beginnings of a new stage of vitality in secular history. The latter is emerging from a somewhat wintry period, but is already living in a spring-like atmosphere and is opening up to the future to grow with greater vig-

³ *Oss. Rom.* (Eng. edtn.) 5
Feb. '92

our and confidence.

Vatican II provoked in fact a new ecclesial beginning. Despite being harassed by many problems, we can meditate with joy on the words of Paul VI: "We are living in the Church at a privileged moment of the Spirit. People are happy to place themselves under his inspiration. They are gathering about him; they want to let themselves be led by him".⁴

⁴ EN 75

Let us therefore give ourselves diligently to the preparation of this Synod.

A difficulty

The 94-Synod is not going to undertake a study of the particular characteristics of individual institutes, nor even of religious life by itself; it is going to give its attention rather to the global significance and ecclesial importance of the whole of 'consecrated life', and into this category come also secular institutes, other forms of special consecration and Societies of apostolic life.

The question immediately arises as to whether this extension of approach will not expose the Synod to a certain risk of dispersion and genericism. Will not the breadth of treatment prove harmful to the depth and practical nature of the concluding guidelines?

When one looks at the programme (which has already begun) of the work to be done, it would seem that the breadth of approach does not, in fact, exclude the possibility that at certain moments the Synodal Fathers may concentrate their attention on some particular groups, e.g. those of 'religious life' as such; these indeed make up the

lion's share of consecrated life.

On the other hand it must be acknowledged that among the People of God of the present day, starting from those who bear the responsibility for pastoral work, it is truly fitting and indeed urgent to specify the ecclesial dimension and particular role of consecrated life. In this sense the breadth of approach will be particularly useful, for two reasons.

The first is that of deepening the substantial common aspects, without which consecration cannot be lived; or in other words that basic component which lies at the root of the different characteristics proper to the individual groups. In our own case, for instance, being a 'true Christian' (which is the fundamental common aspect) is the driving force behind being 'salesian' (which is our specific difference). Our special General Chapter (GC20) already said this: our following of Christ, we read in the Acts, "is not something external added to baptismal consecration, but a mode of living out baptismal commitment in one of the different and complementary christian vocations, all generated by the Spirit. There are not two levels in this vocation: that of religious life which is a little higher, and that of christian life which is a little lower. For the religious, testifying to the spirit of the beatitudes with the profession of the vows is his only manner of living out baptism and of being a disciple of the Lord, thus fulfilling a coordinated service in the global mission of the Church".⁵

⁵ SGC 106

The second is that of appreciating from a historical point of view the diversity of the individual charisms so as to see in them, as one looks at their concrete experience, the inexhaustible creativity of the Holy Spirit through the centuries, in response

to the many newly arising and varying contexts in which the Church carries out her mission. This obliges us in our examination of consecrated life to go much further than intellectual concepts hatched from abstract themes.

In this way one comes to a better understanding of both the common vitality to be strengthened, and the unique nature of each particular characteristic to be interpreted as a pluriform historical expression of the one charity infused by the Spirit.

It is precisely in this sense that preparations are being made for the Synod: on the other hand it is better to await its celebration before making serious judgements.

An authoritative aide for its preparation

Soon there will be published for our use an aide of the Synodal Council, commonly known as the 'Lineamenta': it will be an incentive to reflection throughout the whole period of preparation. It will be made up of three complementary parts:

- the doctrinal vision of consecrated life in the mystery of the Church (its "identity");
- its present situation, after the fertile but troubled developments from Vatican II to the present day;
- its mission, with particular emphasis on the responses to be given to the New Evangelization.

Keeping in mind what the Council said, i.e. that consecrated life "while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs undeniably to her life and holiness",⁶ the thought comes to mind that the Successors of the Apostles will want to highlight especially the vital values involved in

⁶ LG 44

the *sequela Christi*, which alone can stimulate “all the members of the Church to fulfil unflinchingly the duties of their christian calling”.⁷ Consecrated persons are called to lead others to the discovery of what the Holy Spirit has given to the People of God through their consecration.

7 LG 44

If we allow ourselves to be challenged by this Synodal objective, we shall better understand that the process of renewal, in which we feel ourselves involved, cannot be just a problem of method and pastoral programming; it is primarily a spiritual attitude of making a fundamental option, a mentality, a discernment, a concept of life; indeed such an interior conversion becomes the source and incentive for a search for appropriate methods, and constitutes the driving force of every practical programme.

I think that the Synod will ensure for us a renewed clarity and a deeper enlightened understanding, in so far as in its reflections it will start from the standpoint of “*ecclesiality*”. This indeed affects consecrated persons, not only as referring directly to Christ, but also to all members of the People of God, to the lay faithful and to the Pastors.

This is a work of the Synod which will certainly prompt us to reflect on the doctrinal basis of the consecrated life, starting primarily not from the specific nature of each Institute (as we are accustomed to do amongst ourselves), but rather by concentrating attention on the common fundamental quality to be discerned from an ecclesial point of view through our own particular experience linked to a gift of the Holy Spirit meant also for others.

In a certain way we are invited to carry out a process which is the reverse of that of the recent General Chapters: there our concern was to start

from the promptings of the Council and so define the charisma left us by the Founder, i.e. we moved from the common patrimony of the Council to the specific nature of our own characteristics; here on the other hand we shall have to start from the experience of our charismatic identity so as to bring light and deeper understanding to common values of an ecclesial nature, i.e. we have to pass from the specific nature of our own characteristics to the vital common patrimony.

Between Vatican II and the present day, progress of an ecclesiological kind has been made in steps which need to be examined in the light of their mutual illumination aimed at creating harmonious growth: e.g. between local Church and consecrated life, ministry and charisma, communion and particular character, consecration and mission, etc.

All this will serve to strengthen in us the awareness that we are living in the early part of a new era: a new beginning in the recurrent youthfulness of the Church.

The Synod therefore will be an excellent occasion for perfecting the great commitment to spiritual renewal extended to all the People of God, enlightened and richly expressed by the multiple institutes of consecrated life. I think that the efforts we shall make to single out some aspects of our life that we can offer as the fruit of the journey we have made in these years, will foster in ourselves a more lucid awareness of the biblical and theological foundations of our consecration and mission, of the evangelical counsels, of the responsibility shared by every member, of decentralization in unity, and of the indispensable and fraternal service provided by authority.

The unfinished renewal

The consideration of what has happened since Vatican II, will provide a kind of realistic assessment of the evolution of consecrated life in relationship also to the future of society. The processes of secularization and socialization have, in fact, had an influence in this field of no little weight; no one can ignore the effect these have had on the evolution of consecrated life, not indeed so as to detect a possible downturn, but rather in view of a balanced discernment of positive values and a possible opposition to be renewed.

In the period following the Council we have made some essential progress: efforts at renewal, commitment to revision, to rethinking and planning, to new initiatives and experiences, to solving problems and difficulties. We have reflected several times during these decades on some particularly decisive aspects.⁸

The steps in our progress have been marked by no fewer than five General Chapters: the 19th (1965), which specified amongst other things the nature and manner of functioning of the General Chapter itself, an indispensable work that made possible the steps that followed later; the 20th (1971), the "Special" Chapter, which carried out the vast and prolonged work of the redefining of our salesian identity in the Church; the 21st (1978) which took on especially the updating of our educative and pastoral plan, the role of the Rector and the figure of the salesian Brother; the 22nd (1984) finished the re-elaboration of our Rule of life; and the 23rd (1990) examined more deeply and laid down how our methodology of educating young people to the faith should be carried out.

⁸ cf. e.g. GC19, 20, 21, 22, 23; AGC 312, *The renewed text of our Rule of life*; AGC 316, *Vatican II, still a powerful force at the present day*; AGC 319, 1988: *an invitation to a special renewal of profession*; AGC 320, *The Guide to the Constitutions*; AGC 330, *The Don Bosco Centenary and our renewal*; etc.

These great Chapters were prepared by the combined work of confreres from all the provinces, keeping in mind both the guidelines of Vatican II and the various cultural requirements. Worth pointing out too is the enormous work of preparation for the Special General Chapter (GC20), under the guidance of Fr Luigi Ricceri, Rector Major at the time.

In the course of these various stages many positive results have most certainly emerged: the living reference to the Founder, the significance of our specific characteristics, the concept and rewriting of our Rule of life, the revaluation of the religious profession, the emphasis placed on salesian spirit, the revision of the structures of service with decentralization in unity, the oratorian criterion for activity, the renewed awareness of the community dimension, attention to initial and ongoing formation, generosity as regards missionary development, the relaunching of the Salesian Family, the involvement of the laity, etc. But all this has been set in motion with an eye to the future; it is not yet finished. The reality of renewal is something continually in progress; it is accompanied by new tendencies, challenges not previously met with, cultural differences associated with different contexts, and endless problems to be faced. In addition the six-yearly programmes drawn up by the Chapters have not matured to the same extent in all the provinces; and then there always remain among the confreres some impenetrable areas.

And then if we look at other groups of consecrated life we see that "unfinished" renewal is a reality. The use of the term "unfinished" implies that we recognize the positive steps that have been taken, but also that the process is a gradual one

and that unfortunately some negative aspects still remain. There is no point in drawing up a list of the more serious failings because, amongst other things, they would involve shortcomings and inadequacies in other sectors of the Church, since the whole area of consecrated life is involved. It is not at all easy to renew in a short time the entire People of God in every geographical situation. The fact that it is incomplete is therefore clear enough, but what gives us hope is the positive renewal that is in progress everywhere.

If we now turn our attention more particularly to our own case we are very much aware of various problems: the slow speed of spiritual revival because of an atmosphere of superficiality, the obscuring of some essential values like the weakening of ascetical practices, the fading of apostolic enthusiasm in various works, manifestations of confusion in some confreres, certain tensions here and there that lead to lack of balance, the danger of a genericism and general levelling down that leads to a weakening of identity, some concessions to dissent, more than a few expressions of individualism or the desire of an easy life, a public witness in society which is not always clear, etc. Between the fidelity to the Founder and the Council which is so well defined in the Constitutions, and the situation actually observed in daily life, there is in fact a considerable divergence, even though it is in process of being overcome.

For us fidelity consists in making of Don Bosco our constant point of reference, and in making the effort to imitate his kind of sanctity. If he were alive today, he would incite us to a style of consecrated life that is more meaningful at a public level, from both a spiritual and ascetical standpoint on

the one hand and an apostolic one on the other (though the two mutually compenetrates and are inseparable); this would also prompt us to think up new responses, the result of renewed interior convictions, of magnanimity in planning, and of a tireless spirit of sacrifice and apostolic courage.

I think that the post-conciliar renewal is making us grow in this dynamic fidelity despite the fact that it is incomplete; we can safely say that we are on the right road.

But if it should happen in some areas that to the dangers and negative aspects already mentioned we have to add the drama of a growing lack of personnel and of the aging process, which renders the future of some works more than a little precarious, renewal must be accompanied by the courageous seeking of new and previously untried solutions, allowing ourselves to be guided by the criterion of significance, on which we have now been insisting for some time.

In any case, a symphony is still a symphony, even if it is unfinished! The celebration of the Synod is a propitious opportunity for correcting false notes.

Ecclesial aspects in our post-conciliar experience

In the years following the Council we have profited by some of the great ecclesial values inherent in our own specific vocation. Reflection on them offers us the possibility of contributing to the preparation of the Synod (in various local and general meetings) practical elements for the renewal of consecrated life. We shall list some of them, emphasizing in them the ecclesial aspect in its deepest

sense: i.e. not only of “thinking with the Church” and “working with the Church” but rather of “identifying with the Church” in living our own vocation as an expression of its vitality of grace, of doctrine and of evangelizing responsibility.

I think the following aspects are particularly stimulating: the fact that our vocation is embodied in a ‘charism’; the feeling of being permeated by a special ‘consecration’; the concept of ‘*religious profession*’ as a covenant with God in view of a particular evangelical project; the fact that through our particular characteristics we form part of the sacramental nature of the People of God: the fact that we are qualified in the latter, through the initiative of the Holy Spirit, in a specific ‘*field of work*’.

Each day we have experienced the mystery of the Church through living these aspects which are common to other consecrated persons, even though with different typical experiences, especially concerning the choice of field of work. It is worth our while therefore to bring them out as living sources of what we may call “ecclesiality”. We have already spoken of this many times in the past, but now we do so with our eyes on the theme of the coming Synod.

— “*Charism*”. The fact that the charism of the Founders is to be considered as an “experience of the Spirit” to be transmitted, preserved and developed⁹ as a gift to the People of God, has made us feel in a more lively way our sharing in the mystery of the Church, experiencing its Pentecostal dimension in our vocation, which is vitally ecclesial because it is charismatic.

Consideration of the variety of charisms has prompted us, not only to follow theories and inter-

⁹ cf. MR 11

pretations that are more or less generic, but also to refer back more attentively to the permanent historical and creative presence of the Holy Spirit. The charism of the Founder is not a vague and abstract gift – a kind of myth without a history – but a lived evangelic reality intertwined with history; its identity is portrayed in various kinds of christian existence and is constitutionally ordered to the life of the Church. In this way we have learned to seek the origin of every kind of consecrated life primarily in the initiative of the Holy Spirit in the course of the centuries.

And so, for example, instead of looking at the monks of the desert for the initial prototype of our consecrated life, we discover our particular gift rather in the kind of life of the Apostles, to which we are substantially directed by the experience of the Holy Spirit lived by the Founder. The awareness of being linked to the Holy Spirit by special bonds not only provides us with wider horizons in looking for models, but also intensifies our knowledge of the vitality of the Church.

What is new in every charism – the prophetic dimension it manifests in the saving mission of the People of God – is usually a particular reading of the Gospel, a courageous way of facing the new challenges of society. Relaunching a charism means rediscovering these innovative nuclei placed in it by the Holy Spirit.

History teaches us, in fact, that a charism can provoke resistance, without on that account diminishing “boldness in initiatives, perseverance in the gift of self or humility in the face of adversity: the true relation between genuine charism, with its perspectives of newness, and interior suffering, carries with it an unvarying history of the connection

between charism and cross".¹⁰ In this charismatic perspective we may say that an important contribution of consecrated life to penetration and participation in the life of the Church is the protagonism of the Holy Spirit, his life-giving and animating presence in the Body, his many sided fertility directed to creating communion, his role as the builder of organic and catholic unity through the valuable contribution of so many differences.

¹⁰ MR 12

But we must add too that the Spirit bestows multiple and appropriate charisms also on Pastors, who must bring them together in ecclesial communion: to the Pope and the Bishops he gives the charism of coordinating charisms; It is precisely because of this that emphasizing the protagonism of the Spirit sheds daily light on the organic nature of the Church as the "Body of Christ". In fact, before the diversity proper to hierarchical structures, and before the exercise of the various ministries and offices, there is the mystery of the Church in which all are called to give the primacy to "life in the Spirit".¹¹

¹¹ cf. MR 4

Reference to the Spirit, therefore, as the source of life is for everyone the fount and foundation of a genuine ecclesial mentality.

— "*Consecration*". Vatican II brought about a real upheaval in the manner of interpreting 'consecrated life'. The terminology now in use stems from the Latin term 'consecrata' used by "Lumen gentium".¹² By whom is this life "consecrated"? The answer is to be found precisely in that word, used in the passive voice; it proclaims that God is the protagonist, through the ministry of the Church, of a special consecration: it is not a sacramental anointing, but a "solemn blessing" (to use

¹² LG 44

the term from the Rite of Religious Profession) which ensures a special gift and assistance from the Holy Spirit.

From this point of view, the adjective 'consecrated' appears to be the element certifying the ecclesial nature of such life.

The divine act of 'consecrating' inserts, in line with what happens in Baptism and Confirmation, a special 'presence' of the Holy Spirit: by it he commits himself to involvement with those who profess the evangelical counsels, to be their guide, support and food. Consecration, seen as a "particular presence of the Spirit", becomes a living source of hope and thus shows forth an aspect of the life-giving role of the Spirit as 'soul' of the Church.

And there is a further observation which it is important to add: God's consecrating action with the gift of his Spirit involves at one and the same time both the 'vocation' and the 'mission'; it is God who, by giving his Spirit, 'calls', 'consecrates' and 'sends' in a single act of providence and predilection. From this standpoint vocation, consecration and mission are inseparable. Hence consecration and mission appear as two constituent aspects of a single reality, in which they coexist in mutual interchange: they indicate an evangelical plan of life animated in a particular manner by the loving presence of the Holy Spirit.

This observation has a considerable repercussion on the very interpretation of consecrated life. The 'mission' is not something external, simply identifiable with 'apostolic activity', but a divine initiative that precedes and guides it; it is directly included in the consecration and defined in the choice of field of work that forms part of the Founder's charism. And so from the mission are born

physiognomical traits which give form to the commitment to the evangelical counsels and determine their ecclesial typology and manner of realization. The making of the vows is not a commitment by a vague and generic promise, but indicates the acceptance of the radical consequences of baptism and their expression in a well defined manner by a particular physiognomy, derived precisely from the mission given by God.

And so there is no longer any tension between consecration and mission (especially in groups of apostolic life), but mutual compenetration in the interchange of ecclesial values. Using the term 'consecrated life' is an indication that in the People of God there is a portion chosen and designated by the Lord for the good of the Church (as regards sanctification and the apostolate), and that it is enriched by a great variety of charisms "like a bride adorned for her husband, and to manifest in herself the multiform wisdom of God".¹³

13 PC 1

This conciliar vision of consecration, while able to bring about a deep interior spiritual renewal in the consecrated persons themselves, emphasizes a vital ecclesial aspect at the same time: the sacred hierarchy intervenes in the act of consecration, to ensure by its ministry the realization of the vocation and mission expressed by the different charisms, considered as a particular gift to be preserved and defended.

— "*Profession*". Profession is the name of the act by which one who is chosen and called gives himself totally to God (its full significance appears in perpetual profession): he commits himself to follow Christ in a radical manner, highlighting some aspect of his unfathomable mystery. The deeper understanding of the theological sense of consecra-

tion helps to specify what is being done by the subject making his profession: strictly speaking he does not “consecrate himself” (in fact he “becomes consecrated”); he “offers himself” in a total oblation. The radical aspect of this oblation is contained and manifested in the evangelical counsels; they are the measure of the generosity of the response to the divine call. Consecration on the part of God and the complete donation of himself with the evangelical counsels on the part of the subject become inseparably united in ‘profession’. And so in the professed person the effects of the particular presence of the Holy Spirit abide side by side with his own will of radical oblation; he is now said to be ‘consecrated’ and his existence ‘consecrated life’. And so we can see that the adjective ‘consecrated’ has a double meaning: that of the divine action (“consecrated by God”), and that of radical self-donation into which the special assistance of the Spirit enters in a vital way (“consecrated to God”); both of them are due to the loving presence of the Holy Spirit.

The radical commitment to the practice of the evangelical counsels is included in a true personal and group ‘covenant’ with God through the Founder, considered after the manner of a father or patriarch; it is a covenant which gives to the making of the vows the concept of a concrete response to the particular project suggested to the Founder by the Holy Spirit. The fact of the intimate unity between consecration and mission means that the evangelical counsels are deeply and vitally inserted into the particular mission received in consecration and in the concrete project expressed in the charism. And so the profession is not just simply the making of vows, but also the intention to live them in line with the Founder’s charism. The

realization of the mission gives the concrete tone and ecclesial physiognomy to everything that is offered in profession. The self-donation in the practice of the evangelical counsels is determined and measured by the realization of one's own mission in the Church, according to the Rule of life approved by the Church herself.

Rightly does "Lumen gentium" declare: "Being means to and instruments of love, the evangelical counsels unite those who practise them to the Church and her mystery in a special way. It follows that the spiritual life of such Christians should be dedicated (*Latin - devoveatur*) also to the welfare of the entire Church. To the extent of their capacities and in keeping with the particular kind of religious life to which they are individually called, whether it be one of prayer or of active labour as well, they have the duty of working for the implanting and strengthening of the kingdom of Christ in souls and for spreading it to the four corners of the earth".¹⁴

¹⁴ LG 44

And so from this point of view too the ecclesial nature of consecrated life is highlighted; rightly does the Church "preserve and foster the distinctive character" of the various charisms.¹⁵ This 'distinctive character' is inherent in the diverse professions of the evangelical counsels "and also involves a particular style of sanctification and apostolate which creates a definite tradition".¹⁶

¹⁵ cf. LG 44

¹⁶ MR 11

These charismatic differences inserted in the same profession have been created by the Spirit for the precise purpose of enriching and energizing the Church in the realization of her mission of salvation.

— "*Sacramentality*". The presentation of the Church by Vatican II as the universal "Sacrament

of salvation” has given back to this term the meaning of a witness and credible sign inherent in christian existence: those who are baptized must become “signs and bearers” of the mystery of Christ among men.

The Church has, therefore, a sacramental nature manifested by a colourful variety of vocations which render her meaningful among peoples in many different forms. Consecrated life forms an important part of this ‘sacramental nature’ of the Church.¹⁷ “Lumen gentium” states, in fact, that by means of those who are consecrated, the Church can better present Christ, “in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men, always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him”.¹⁸

This multiple ecclesial significance, as well as bringing together the plurality of theological and Christological values inherent in consecrated life, gives a practical indication of the reason behind the many ways in which the members become associated with the mission that belongs to the People of God “by a new and special title”:¹⁹ “they reveal more clearly to all believers the heavenly goods which are already present in this age, witnessing to the new and eternal life which we have acquired through the redemptive work of Christ and preluding our future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom. Furthermore (...) this state manifests in a special way the transcendence of the kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things and the highest kinds of bonds within it, bringing home to all men the immeasurable greatness of the power of Christ in his sover-

¹⁷ cf. MR 10

¹⁸ LG 46

¹⁹ LG 44

eignty and the infinite might of the Holy Spirit which works so marvellously in the Church".²⁰

²⁰ LG 44

This perspective of the special significance of consecrated life also helps in interpreting the comparatives (e.g. 'more closely', 'more intimately', 'in a more certain and secure manner') with which the Council documents refer to it. Rather than indicating an order of dignity or holiness, these comparatives highlight the special sign provided in the Church by consecrated life, i.e. the "sacramental dimension" by which it manifests to the world the many riches and usefulness of christian values.

In particular it openly proclaims the eschatological character of the People of God. Consecrated persons, with their total self-donation through the practice of the evangelical councils, become a visible sign of the force of the resurrection; they strive to become experts in discerning the action of the risen Christ in history and bear witness to the commitments and joy of hope in preparing for the Saviour's return with the expectation of "new heavens and a new earth".²¹

²¹ Acts 21,1

Hence from this point of view of significance also, the advantageous ecclesial character of consecrated life is affirmed in a particularly concrete and attractive manner.

— "*Choice of field of work*". Apostolic consecration implies, on the part of the Holy Spirit, the assigning of chosen beneficiaries in the evangelizing mission. And so, for example, for those who are sent to young people it means interpreting their mission as intrinsically linked with the evolutionary age of man, or in other words feeling called to embody in a competent manner their own activities in the field of education. The choice of a field of work (which in this case is an 'educative choice') be-

comes in fact the first step in the inculturation of the Gospel; it is a step in which faith and life, Gospel and culture, must be made inseparable.

For us this aspect was set out in detail in the GC23, and we have commented on it in the special circular on the "new education", in which we said precisely that the educator-evangelizer must cultivate the endowments proper to an 'artist' of God to be able to bring together in unity the different aspects that combine to foster the growth of the person being educated. In this era of great transformations, to the demands of the new evangelization must be added, therefore, those also of a 'new education'.²² From this point of view there are several human innovations that must be known and studied more deeply; this in turn helps us to see that considering man as the vehicle for the Church's mission implies many practical consequences as regards the process of inculturation. Today we can say that the slogan "to evangelize by educating and educate by evangelizing" expresses the need for a methodology to be duly evaluated in all the work needed in a new evangelization: to permeate culture by the Gospel as the vehicle of salvation. The gospel message, however, must not be diluted in culture but rather continue to be always its horizon and a necessary incentive to progress.

And we can go even further. We see that the educative choice belongs to the wider field of human advancement, which is itself always bound up with the practical exercise of christian charity. From this point of view the choice of a field of work makes us see at the present day, and with particular concern, certain priorities which are essential to its relevance: the preferential option for the poor, solidarity in line with the Church's social

²² cf. AGC 337

doctrine, ethical discernment in the formation of conscience, the reality of sin, the urgent need to proclaim the events of the Passover of Christ.

Our experience teaches us that the choice of a field of work becomes a kind of crucible where former ecclesial aspects become fused and prepared for use; it appears as the concrete and indispensable expression for the Church's maternal function in respect of the christian development of mankind.

The reflections we have made, which do not claim to be exhaustive, on the aspects we have considered and which were already known to some extent (charism, consecration, profession, sacramental nature, and choice of field of work), we may consider as a profitable result of our postconciliar experience; with them we have entered the Pentecostal orbit of the Council. They can shed valid light also on the whole process of the renewal of consecrated life. It is a question, in fact, of intensifying with the presence and power of the Spirit, the unfathomable mystery of Christ in time; of making vivid and relevant to the present day the charisms of Founders and Foundresses; of appearing on the threshold of the third millennium with the invigorating energies of the resurrection.

The great open horizons

The Synod will certainly direct its attention also to the several serious problems that remain open in the renewal process.

It must be said that in the whole of christian life, and hence also in consecrated life, incompleteness is inherent in our very condition as 'pilgrims'.

Awareness of this condition should not provoke discouragement, but rather help us to a clear understanding of the goals to be attained, albeit gradually and with sacrifice supported by hope. And so when looking at the discrepancy which still exists between the ideal described in renewal documents and daily life, we must be able to single out the more significant and strategic points on which to concentrate with unambiguous and constant fidelity. These are objectives to be realized, and we have already started on the way; they need to be continually studied at greater depth, revised and re-planned at opportune moments.

In the "Lineamenta" are listed various problems that have remained open; in our case we prefer to speak of them as goals not yet reached. We mention below some of the more important ones, not to hurl recriminations against deviations or shortcomings (which unfortunately exist) but to motivate our commitment to preparation for the Synod, as I said earlier.

We refer more directly to our salesian situation, so as to translate our eventual contributions to the Synod's work not only into reflections to be put forward, but also and more particularly into living witness. Continuing with trust and constancy along the road we have begun, we intend to commit ourselves forthwith to a more authentic renewal, keeping in mind certain guiding principles that seem to us more urgent. A consideration of them will serve us as an examination of conscience.

— "*Life in the Spirit*". The renewal of consecrated life is intimately linked with an intensely lived "life in the Spirit"; because it is the Spirit who gives life and growth to a vocation. In our experience since the Council, the ecclesial elements mentioned

earlier have fostered an appropriate formative pedagogy (for the initial stages and ongoing formation), and have contributed to the marked improvement in our personal and community life. But we are speaking of a very demanding process that will never be completed and which unfortunately is hindered by the secularized climate in the environment in which we live.

Our own "life in the Spirit" is of an active kind, the fruit of an apostolic consecration which constitutes the source of all our sanctification. Its central driving force is "pastoral charity", the bearer of the "grace of unity" which makes possible the vital synthesis between contemplation and action.

This salesian spirit has been lived in an eminent manner by several confreres in the short history of the Congregation: our Family can already boast among its members 3 Saints, 5 Beati, and more than 19 Servants of God, of whom 7 have already been declared 'Venerable', without including the many Spanish martyrs. They are a sure indication to us that our plan of sanctification is animated by the "new and undying enthusiasm" which is the first condition for all evangelization.

The clarity of their testimony reminds us too that among young people we are not simply educators but also consecrated persons, i.e. men of God, sent to educate and hence carry out a work destined to be the typical expression of a strong adherence to Him who sends us; this is the soul of the preventive system, and it has consequences which are many and very decisive for both personal and community life.

The Pope has asked us to avoid the dangers of both intimism and activism. We have undertaken to foster our own kind of prayer²³ and to permeate

²³ cf. AGC 338

²⁴ cf. SGC and AGC 334

our apostolic work for the young with salesian spirit.²⁴ In these we can always increase our efforts, aware as we are that some of us move too slowly. We must consider life in the Spirit as the first open goal ahead of us. In this sense we await from the 94-Synod enlightenment and encouragement which will provide sufficient space also for the particular aspects of active consecrated life, which has perhaps been forgotten to some extent or not dealt with at sufficient depth in official guidelines. For this reason we want to be able to imitate the Founder to a greater degree and to acquire a better knowledge of the spiritual doctrine of St Francis de Sales, so as to offer a characteristic apostolic testimony to the life and holiness of the Church.

John Paul II, when he spoke to us during his unforgettable visit to the GC23, reminded us in forthright terms: “First of all I want to emphasize as a fundamental point the strength of a unifying synthesis that stems from pastoral charity. It is the fruit of the power of the Holy Spirit which ensures the vital inseparability between union with God and dedication to one’s neighbour, between depth of interior evangelical meditation and apostolic activity, between a praying heart and busy hands. Those two great Saints, Francis de Sales and John Bosco, have borne witness to this wonderful ‘grace of unity’. The hidden riches that accompany it provide clear confirmation, as amply demonstrated by the lives of these two Saints, that union with God is the true source of the practical love of one’s neighbour.”²⁵

²⁵ GC23 332

We are also grateful to the Holy Father for the Apostolic Exhortation “Pastores dabo vobis”, in which (as I said at the beginning) we find pastoral charity presented precisely with these characterist-

ics of unifying potency. The grace of unity, the fruit of pastoral charity in salesian life, is contained in that "thirst for souls" with which Don Rinaldi commented on the spirit of Don Bosco.²⁶

²⁶ cf. AGC 332

There is however one spiritual aspect among us which has certain defects: it is that of our *ascetical commitment*. There is no true life in the Spirit without concrete asceticism. Certainly the latter must be in harmony with the particular characteristics of our charism,²⁷ but it must be there, every day and in abundance. This, maybe, is the weak point in our spiritual revival. And yet every form of consecrated life has always been an ascetical exercise. Let us call to mind once again what St Ignatius of Loyola said: "greater mortification of self-love than abstention from meat; and more mortification of the passions than prayer; for a person who keeps his passions mortified a quarter of an hour should be sufficient for an encounter with God".²⁸

²⁷ cf. AGC 326

²⁸ cf. AGC 338

Our "da mihi animas" must always be accompanied by the mystery of the cross ("cetera tolle") which renders our activity fruitful.

— "A living sense of ecclesial communion". Another open horizon, which often meets with particular difficulties, is that of our concrete presence in the local Churches.

The 85-Synod, twenty years after the Council, reminded us that "the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea running through the Council documents". Our consecrated life will need to manifest in a better way the incorporation of salesian works and foundations within the organic communion of the Church, characterized simultaneously by the diversity and complementary nature of vocations.

For us the mystery of communion must enlighten both the doctrine concerning the universal Church and that regarding the local Church. Let us recall what the Holy Father recommended to Superiors General some years ago (1978): "By your vocation you are with the universal Church, through your mission you are in a particular local Church. Therefore your vocation for the universal Church is realized within the structures of the local Church. You must do all you can to bring about the development of consecrated life in the individual local Churches, so that it can contribute to their spiritual construction and become their particular strength. Unity with the universal Church, through the local Church: that is the path you must follow!"²⁹

²⁹ *Oss. Rom.*, 27.11.78

A practical problem in this connection can be relations with those responsible at the local level for pastoral work. The document "Mutuae relationes" had looked forward in hope to an easier and more fraternal communion, which in certain circumstances was not always realized. Let us hope that the 94-Synod will give special attention to this point.

It is important that all the Bishops should have a concept of the gift of the consecrated life more in harmony with the ecclesiology of the Council, and be able to appreciate, foster and coordinate its richness. "Mutuae relationes" had already clearly stated: "The Holy Spirit is the *soul* of the ecclesial Body. No member of the People of God, whatever his ministry may be, can personally possess in himself the totality of all the gifts, offices and duties: he must enter into communion with the other members. Differences in the People of God, whether of gifts or functions, converge and mutually comple-

ment one another for a single communion and mission".³⁰

³⁰ MR 9b

For our part we are called to collaborate with more flexibility and understanding, prompting a fraternal dialogue which does not succumb before difficulties and constantly endeavours to overcome problems. In this connection, in addition to a more complete and specific doctrinal formation, attention will have to be given to individual persons with their particular mentality and temperament; and so dialogue will need the help of intelligent pedagogy, fraternal cohabitation, salesian kindness and a lot of patience.

Our works (oratories, youth centres, schools, parishes etc.) are of a pastoral kind (our mission is to the "young and the poor") at the service of a locality; each one should have its own particular characteristics (or at least this is what we are aiming at) to enable it to be incorporated and harmonized with the projects of the local Church to enrich the latter's possibility of service. Experience has shown that if we agree in laying down the necessary conditions a satisfactory situation can be realized without disagreements.

It is clear that, on our side, we shall have to improve our fidelity to the magisterium and pastoral guidelines of Peter's Successor,³¹ as well as our knowledge and adherence to the ministry that belongs to the Episcopate, to the role of the various pastoral organisms (and in particular those of the presbyteral and pastoral councils) and to collaboration with the laity.

³¹ cf. AGC 315

There is no doubt that at the present day every pastoral initiative has urgent need of greater ecclesial communion and, for us, a communion built on kindness.

— “*Significance*”. This is an aspect linked with the concept of “sign” proper to the consecrated life, considered in general as a sharing in the sacramental nature of the Church: but every charism shares in it in its own specific manner – a manner that is called to become a concrete project in its works and foundations; the latter should clearly manifest in the neighbourhood the particular charism concerned. Now, in a time of great cultural transformation, of pastoral renewal in the Church, of involvement with the lay faithful, of previously unknown challenges and new forms of poverty, together with a drop in the number of personnel in many regions, it becomes vital and even indispensable to rethink the significance of our presences, with due consideration to the fundamental aspects of our own postconciliar renewal. Of this the Vicar General, Fr Juan E. Vecchi, has already written in the AGC, with reference to the “person of the Salesian”, the “community”, “pastoral quality”, the “ability to recruit other workers”, and the “relationship with the locality”.³²

³² cf. AGC 340

All this forms a target that is open and in urgent need of attainment. Attempts have been made at times to achieve it with partial solutions, but without very positive results; a reshaping of the works is not sufficient by itself, neither are certain forms of insertion among the poor, nor the inventing of other kinds of community life, and still less the giving up of the works themselves. It is not simply a problem of structures, of individual fantasy, of criteria inspired by positions that are sometimes rather ideological, but of putting into practice the evangelical project of the Founder.

Our apostolic works will be truly significant if they respond, among other things, to two require-

ments: the first is the manifestation of all aspects of their charismatic renewal and not just some partial facet; and the second is the ability to respond to the more urgent requests of those to whom our mission is addressed in the areas and cultures where the work is sited. Certainly this will mean that we must keep in mind our strength in personnel; it is a dangerous temptation for significance to want to meet every necessity. It is a case of giving “signs” of response to the challenges with the authenticity of our own charism, of living it here and now in new forms (and if necessary also in fewer works) but in genuine fidelity to the common project.

Significance must always be conjoined for us with the “educative option”, because that is the field in which we are sent to work. That is where we commit ourselves by our profession and that is where our prophetic dimension is realized.

— *“Missionary mentality and outlook”*. The present social and cultural situation has opened up very many new equivalents of the Areopagus in the Church’s mission.³³ It is now necessary to adopt a missionary criterion almost everywhere. — In particular, if the renewal implies for us an adequate “re-founding of the Oratory”,³⁴ as realized by the Founder and suggested by the Constitutions,³⁵ we immediately have an urgent objective to achieve — that of converting ourselves (as the Pope told us) into true “missionaries of youth”, not only in the case of those sent ‘ad gentes’ but in all our works, as is evident. This attitude implies special initiatives in communal living and dialogue for evangelization purposes, the ability for adaptation, an apostolic creativity based on the permanent criteria of the preventive system and applied in the various works in the most suitable way.

³³ cf. *Red. miss.* especially 37b, c; 69-70; and AGC 336

³⁴ GC23 345

³⁵ C 40

We must cultivate a spirit of initiative, which is not satisfied with remaining on the defensive, so to speak, but which seeks to attack or, in other words, to seek the opportune moment for indicating a lifestyle and proclaiming the Gospel. We need to think of the first great missionaries, the Apostles, who were never silent about the mission they carried within them wherever they went. What I mean to say is that being called “missionaries of the young” is not just having a fine name (and at the present time a very relevant one), but a commitment to conversion in view of a new kind of evangelizing presence.

The GC23 has given an ample description of what we have to do; the difficulty lies in knowing how to put it all into practice. It is indeed therefore a case of another open horizon, to the attaining of which we have been dedicating our best efforts for a number of years.

— *“Inculturation”*. Finally there is the goal of inculturation, not only in the missions properly so called but everywhere. As has been said more than once, we are living in an era of cultural transformation which, through the signs of the times, is provoking the growth of a planetary culture which in turn is necessarily giving a new dynamism to the various local cultures. Although in itself culture is not something absolute, it nevertheless conditions the life of everyone: language, manner of life, ways of appreciating values, a system of thought and judgement – these are all realities which constitute the atmosphere breathed by every individual. Now the Word of God has been proclaimed to be contemporaneous with every human generation in every part of the world. We must therefore be able to make it contemporary with local culture.

For this purpose a correct inculturation becomes essential. This demands, primarily and on the one hand, clarity and integrity about what we have to inculturate; and on the other hand, competence in the local language, discernment regarding ways of life, awareness of changes as regards the appraisal of values, the knowledge and ability to evaluate systems of thought and judgement. It is not an easy task nor one that will have an end, because we are witnessing the dawning of a new historical era. It is a task to be realized in an ecclesial manner.

The acceleration of such dynamic forces can lead more than one person to relativism, and even to discouragement. But the fact that we can count on a truth of salvation as regards man and his history, revealed to us by God himself, points out to us the road of inculturation as an indispensable choice for the realization of our vocation.

In particular, as far as our consecration is concerned, inculturation allows for a healthy pluriformity of manner of life, provided that the latter be rooted with clarity and integrity of content in the one common vocation, following the evangelical project set out in the Rule of life. The gradual work of inculturation demands an authentic consecrated life faithful to the characteristics of the Founder's charism, and a careful critical ability in discerning the cultural values to be assumed and integrated.

And there you have another great horizon which is always open; at the present day it touches the whole Church and demands a continual analysis of relations between unity and pluriformity, always respecting the primacy of the Word of God and the charism of the Founder in the development of cultural values.

For the Gospel or a charism to be inculturated it is absolutely necessary that the elements of its specific identity be preserved. It can be seen at once, therefore, that the work to be carried out is a complex one; attention, sensitivity and study are necessary as regards both novelty and tradition; the *progressives* in fact run the risk of distorting the origins, while the *traditionalists* risk misunderstanding the contemporary element and what the Lord is saying to us through the signs of the times; neither are able to discern the true nature of God's gifts with their unique transcendence – essentially ordered to embodiment, and the historical modality (which is in fact transitory) of cultural schemes, though yesterday they were precious cocoons of God's gifts.

The right discernment of the steps to be taken in so delicate a field, is not a task to be left to the arbitrary decision of individuals, but must be taken up by the community at its various levels, under the guidance of the designated leaders.

Demands of the New Evangelization

Today the Church gives special attention to the new evangelization and hopes that consecrated life also will give to it its generous support. We may ask therefore what are the principal demands that emerge from this task. The response would be lengthy, and here it will be sufficient to indicate two complementary lines of approach: one concerns the subjects called to evangelize; and the other the *particular cultural content* which must be kept in mind.

On the part of the *subjects* one may recall the programme expressed by John Paul II concerning evangelization: “new in enthusiasm, new in methods, new in expression”. The renewal of consecrated life must be courageously compared with the demands of the new evangelization; they call for a kind of conversion by individuals and communities. There must be a ‘new enthusiasm’ in the witness of one’s own charism with a life in the Spirit which renews deep communion with the mystery of Christ; a ‘newness of method’ in the apostolic enterprise which expresses the charismatic fervour of the particular characteristics; and a “newness of expression” (with a spirit of initiative) to translate the new methods into activities and works, in sincere ecclesial communion. The new evangelization requires, therefore, the fullness of the testimony of the pastoral charity of the particular charism, so as to irradiate the light and warmth of the Gospel with life itself.

The GC23 has prompted us in this very sense;³⁶ in particular it insisted that each community be a true “sign of faith”, i.e. made up of members who are “spiritual men”; that it be a “school of faith”, i.e. truly missionary among young people, making of evangelization its reason for existing and functioning; and, finally, that it become a “centre of communion and participation”, able to unite and incite other collaborators, in harmony with projects of the local Churches.

As regards *cultural content*, there is an urgent need to give attention to values that have matured in the emerging culture: they proclaim true innovations. It is true that discernment is needed within their innate ambivalence, but they certainly embody innovations that need to be baptized and in

* cf. GC23 4. 90-91. 215-220

which Christ's Gospel and the particular charism can be incarnated. One need only think of the emergence of the temporal order and the proper evaluation of the values of the laity; of the progress made in the concept of social life and the new frontiers that have opened before the social dimension of the faith; of the development of relationships of reciprocity between men and women, and what follows from these for the renewal of society and the Church; of delicate challenges in the area of life, justice, peace, solidarity and ecology, with so many questions to be resolved from an ethical point of view.

In particular, the field of special interest to us is that of youth (open to several groups of consecrated life): this is where we are called to offer our best efforts to re-establish dialogue with the young and educate them to the faith. The educative option points to a far from simple path that must be followed in the light of the new evangelization.

We await from the Synod a renewed presence in the world of the mystery of Christ

What can we expect from the 94-Synod? Many results, certainly; but there is no point in drawing up a hypothetical list.

The Synod will tackle the theme of consecrated life, looking in global fashion at its mission and nature in the Church. The successors of the Apostles, called as they are to foster the renewal of the entire People of God, will be concerned to translate the great principles and guidelines of the Council into renewed pastoral forms. Certainly from the Synod will come guidelines for renewal: from the primacy

of "life in the Spirit" to the consideration of relationships of communion with both the Bishops (a relaunching of "Mutuae Relationes") and the lay faithful, to a common vision of the doctrine of the local Church, to the appraisal of the charismatic pluriformity in the process of renewal, to some practical problems concerning especially the 'religious life', etc.

We could say, however, that we expect as a global fruit not so much a solution to specific problems of this or that group, but rather a strong relaunching of consecrated life in its essential and vital aspects. Consecrated life, in fact, through the fruitful action of the Holy Spirit in the Founders and Foundresses through the centuries, is called to manifest the richness of the mystery of Christ which makes to shine out in the Church (his Body in history) the multiform grace of Christ its Head.

Consecrated life also evokes and preserves a special communion with the Church in heaven, through so many eminent holy men and women who have borne witness to the Church and embellished it by their experiences: "from the God-given seed of the counsels a wonderful and wide-spreading tree has grown up in the field of the Lord, branching out into various forms of religious life in solitude or in community; different religious families have come into existence in which spiritual resources are multiplied for the progress in holiness of their members and for the good of the entire Body of Christ".³⁷ This charismatic fertility which has matured through history is still alive and influential, with bonds of communion and grace in the heavenly Jerusalem.

³⁷ LG 43

Disciples are called today to manifest the mystery of Christ by rendering Founders and Foun-

dresses still vitally present; their renewed life will appear as a spiritual exegesis or a vast existential comment on the inexhaustible patrimony of the Gospel. Consecrated persons at the present day, instead of getting involved in the demythologizing of their particular origins, must be able to demonstrate this ineffable communion of saints. This is the most authentic way in which Founders and Foundresses feel that they too are committed from heaven to collaborate in the new evangelization.

Conclusion:

Mary, Model and Helper of the consecrated life

From the abode of the Saints the first to intervene in guiding the Synod and rendering it fertile will be the Virgin Mary, the model and helper of consecrated life. In a motherly way she has always accompanied the work of the Holy Spirit, the distributor of charisms: witnesses to this are the Founders and Foundresses and the Marian dimension of their Institutes. Mary is the Helper of the Church in difficult times, she is the Star of the new evangelization and the Guide of the Bishops. Full of grace from the first moment of her conception, all her life has been an experience of the Holy Spirit; after Jesus, she is certainly the highest model of consecrated life: of complete self-donation to God, of the motherly mission towards Christ, of an intense journey of faith, of the unequalled example of a first disciple in following the Lord, of being the sign and bearer of the richness of his mystery to all men, of an ineffable love for the Church of which she is by her very existence both prophet and mother.

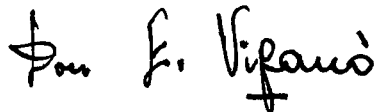
Mary invites us to pray for this Synod and to prepare it, to the extent that lies in our power, with a lively care and hope. It is an event that will enable consecrated life to take on, through her maternal intervention, a particularly decisive role in the new times.

One aspect of our preparation will be that of studying more deeply the salesian vocation from the synodal aspect of a living charism for the Church of today, as we have tried to suggest in these reflections. Mary will help us to perceive more clearly from an ecclesial standpoint the significance and importance of Don Bosco, and to live with renewed commitment his gospel project according to the needs of the new evangelization. She has already helped us to this end through the great Chapters that have followed Vatican II; she is guiding us now as we implement the deliberations of the GC23, and she will urge us on in an ever more pressing manner through the new Synod towards those ever open horizons and goals which will help us to be authentic and more credible "missionaries of the young", i.e. to be protagonists with them of a new era of the presence of faith in society.

May Don Bosco prosper the work!

Cordial greetings as we take up our common task of moving towards the objectives that will render ever more efficacious in the Church the patrimony of consecrated life left us by our Founder.

Affectionately in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Don F. Vigano". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The word "Don" is written in a smaller, simpler font than the name "F. Vigano".