

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

EDUCATING TO THE FAITH IN THE SCHOOL

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Rome, Solemnity of St Joseph,
19 March 1993

My dear confreres,

I send you my affectionate greetings, in the name also of the members of the General Council. We brought our last plenary session to an end on 5 February last, and immediately the members began to leave for visits of animation. A few days later I presided over the Team Visit to the Italian provinces, and later was able to make contact with various communities, especially in the two Mexican provinces, where I preached a special retreat to the rectors at the end of the celebrations marking the

centenary of the arrival in Mexico of the first five Salesians.

Everywhere there is evident a diligent commitment for the application of the deliberations of the GC23. God is blessing the Congregation too in delicate situations, not only in the vast missionary frontiers, but also in new foundations in Albania, Siberia and various countries of the former Soviet Union.

It is true that our personnel is strained to the limit in certain areas where vocations are scarce, but by living the evangelical counsels in an authentic manner and by avoiding the dangers of a soft and easy life, Don Bosco urges us not to stop and helps us to go ahead, leaving aside if necessary elements that no longer have salesian significance.

Among the themes being submitted to competent study in congresses and meetings for revision and planning, I have noted that of the education of young people to the faith *in our schools and scholastic institutions*. This is a topic that is rich and challenging; it is neither simple nor free from controversy, but it is certainly vital for the renewal of the Congregation.

For this reason I think it opportune to invite you to reflect on the subject of the school, and consider it in some of its most demanding aspects. It is impossible, in fact, to speak of the salesian work and mission without this topic cropping up, and on the other hand it constitutes in one way or another, positively or negatively, an important educative experience that must be examined and assessed.

The “oratorian root” of our school.

I saw in Mexico – in the north in various towns along the frontier with the United States, and in the south in the Yucatán peninsula – a promising relaunching of the salesian oratory in the more densely populated suburbs where young people are at risk. In this unique kind of experience you immediately notice that the oratorian presence, with all its rich dynamism, becomes almost necessarily the creative nucleus for other initiatives, aimed precisely at meeting the practical needs of those youngsters. The salesian oratory is not an institution as yet completely defined; still less is it a kind of alternative in contrast with other structures, but rather something that leads to the search for a kind of education more useful to needy youth; and among such kinds of education there emerge almost at once scholastic initiatives for the world of work or for social and civic formation. You could say that the oratory (i.e. presence amongst the most needy youngsters) becomes also a source of scholastic structures, with a particular style and spirit.

We have seen this already in Don Bosco. From the first years of his activity at Valdocco, he inserted the scholastic component into his apostolate in a creative manner, preserving its objective, atmosphere and oratorian criteria. And when he was offered the opportunity he also took on schools that were already functioning or which he opened himself in some cases, guided always by his initial oratorian intent and his characteristic method of educating poor boys to a social and ecclesial life.

I think we must give due attention to this “oratorian root” and working-class characteristic of our

schools. Rightly the renewed Constitutions remind us that the experience of Don Bosco's oratory at Valdocco "is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works".¹ It is a criterion that starts from the reality of the young and the working-class, and seeks the most suitable means for an integral education, especially of those in greatest need. 1 C 40

As the Congregation has expanded throughout the world it has become inserted into the movement which has spread Catholic schools among working-class peoples, taking the current models and improving or transforming them with its own specific identity and pedagogical intuitions. In this it has been guided by the conviction, corroborated by practice, that the school constitutes a privileged means for the education of the young, a valid element in the advancement of peoples and an evangelizing environment of particular efficacy.

Rather, therefore, than school and oratory being mutually opposed as two well defined and separate institutions, for us they recall and enlighten each other; they interchange criteria and methods, reciprocally enriching each other in their educative and evangelizing purposes, while both are characterized by their primary concern for poor and needy youngsters.

The scholastic commitment of the Congregation at the present day.

After more than a hundred years of life, according to the data of the last General Chapter, we are now working in many hundreds of scholastic insti-

tutions, including primary schools (501), middle schools (498), senior schools (296), technical schools (79), university faculties (34), parish schools (677), and remedial centres (95).² To these must be added the professional schools (252) and agricultural schools (53).³ The Salesians involved full-time in these schools number about 4,300 with a further 1,800 engaged part-time; working with us also there are more than 35,000 lay collaborators in the education of some 800,000 youngsters. And if to these we add the substantial scholastic commitment of the FMA, the numbers are doubled.

Our Family then appears as a movement of educators solidly represented also on the scholastic front, as emerges also very clearly from a study of religious statistics.

But it is not merely a matter of quantity. The Congregation has always taken special care to see that our schools are competent and qualified. In times when their validity was never called in question efforts were made to perfect their organization, to install in them a discipline based on reason, to make them fully efficient from a didactic point of view, and to foster their educative effect and cultural level. In times of contestation we made every effort to identify the cause of the crisis, to respond to new educational and pastoral requirements, and to reassert the advantages of the scholastic institution, without losing sight of its limitations. We managed especially to redefine the identity of the salesian school animated with the oratorian spirit of the preventive system.

In this uninterrupted process of reflection and orientation, various and complementary perspectives were reached which together constitute a valid synthesis: the educative project, the educating

² *La Società di san Francesco di Sales. Dati statistici.* Rome 1990. pp 56-57

³ *Ibid.* pp. 64-67

community, the cultural dimension of the school, its evangelizing purpose, pastoral animation, and relationship with the local neighbourhood.

The GC21, which drew up its guidelines in the light of *Evangelii nuntiandi* and under its influence, having in mind specifically the evangelization of the young, reasserted the validity of salesian presence in the school, and summed up its merits as follows: "The school offers countless opportunities to meet young people and establish a personal rapport with them; it makes for a community whose cultural traits are enlightened and permeated by faith-values. Our pastoral efforts extend to parents and lay co-workers, thus particularizing the gospel message in a single programme of personal development. It asserts the right to alternative education in a society whose cultural leaders and monolithic school system preclude this right of parents in the education of their children".⁴

⁴ GC21 130

The problem of the relationship between "school" and "education".

The GC23, concerned about the education of young people to the faith, suggested a balance in the relationship which exists between "education" and "school"; it did not conceal the difficulties that exist, and the fact that to overcome them there is need for a complex and decisive renewal. "In the educational system of our complex societies", it declared, "one notices a prevalence of instruction and scientific data over educational intentions and the overall formation of the individual. This is something which creates a separation between educational

⁵ GC23 56

system and life, between teaching and the integral formation of the person, and makes difficult the development of a personal culture".⁵

In this way there has been created, and sometimes even among ourselves, a real separation between the scholastic programme and the concerns of life and of the sense of an evolutionary age itself.

On the other hand, the simultaneous presence of numerous educative agencies, visible and concealed, as though in competition with one another, diminishes the influence and real value of the school as regards truly educative strategies.

⁶ GC23 267

Nonetheless the GC23 recognizes that the school is still the environment in which education to the faith can be inserted in a "vision of life and the world that the youngster builds up through learning the various matters associated with the planning of his own future".⁶

The advantages offered by the scholastic environment, however, are not to be taken for granted. They are to be deliberately pursued and attained in a situation without precedent in which many factors are interwoven. Hence the invitation to do some rethinking with a view to education to the faith, the content and application of various disciplines, the underlying cultural perspective, the structure and style of the community, explicit programmes of religious teaching, and the experience of christian commitment.⁷

⁷ GC23 270-273

On the other hand intentions and plans for renewal along these lines have not been lacking in the preceding period.

Evidence of this, in addition to the General Chapters in the years following Vatican II, are the "*Elementi e Linee del Progetto educativo per le scuole salesiane*", offered to the Provinces by the

Department concerned, the theoretical and practical development of the educative community and of the formation of collaborators, and the theme of evangelization in the school which has given rise to notable transformations of criteria and methods, though not without some serious difficulties as regards grasp and comprehension.

There have been occasions when these aspects have been examined more deeply in various regional congresses (e.g. in Italy,⁸ Spain, and the Pacific zone of Latin America). And with respect to the formation of workers the Youth Pastoral Department, in conjunction with our Faculty of Educational Sciences, has offered a course in each of the recent six-year periods. If to all this is added the recommended presence in every pastoral team of a person in charge of the educative dimension, and all the material produced by the confreres in study days, you can see that we have always advanced with fidelity to Don Bosco.

The result has been the didactic and cultural affirmation and achievement of many of our schools, even in demanding environments, with an esteem and constant request for such schools on the part of families.

If it is true that the reality of the youth situation has prompted the opening of new fields of intervention, thus reducing the proportion of scholastic commitment in the global activity of the Congregation, it would be a mistake to interpret this as the beginning of the abandoning of schools or disengagement from them. In this regard, incentives and guidelines from the magisterium of the Church and headquarters of the Congregation have never been lacking; what may have been missing, for understandable reasons, is the reaction at local level

⁸ cf. *Scuola salesiana in Italia. Atti della Conferenza delle Ispettorie salesiane d'Italia sulla scuola*. Rome 1984. *Il progetto educativo della scuola e della formazione professionale* (1992), jointly produced by the SDB and FMA.

where the directives have to find practical application.

In the scholastic field we are neither out of line nor lagging behind, but nevertheless we feel the need to come to grips with a movement which was and is in existence under many different aspects. This is evident from the growing complexity in this sector, the increase in the number of lay collaborators, the new teaching requirements, a relationship of new evangelization as regards the possibility of education to the faith, the linkage with the local society and neighbourhood, and the need for requalification on the part of the confreres.

Among the more authoritative aides from which we may draw inspiration, we can recall: the Declaration *Gravissimum educationis* of Vatican II, the letter *The Catholic School* of the Congregation for Catholic Education (March 1977) and *Lay Catholics in Schools: witnesses to faith* (1982) of the same Congregation, *La Scuola cattolica, oggi, in Italia* published by the Italian Bishops Conference (1983) with the supplement *Fare pastorale della scuola oggi* (1990), *The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school* of the Congregation for Catholic Education (1988), various weighty statements of the Holy Father, various other interventions of local Churches, and the document of the GC21 *The School: a setting for evangelization.*⁹

Crisis of cultural transition

Human reality is truly on the move, and in an accelerated form; in the cultural climate of our time we are registering radical changes which

⁹ GC21 128-134

make us think of the beginnings of a new historical epoch at planetary level. Some people are speaking of a kind of cultural revolution of the world.

Many "res novae" are emerging in society. Where the acceleration is greatest, there is already talk of transition from the modern era to the 'post-modern';¹⁰ or in other words from a type of culture resting on a conviction of indefinite progress and centred on the capacity of human reason without recourse to anything transcendent (and hence creating agnosticism and totalizing ideologies), to another kind of culture that is radically sceptical, open to some kind of possible transcendence but in relativistic form (like the religion put forward by New Age), characterized more by the fall of false certainties than by the contribution of real arguments for hope.

Without entering into the merits of opinions concerning what is 'modern' and 'post-modern', it is clear that there is a climate of subjectivism, of relativism, of pluralism, of new styles which add the idea of 'post' to many concepts, even going as far as to consider the faith itself as being out-of-date and to speak of a 'post-christianity' in which the Church's mission would appear to be obsolete.

But from another point of view, such an evolution offers some interesting possibilities. The fall of ideologies, in fact, and of political and social myths raised to the rank of secular religions, makes us realize in a gradual but ever increasing way that the christian faith is after all the one point of reference that is stable and gives promise; it alone enlightens, defends and promotes perspectives of true humanism, rich in significance and in objectives which give sense to life and history and move hearts towards hope. The recent publication of the *Catech-*

¹⁰ cf. CIVILTA' CATTOLICA n. 3418: *La fede cristiana nell'epoca post-moderna*, 21 November 1992

ism of the Catholic Church may come to be considered as an historic sign which points to the true point of reference for the future. One may think that the hour has struck for a new commitment to the inculturation of the Gospel in what John Paul II has called "this great moment of human history".¹¹

Cultural conditions are right for the launching out with pedagogical intelligence into the new evangelization, with the possibility of finally healing the pernicious divorce between the Gospel and culture; the crisis carries with it, in fact, the request to tackle and treat the very roots of the emerging culture.

The Holy Father frequently comes back on this theme which is so much in harmony with his general line of thought: "Even though the Gospel is not to be identified with any particular culture, it must inspire them so that in this way they can be transformed from within, enriching them with the christian values derived from faith. Indeed, the evangelization of culture is one of the most profound and universal ways of evangelizing a society".¹²

"The absence of basic christian values from modern culture has not only obscured the transcendent dimension (...), but is at the same time a major cause of the social disenchantment in which this crisis of culture has developed. (...) One of the goals of evangelization is to intensify the dialogue between science and faith in order to create a true christian humanism".¹³

All this leads us to reflect in a new way on the nature and mission of our schools. Many Catholic schools have perhaps remained dazzled by the new cultural innovations without immediately finding a way to suggest an adequate response to their pressing challenge.

¹¹ CL 3

¹² Opening address at San Domingo, n. 20

¹³ *ibid.* 21

Their insertion in a culture marked by so much agitation and pluralism puts before young people, without any assessment of their values, a whole variety of ideas concerning the sense of life and its ethical and religious planning. And so while objective and commonly held solutions are offered them for practical problems, as regards really vital problems the situation remains very much marked by subjectivity.

This has particular repercussions on religious education, understood in its elementary sense of responses to questions about existence, and still more on christian education in its multiple aspects of knowledge of revelation, of experience of a committed life and of a global vision of reality.

Many factors join forces to aggravate this phenomenon. One is the lack of proportion between religious instruction and the totality of the information and messages that youngsters receive, as a result of which their knowledge of the faith remains vague, imprecise, incomplete and confused. Another is the interruption – in christian countries – of the catechetical process in the period of adolescence when problems are emerging concerning feelings, ethics, culture and society. In fact the last systematic programme of christian formation offered them is their preparation for the sacrament of confirmation.

But a still greater influence is exerted by what the GC23 identifies as the growing irrelevance of the faith to culture and life, as the individual grows in the knowledge and dimensions of his existence. “In the welfare state, and correspondingly in other contexts, religious values have been moved to the margin of the components of the new society and of the aspects considered essential for social life.

For the young, and especially for those living in this kind of atmosphere, questions about God are of no importance, and religious terminology (salvation, sin, faith, future life) has lost all its significance. (...) Religious concepts can no longer be expressed in an intelligible way in the field of culture. This is a dramatic aspect of the otherwise lawful process of secularization".¹⁴ All this is immediately clear to the attentive observer; but it is only one sector of the problematic aspects.

¹⁴ GC23 83

Fortunately, however, there are emerging positive tendencies as well, though perhaps still in embryo: they are the values and demands regarding the individual, considered as the determining subject in all educative and social processes. Such values and requirements suggest the pursuance of lines of research leading to the discovery of the mystery of the human life within each individual. They also suggest that priority be given to the formation of the person of the individual, activating in particular those dynamic elements which foster the desire and ability for a continuous growth throughout the course of life. Positive and stimulating also is the new scenario of the common worldwide background, expressed in solidarity with everyone both near and far, in respect of the natural and civil rights of each one.

Of all this we have already spoken in the circular on the new education.¹⁵ Our GC23 takes note of the point: Many young people, it says, "are appealing to new values, able to regenerate personal relationships, and which offer a richer social structure. Some emphatic points are emerging from the world of youth: the centrality of the individual as the beginning, subject and end of all social instructions; the rediscovery of the values of equal dignity

¹⁵ cf. AGC 337

and reciprocal relationship between man and woman; a new way of building rapport based on freedom and justice; a collection of values linked with diversity (e.g. tolerance, ecumenism, respect for what is different) and solidarity (the new vision of peace and development, the totality and universality of growth); renewed cultural attention to cultural and religious realities, beyond purely technical aspects; a marked sensitivity to the great problems of the world...; a significant rediscovery of the environment and the need to safeguard it".¹⁶

16 GC23 49

Not all the values proclaimed and desired by young people, however, succeed in bringing about transformations in convictions, attitudes and behaviour of a permanent nature, capable of giving rise to durable decisions and life options. There is in fact a certain disjunction between shared declarations and lived culture, between accepted norms and criteria and subjective aspirations, between social objectives and personal projects.

This situation of disorientation (caused by so many innovations) has in fact caused a lack of credibility also in the case of some Catholic schools.

Times for research.

The epoch-making changes, therefore, through which we are living, mean that we must prepare cultural objectives. The Second Vatican Council has been an immense grace of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church at a time which is so complex but at the same time so fruitful.

The defects and inadequacies of scholastic activity before the Council have provoked among those

working in this field a justifiable concern to find new modes of apostolic presence which have, in fact, frequently led to the educative role of a renewed Catholic school being reduced or neglected.

There have been pastors who were completely insensitive in this connection, despite the explicit guidelines of the Magisterium; some Institutes of consecrated life have even gone as far as to abandon their scholastic works, as though were a residue from times past and now out of date.

But with the passage of time there is emerging with ever greater clarity an explicit criticism of such attitudes. We saw it in the 4th Conference of the Latin-American Bishops at Santo Domingo¹⁷ and also in declarations of other Episcopal Conferences: e.g. the secretary of the Italian Bishops Conference, Mgr Dionigi Tettamanzi, in a meeting with the Provincials of Italy (November 1992) frankly stated: "It is to the credit of Religious (or at least many of them!) that they have kept faith with the Catholic schools, even when ecclesial attention was lacking on a growing scale, and sometimes indeed there was a complete lack of understanding of this specific service to education".¹⁸ A full fifteen years earlier in the Letter of the Congregation for Catholic Education there was an exhortation to Religious to "not allow themselves to be diverted from this work of education by attractive invitations to undertake other, often seemingly more effective, apostolates".¹⁹

We know that the new evangelization is of its nature inseparable from human advancement and christian culture;²⁰ the two aspects, in fact, of *advancement* and *culture* constitute its most important dimension. To evangelize young people, who are in an evolving state, one must be able to act

¹⁷ cf. AGC 343, pp 16-18

¹⁸ CISM Jan-Feb 1993

¹⁹ *Scuola cattolica* 89

²⁰ cf. AGC 343, pp 6-10

from within their human growth and cultural maturing process. The Latin-American Bishops at Santo Domingo rightly considered Catholic education as a «methodological mediation for the evangelizing of culture».²¹

²¹ Doc. S. Domingo 271

Now although it is true that education is a much vaster concept than that of the school, the latter – if it wishes to truly fulfil its function – must be considered as one of the most influential institutions in the sector of integral education. Of its nature it is called to mature the individual by developing from within his evolutionary process the horizons of the sense of life, avoiding its devolvement into a reductive programme of simple scientific and technical instruction; it must be a place of humanization with a valid concept of human existence, with a scale of values and a global vision of man, of his history and of the world. Only an abstract rationalism can conceive of a so-called “neutral” or aseptic school, not at the service of a culture but of isolated information for the teaching of a vague agnostic relativism.

Now every culture refers back to a humanism, and in the present pluralism of society christian humanism – as we have already implied – presents a deep originality and a growing revival of its social validity in the search for the common good.

The Catholic school does not represent a kind of supplementary work; it is an original and valuable contribution to the life of civil society, and indeed a right of the people. The freedom which should characterize every democratic State demands that culture be determined by the citizens themselves according to their competence and convictions, and not by public authority whose function is to promote and protect but never to monopolize. The func-

tion of the State is subsidiary, and "if it claims for itself a scholastic monopoly, it goes beyond its rights and offends against justice".²²

²² Libertatis conscientia 94

Complexity of the scholastic institution at the present day.

The school belongs, as we have said, to the realm of culture and partakes of its autonomy, in line with the requirements of that "lay nature" which is inserted in the temporal order and in its consistency and purpose, as was wished by Christ himself as the Word and creator.

This institutional "lay nature" is proper to every school as such; it is not in contrast with the christian inspiration which characterizes the set-up of the Catholic school; the faith, in fact, imposes no limitations or conditions on the nature and mission of the temporal order and hence of the school, but even purifies and stimulates its purpose by defending it from attempts at ideological manipulation of various kinds. In so far as it is a school, it is directed to human advancement with the perspective of educating the individual for the good of civil society.

The demands stemming from the nature and cultural mission of the school are multiple at the present day, and are on the increase in every society.

And so the school has become involved in a moving complexity, manifested in the first place in the order of teaching in which scientific information calls for an ongoing restructuring of programmes and disciplines, with a new articulation and

corresponding new methods and new teaching instruments.

Then there are the requirements of the various components of the school-entity, the didactic and disciplinary responsibilities, the functioning of the various councils, the insertion of parents, relationships with auxiliary personnel, the maintenance of buildings and their adaptation to new legal norms, and – a particularly important point – their financial upkeep.

The complexity extends also to the effort to provide a true education, which requires convergence of vision to give form to an activity which is coordinated and capable of expressing a common cultural commitment.

One can list all these aspects very rapidly, but their pedagogical functioning implies patient programming, methodical realization, laborious striving for convergence and continual balanced reassessment. If this effort at coordination is lacking, the scholastic institution runs the risk of not being a true school of life; it appears rather to be an obligatory loading-up period for taking data on board and acquiring a certain functional competence; it breeds antipathy in the pupils, and leads them to use their “free time” elsewhere.

But it must be added that if there is an effort at effective organization the complexity can be valuable, because it brings about a convergence among the indispensable plurality of roles, the didactic requirements and the educative aspects in an harmonious integration; the latter does not suppress the natural tensions between different poles but directs their energies towards a more efficacious capacity for cultural growth.

The complexity inherent in present-day histori-

cal evolution leads us to reflect on the serious nature and urgency attaching to the new requirements in today's school; they imply the ability to acquire and develop an authentic professional approach, not only general but specialized too. In fact the management of the overall structure, the didactic level, the animation of the educative community, cultural planning, and dialogue between scientific and technical information and the significance of values, demand a basis of systematic knowledge and a pedagogical praxis that is continually updated.

The educational sciences have developed in many directions and now require specialized profiles. There is an urgent need to overcome the tendency to consider the aspect of teaching as something purely technical with a functional rather than an educative purpose. A deeper reflection on the educative aspect of teaching, on the other hand, reveals and recovers the values intrinsic to the process of learning, in so far as it educates the mind to ask proper questions, to elaborate data correctly, to apply and exercise the intelligence, and not only to elucidate the relationship between empirical facts but also to discover the sense of the totality.

But if teaching and learning as an exercise already contain educative values, the cultural heritage with which the school brings pupils into contact offers still further elements of growth. In this sense emphasis is given to the horizons which the various areas of knowledge open on human reality and matter, and the attitudes of mind and soul they create.

If the complexus of content and methods is properly imposed, it should mature in young people a humanistic mentality, which leads the indivi-

dual to rise above material things: i.e. an ethical and cultural dimension which makes a measurement against conscience and objective values something habitual; a solid culture which understands progress as a sharing of good things by all, and does not proclaim individual affirmation as the first thing to aim at; a culture of sense, open to the transcendent, able to accept questions regarding existence and seek appropriate responses.

All this becomes possible only when the first and fundamental reflection, from which come educational objectives, has been brought to bear precisely on the culture which the school communicates through all its elements and particularly its teaching. The central problem of the school is therefore its cultural set-up, which means its integral reflection on man, in view of his formation for peace, for solidarity, for human rights, for the ecology, and for the betterment of society and of the world.²³

²³ N.B. It would be well to read the document *The Catholic School*, nn. 26-37

The Catholic school renewed.

What characteristics should be given to a renewed school at the present day by the qualification of being "Catholic"?

We can say that in the decades that have followed the Council the Catholic school has been submitted to some fundamental rethinking. The new evangelization of culture indicates the tone of the christian humanism which should mark it out, and which the school translates into its own educative plan.

The plan demands that in the first place it

should be authentically a *school*; i.e. that it should concentrate on education through communication and the elaboration of knowledge; and this it does with a proper “lay” approach, without any concessions to secularist interpretations or ideological exploitation. It truly recognizes, respects and promotes the transmission of culture as a priceless service to civil society.

If it is not a true school, it cannot be genuinely *Catholic* either.

But if it is a true school, and often it is so to a greater extent than many others, it is well to point out at once that it has the right to social parity (or equality) with other schools, especially in what pertains to financial aspects: “The State cannot, without committing an injustice be content merely to tolerate so-called private schools. These provide a public service, and consequently have the right to receive financial help”.²⁴

²⁴ *Libertatis conscientia* 94

This is a genuinely democratic consideration which one must try to bring out everywhere in the social and political field. Catholics are citizens like all others; together they constitute the Church of Christ, which is neither an alternative nor a “part” separated from any civil society, but is rather in the latter as a leaven for advancement and liberation, to purify and strengthen its human values.

At the present time there are evidently various defects to be put right, some limitations to be overcome and backlogs dealt with, by accepting and bearing clear witness to the ecclesiological turn-about made by Vatican II. This Church, the servant of humanity, considers the Catholic school to be one of the means most appropriate and consistent with its action in the world as the «sacrament of salvation»; it is a means to be promoted with the

greatest zeal, an unparalleled service to be fostered "like the pupil of the eye".²⁵

It constitutes a most profitable environment for the new evangelization, precisely because it is closely linked with culture.

The Second Vatican Council has declared explicitly: «Catholic schools are no less zealous than other schools in the promotion of culture and in the human formation of young people. It is, however, the special function of the Catholic school to develop in the school community an atmosphere animated by a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel. It enables young people, while developing their own personality, to grow at the same time in that new life which has been given them in baptism. Finally it so orients the whole of human culture to the message of salvation that the knowledge which the pupils acquire of the world, of life and of men is illumined by faith".²⁶

The Catholic school, therefore, emphasizes in the scholastic setting the educative aspect in strict relationship with culture, especially at a critical time like the present, so as to overcome both the anthropocentric reductionism of the modern mentality and the subjectivism and relativism of weak thinking.

In its institutional complexity the Catholic school constantly seeks the organic arrangement of its various components and a basic communal dimension. The insistence of Vatican II on the ecclesiology of communion implies a decisive turnabout in the structuring of the school, which must become ever more transformed into an "educative community" and function as such. It aims at being the servant of civil society, precisely because it is a subject both communal and ecclesial.

²⁵ cf. JOHN PAUL II, 28
June 1984

²⁶ GE 8

As such it projects a significance and spreads a message even when inserted in a largely non-christian environment, and when its pupils are of another religion.

But in the context of Catholic tradition it is also called to become a kind of “basic christian community”, in which is set out a valid synthesis between Gospel and culture through the witness of an integration between faith and life, especially on the part of the educators as a whole.

This leads to the Catholic school being inserted into the living texture of the local Church. It is not therefore a kind of isolated castle, but a privileged place for sharing and collaborating in the wider field of a more organic pastoral work for the young: a “centre of communion and sharing”, as our GC23 put it. One might say that the Catholic school should help to bring civil society to greater democracy and the christian community to greater ecclesiality.

In this way the Catholic school perfects its nature as a true school by the christian inspiration of the individuals and the educative community as a whole; it is concerned with the cultural transmission of knowledge in the light of Christ’s revelation, and considers itself institutionally obliged to contribute to the good of both civil society and the Church in its role of service to men.

As a competent expression of the new evangelization the Catholic school tries to communicate evangelical principles from within cultural values, bringing together in harmony the truths flowing from the mystery of creation and from that of redemption: i.e. from Christ the author of the world in his “secular” aspect, and from him as the liberator and recapitulator of everything in the eschatological fullness of the Paschal mystery.

Another characteristic aspect of the Catholic school is that it involves the lay faithful in its various educative activities. The relaunching of the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church has by now acquired a particularly incisive effect in renewal. It is not easy to form an "educative community" that works well together and in harmony; the goal is to make of it an "ecclesial subject" through the continual creation and follow-up of new initiatives.

A fundamental problem in christian education is that of the authenticity of the behaviour of the educating subjects, both as individuals and especially as a community. The synthesis between culture and Gospel is mediated by that between faith and life in the educators, and by a climate of transcendence of faith in the vision of the world, history and behaviour in the neighbourhood. The choices of significance of existence, the plans of christian life, the evangelical animation of the educational environment keeping in mind the present cultural conditioning, the awareness of identity in the situation of pluralism, united with the ability to dialogue, are all aspects inherent in the educative community in the school, so that it may truly be and work as an ecclesial subject called to build up and live a climate of attractive pedagogical spirituality, which at one and the same time will be in living harmony with the roles of both the ecclesial community and the civil subject.

It belongs to the educators to fill with educational values the didactic project of the school, incorporating it in a wider and complementary ensemble of activities. The coordination of the various educational contributions is a task for a community seeking a global quality of christian

education in the whole of its activities.

From this reflection there emerges the need for an intense renewal of the community dimension, centred totally on the educative mission. The educators in the school must become a strong educating subject, able to interpret and transmit the cultural riches of every people through the enlightened vision of the christian faith, drawing on the source of paschal energy.

At the present day the Catholic school appears more as a task to be realized, than as an institution already built and awaiting testing; since it is not just an alternative to a state school, it appears as the perfecting of scholastic commitment as such in a promising but difficult moment in history.

In addition to this characteristic commitment to a christian style of communion, it must also undertake a profound rethinking of its own scholastic teaching programme.

Commitment to teaching in the new evangelization.

It will be worth our while to dwell a little on the delicate aspect of the teaching obligation in the Catholic school. To understand the perspective we must refer back to the consideration of culture as a concrete human fact, situated in time and space. Every culture, after the manner of man who creates it, is immersed in the development of history and is permeated constitutionally by facts, progress, deviations and recoveries which have an objective influence on his own nature.

If one does not take this "historical" aspect into account (i.e. what persons and events are inscribed in man's "nature"), one limits the search for

the objectivity which should help to read reality with integrity, betraying the purpose of science itself.

The so-called "pure nature" of man is something that has never existed; it has always been subjected to so many conditionings. Hence, for instance, the loss at the present day of the sense of sin, which continues to exert an influence on all human life (and therefore also on culture); the leaving aside of the Christ-event which puts human existence and its cultures in an eschatological situation (i.e. in a necessary state of reference to the one and only "New Man"); these are factors which deprive scientific research and scholastic teaching of the knowledge of indispensable objective facts required for integral education. Human reasoning in general, and also the specific line of reasoning of the individual disciplines, receive a light of greater objectivity from the eschatological transcendence of Christ.

It is not a matter of indifference for cultural reality and for scholastic education whether we take account or not of these aspects of existence in time. The historical dimension in its various contributions is objectively inherent in the whole of cultural reality, and has a strongly incisive effect.

The road to know and to follow is not that of man abstract and anonymous, but that of the concrete man in his place in history. On the other hand *culture* is not to be identified with nature, even though there is a fundamental relationship between the two. History has much to say about human reality.

Here history is to be understood, not so much as one scholastic discipline among others, but as a criterion of objectivity in the consideration of

all disciplines, so that they be not developed and taught as a kind of ingenuity belonging to an earthly paradise. It is not enough to make a deep examination of man's nature and project its values in utopian fashion; you have also to consider his path through the centuries and his personal itineraries. And the christian faith, though it regards reality from a standpoint which is not specifically scientific but, at a particular and higher level, is fully concerned with the history of man in an attentive and global form, with full and harmonious trust in human reasoning. And so from both a scientific standpoint and that of the faith, one must recognize that the objectivity of human reality, as also of the whole of creation, still has within it much yet to be discovered.

Now if we take up once again the topic of the manner of teaching in a Catholic school, we must say as a first observation that the teaching commitment refers not so much to the scientific field of search for progress in the individual sciences, as more especially to the educative commitment to bring about the maturing of the individual through the most complete knowledge possible of reality.

The teacher must therefore use his professional scientific approach and his christian faith in a pedagogical perspective, harmonizing reason and faith within the discipline concerned. This is where one already takes a characteristic step forward in the evangelization of culture.

It is the task and art of the educator who teaches, to think from an integrally educative standpoint about the content of what he is teaching, so as to put it at the service of the growth of the person. He is not there just to provide instruction in knowledge but to foster education through his own particular discipline.

And so it is that, especially in the case of the humanistic disciplines (philosophy, literature, history, psychology, sociology, etc.), the qualification "scholastic" is not aseptic and disjoined from the knowledge of the faith, it does not mean only the place and level of transmission of the discipline concerned, but implies a specific dimension different from the secularist teaching that is falsely considered neutral; it is an original quality that is not in contrast with the serious approach and scientific competence which it evidently assumes, but favours an integral objectivity which is to be passed on.

From this point of view also one can see why the Catholic school does not have the simple function of supplying a lack, but has specific traits which characterize it and compel it at the present day to undertake demanding tasks required by the new evangelization, in the conviction of having points of view that are indispensably needed for cultural maturing.

Here we ought to add the capital importance attaching to the teaching of religion in the Catholic school; this is a vital theme that must be harmonized with the other disciplines, and fostered with particular care and competence.²⁷

After these remarks on the renewed Catholic school, we must recognize that while we go ahead in reflections of this kind, there arises spontaneously in us a critical judgement on the concrete state of "Catholicity" in our present schools. Such a judgement extends to the evangelical witness given by the educative community, the specifically christian background against which must be rethought the transmission of the individual disciplines, with their perspectives of sense and openness to the

²⁷ cf. Document of Cong. for Cath. Ed.: *The religious dimension of education in the school*, 1988

transcendent through appropriate methods and arrangements, and also to initiatives in the area of ecclesial communion which must complete the overall physiognomy.

And the conclusion is: Roll up your sleeves!

The salesian style.

It is within this global model of the Catholic school, of which we have given a concise description, that we now come to deal with the salesian features of our own presence in schools. In the first place the GC23 tells us that the community of the confreres is called upon to make itself an animating nucleus, capable of involving the more knowledgeable collaborators in its task and of orienting the whole of the educative community towards the chosen objectives. It is a matter of promoting a growth in communion, which implies a new mentality with a way of doing things that is solidly accepted by all. As well as this community dimension we must remember, in particular, the "oratorian criterion"²⁸ which, as we have seen, is also the historical root of the existence of our schools, with their particular type of pupil, their location in poor areas, a particular family spirit, a clear concern for a maturing of faith, with educative creativity and initiatives that are not limited to school hours.

As regards nature, purpose, methods and results expected from salesian animation, we may appropriately emphasize that in the scholastic environment our work of animation aims at maintaining the clear identity and specific objectives of the school, through the plan to bring together the

²⁸ cf. C 40

educative community, made up of collaborators, parents, pupils and supporters, and to express a characteristic style of education.

All this brings to the fore the formative task as the heart of animation. It is a matter of making the educative community become an authentic ecclesial subject, within which all become involved in processes of growth; in this way is realized the motherly educational function of the Church and profit is drawn from all its patrimony of pedagogy and grace.

Formation develops in four dimensions:

- the *cultural* dimension, which helps to put a correct value on the events and currents of thought which have greater influence on men at the present day;
- the *professional* dimension, which strengthens the ability to face up together to specific problems of young people in the school and elsewhere;
- the *christian* dimension, which leads to a greater awareness of the significance and demands of being believers, and an ever deeper and more complete knowledge of the mystery of the new Man and an authentic experience of faith;
- the *salesian* dimension, which continually puts forward and deepens the theoretical and practical understanding of the frame of reference of the preventive system.

Animation constitutes the real qualitative leap in the present scholastic renewal. It shifts the emphasis to the service that our apostolic consecration can provide. From it is expected not only work of a kind appropriate to the temporal order but also and more especially a force of calling and aggregation in faith; the school is expected to be a specifically

christian sign and reminder. In this sense the consecrated personnel are called not only to be more faithful administrators or teachers with a proper cultural vision, but to translate their radical option for Christ into an educative presence and impact.

Moreover animation implies a shift of accent in the management of our works. In them the religious community, even though reduced in number, must concentrate on fundamental aspects, ensuring above all that in the orientation of the work its educative and christian quality is preserved.

In this light the importance of the salesian figure of the *Rector* appears more clearly. We know that according to the Constitutions²⁹ he is not only the guide of the religious community, but also the first in order of responsibility for its mission, i.e. the one who gives direction to the educative and pastoral commitments of the confreres and educative community, the one who in the last analysis is in charge of its organization and functioning.

In the frequent discussions which to some extent have been taking place everywhere, the possibility has been raised of separating the religious direction of the community from the pastoral and educative direction of the work, but each time the discussion has ended by coming back to the traditional position. The GC21 preferred to indicate priorities among the duties assigned to the Rector³⁰ and the acquiring of new abilities, rather than sanction a division between religious, educational and pastoral responsibilities – and this for a fundamental reason: our salesian religious experience points to the achievement of the mission as its inspiration and integration. In this our consecrated life has its effect in a pedagogical form and, vice versa, our pedagogical experience enriches our spirituality: it

²⁹ cf. C 176

³⁰ cf. GC21 52-53

is the dynamics of our “grace of unity”. This principle and its relative applications were highlighted by recent General Chapters and therefore form the criteria for giving organic unity to the community and to its scholastic work.

In recent times, however, a local situation has arisen and is growing, in which local governments consider pedagogical and organizational matters to be primarily the responsibility of the school itself. To this is added the complexity of the components to which we have referred already, with the result that the Rector cannot take part in and follow up some of the more specifically scholastic aspects. Sometimes his professional qualifications do not meet the present scholastic demands. And so, intentionally or not, the figure of the headmaster has been taking over the role of the final point of reference, not only as regards the organizational and didactic sectors, but also with respect to the objectives, the guidance of the educative community, the organizational structure and balancing of roles, and relationships with the various component bodies. This is a set-up that must be corrected by constant dialogue in the community.

In any case the practical consequence has been that sometimes preference has been given to the appointment as Rector of a confrere who could animate the religious community without bearing the principle responsibility for the scholastic work. If the circumstances do not admit of other solutions, or if this solution be considered best in a particular case, it can be tried out. But if by such an exception the intention were to be to change the normal salesian practice, the method should be submitted to serious discernment.

It is the Rector in fact who makes evident the

pastoral purpose of the salesian school, on account of which all the technical functions are directed towards education and the latter is directed towards growth and maturing in faith. He also renders visible the family structure of the community, in which the ultimate reference is to the one who expresses fatherliness and affection. In this sense the GC23 urges him to cultivate a personal relationship with the pupils, which will enable him to deal with the problems of life they feel most intensely and in this way promote vocational commitment.

What we have said about the Rector, however, and about the community dimension in general, requires that the various roles and relative influences be coordinated, leaving to each one the necessary autonomy within a space for dialogue to assure union and convergence. Such space should be found in the salesian community which, specifically under the guidance of the Rector,³¹ assumes responsibility for the mission and discerns situations and challenges so that it may remain faithful to its objectives and particular spirit.

Each of the roles has its own particular educative incidence, which becomes positive under two conditions: that it be thought of as complementary with other roles, and that in the exercise of its functions it draws inspiration from the educative purpose and pastoral plan. No one can exempt himself from these conditions. They are above any role and belong to our mission. Hence any oppositions or separation, whether in theory or practice, between administrative, educative or pastoral sectors, are dangerous and must be corrected. Concern for education to the faith guides and determines the programming, structure, organization and exercise of functions, and all the interventions of any indivi-

³¹ cf. C 44

dual: "We are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity".³²

³² C 34

Masters of youth spirituality.

In conclusion I would like to recall what the Holy Father wrote in the letter *Iuvenum patris*: "In the Church and in the world the integral educative vision that we see incarnated in John Bosco is a realistic pedagogy of holiness. We need to get back to the true concept of "holiness" as a component of the life of every believer. The originality and boldness of the plan for a "youthful holiness" is intrinsic to the educational art of this great Saint, who can be rightly called the "master of youth spirituality". His secret lay in the fact that he did not disappoint the deep aspirations of the young (the need for life, love, expansiveness, joy, freedom, future prospects) but at the same time led them gradually and realistically to discover for themselves that only in the 'life of grace', i.e. in friendship with Christ, does one fully attain the most authentic ideals".³³

³³ IP 16

Yes, dear confreres, the new evangelization demands for everyone a climate of "new enthusiasm", or in other words a life of faith translated into a spirituality to transmit and bear witness to.

The GC23 dealt at length³⁴ with the theme of our salesian spirituality which, precisely because it is a youth spirituality, becomes an *educative spirituality*: "To promote the growth of the young to the fullness of life after the measure of Christ the perfect man, is the goal of salesian work".³⁵

³⁴ GC23 158-180

³⁵ GC23 160

Certainly among the many youngsters in our

schools there is a great variety in the level of their religious experience, but the atmosphere of the school should be built on the true spirituality of the salesian animating nucleus and that of the educative community. The witness of faith of the educators influences the environment and tends to bring out the more mature youngsters, who then become the joyful daily leaven for a growth in youth spirituality among their companions.

Let us ask Mary Help of Christians to obtain for us an ever more lively fidelity to Don Bosco, so as to assimilate our work in schools and special "basic christian communities"; in them the eschatological project-man of Christ the Lord will be newer and more definitive.

May the coming Easter celebrations bring us the joy of meeting with the greatest "new event" in history, the risen Christ, to whom we offer our determination to commit ourselves to the renewal of the salesian school.

May Don Bosco intercede for us!

With cordial greetings and fraternal good wishes.

Affectionately in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò