

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome

March 1, 1979

My dear Confreres,

I returned yesterday from a long journey which enabled me to provide a service of animation to the Salesian Family of the Antilles, Mexico, Central America and Panama, and the two provinces of France.

The contact I was able to make at different stages of the journey with so many groups of Salesians brought home to me once more the vitality of our vocation and the sincerity of the love which is shown for our holy Founder.

Without any doubt the central event of my six-week journey was the Bishops' Conference at Puebla. It was a real salvific event for the future of Latin America and an item of prophetic witness for the whole Church and for the world.

The feast of our Founder, celebrated during the first days of the great assembly, served also to demonstrate the appreciation and gratitude of the Bishops for our vocation and effective presence in that continent, and to emphasize the topicality and balanced dynamism of our mission among the young and the working classes.

Hardly a day passed at Puebla without it being impressed on me afresh how fully the main theme of our General Chapter, "Salesians Evangelizers of the Young", is in complete harmony with the vast and concrete question studied by the Bishops, which was centered on "the present and future evangelization of Latin America."

I was especially struck by the pastoral journey made by the Holy Father to and in Mexico and by his masterly indications which were extraordinarily well received because of their practical nature and the doctrinal clarity which enabled them to permeate all the work of the assembly.

I would like to set down and pass on to you in a fraternal spirit some of my reflections on this ecclesial event. I think they may prove useful for our meditation because everywhere, even outside Latin America, they can be a source of enlightenment and direction for our salesian commitment.

I will chose just four of them.

1. Puebla provides a strong proclamation of the original nature of the Church's mission, and in particular of the priestly and religious vocation.

This was the first great point that come to my mind. What was the fundamental characteristic, the particular point of view of this meeting? What particular message did the Pope and the Bishops have to offer? Those who form public opinion — as we saw very well at the last two Conclaves — start from far different motives and interests. They do not seem to be able to grasp the proper function of Christ in history; certainly they usually seem far from being in harmony with his Spirit.

The many and valid fields of human specialization and the current ideologies do not lead to a perception of either the existence or the nature of an indispensable saving activity in history. This is an exclusive function of Christ and his Church, which demands a special place for pastoral activity. To be “pastors” implies an originality and a specific level of intervention in the human set-up which is quite distinct from economic, political and cultural obligations.

Rightly the Holy Father said at Puebla: “It is a great consolation for the universal Father to note that you come together

here not as a symposium of experts, not as a parliament of politicians, not as a congress of scientists or technologists, however important such assemblies may be, but as a fraternal encounter of Pastors of the Church.”

And earlier, in an address to priests and religious, he had declared: “This lofty and demanding service cannot be realized without a deep conviction about your identity as priests of Christ, depositaries and administrators of God’s mysteries, instruments of salvation for men, witnesses to a kingdom which has its beginning in this world but finds its fulfillment in the next. Before these certainties of faith, why do you doubt about your identity? Why are you hesitant about the value of your life? Why do you hold back on the road on which you have set out?”

From this, dear confreres, follows the first reflection I offer you, and it is one which is very topical for us today: to be aware of the original nature of our vocation in history and to cultivate its identity is our first obligation if we want to see a rebirth of an efficacious pastoral commitment.

The vocation of Christ, of the Priest, of the Religious, is indispensable for man’s liberation and integral promotion; it is a great and urgent calling; a generous and splendid vocation; a vocation for the future, one of growth. Christ is not a technician, nor is he a scientist or a politician, but he is the most necessary man in all history, because he is man’s one and only savior.

To be engaged in pastoral work for the young means to insert oneself into this novel activity of Christ and of the Church. The young are in urgent need of it.

2. Puebla clarifies the dignity of man in the light of the Gospel, and courageously makes its own the present turning point in the field of anthropology.

The Pope and the Bishops have spoken with biblical enthusiasm of the dignity of man and of the greatness of his person.

The new episcopal document criticizes the two strongest and mutually opposed secularistic movements which permeate today's society, Capitalism and Marxism, based on an anthropocentric philosophy which excludes God and denies any radical cultural or social influence to religion.

No one knows better or gives deeper understanding to the dignity of man than Jesus Christ, God and man.

And so the Latin-American Bishops tell us that there exists an objective and genuine Christian anthropology, centered on man, "the image of God", which is proposed in faith and illumined by the teaching of the Church and especially her "Social Teaching". The rich doctrinal patrimony of this teaching must become known to believers and form ever more explicitly a part of the daily message of evangelization.

The Pope and the Bishops of Puebla insisted on the urgent need for a new in-depth study of the Church's Social Teaching, in which "the Church expresses that which she possesses as her very own: a global vision of man and of humanity" (PP No. 13). This teaching admits of consultation with and enrichment by the ideologies in respect of the positive part of their content, but in turn makes a critical assessment of them and of their relative importance. Neither the Gospel, nor the doctrine and Social Teaching which stem from it, are ideologies. On the contrary, for the latter they represent a powerful source which questions their limits and challenges their ambiguity. The ever fresh Gospel message must be continually clarified and defended in the face of attempts to convert it to an ideology" (Puebla, Nos. 399-400).

And there you have a second conclusion of particular value for us: to give objective importance to the Social Teaching of the Church, to study it more deeply and pass it on to others, so as to be in line with the Church at the present day and evangelically efficient in our mission for the young.

3. Puebla makes a characteristic appeal to the Continent to involve local culture in the plan of pastoral activity.

This important decision stems from the authoritative indication given in the Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in which the late Pope Paul VI called for the evangelization of man's culture and cultures (EN No. 20). To this end the Puebla document presents a renewed and vitally historical concept of culture in the precise sense given to the term in *Gaudium et Spes*. And the development of the whole Chapter on Evangelization is centered on culture; it will be of help in pastoral work in overcoming the dramatic separation between Gospel and culture. The text underlines the intimate bond that exists between Latin-American culture and the religious ideas of the common people, and in general between culture and religion.

It is interesting to note that more recently, even though at a different level, the Holy Father insisted on this intimate linkage. The Rector of the Catholic Faculties at Lyons reminded me of it a few days ago. Speaking to those in charge of the Catholic Universities of Europe the Pope insisted on the serious obligation of Pastors "to evangelize fully and in a lasting manner the vast world of culture", reminding them that the Church has always given special importance to the connection between intelligence and pastoral activity, 'pastorale dell'intelligenza'.

In this field, dear confreres, there is a changed emphasis and new presence for our mission to the young and the working classes which recalls to our minds the historical beginnings of that mission. One of Don Bosco's fundamental ideas was that of penetrating culture with religious values so as to build up a new society. Fr. Ricceri in his letter on the Salesians' "political responsibility" had already pointed out to us this important aspect, saying that: "Our vocation as Salesians entails a religio-cultural mission especially among poor youth and the working-class people, precisely in view of the new society... In an age of transition like ours, we should know how to rethink our vocation without

betraying it. The building of a new society certainly needs politics; but to be genuinely democratic politics needs culture; and if culture does not wish to betray man, it needs religion” (ASC No. 284, Oct.-Dec., 1976, p. 19). There is an urgent need therefore on our part for a new presence in the cultural area of education to which the GC 21 has called our attention. In fact our mission is realized is an apostolic commitment to an active synthesis between the Gospel and human promotion, as a result of which “we evangelize by educating and educate by evangelizing.”

And in addition Puebla gives unusual emphasis to the fact that in the cultural pluralism of Latin America, the working class appear as deeply impregnated with a Christian religious feeling and with Catholic wisdom and teaching. For this reason it insists on a kind of evangelization which makes piety and the religion of the common people one of the most concrete aims of pastoral renewal.

Here again we can see a practical indication of one of the characteristic dimensions of our task as renewed evangelizers, that is, in its sacramental, Marian and devotional aspects.

4. Finally, Puebla makes a clear option for the young.

This is one of the great ecclesial preferences in favor of the Latin-American continent. It is an explicit choice of pastoral renewal on account of which the Church means to show a particular trust in young people (Cf. EN No. 72), considering them the source of future energy, educating them to the needs and responsibility of “sharing” and “communion”, in a spiritual climate of hope and joy. They must themselves become protagonists in the evangelization of youth.

“Sharing and communion” form the live wire, theologically profound and in harmony with the signs of the times, carrying the indications and directives of Puebla; their application to the

field of youth must characterize renewal in pastoral action in this sector.

And it is particularly gratifying to add that the other Puebla option, for the poor—even though it be preferential and not exclusive—must necessarily have repercussions on the kind of youth to which preference should be given; priority will be accorded to our own characteristic sector, the youth of the working classes and those most in need. This urgency of concentrating pastoral work on the poor had already been proclaimed at Medellín, but was powerfully renewed by the Pope in Mexico and the Bishops at Puebla “because the vast majority of our brothers continue to live in poverty and even misery which is worse now than ever” (Puebla No. 917).

In other words, choice of the poor—with its implied task of overcoming injustice—lived and developed according to Gospel principles, constitutes a strategic position from which to find an alternative society to the two present materialism which brandish their respective historically-based plans as the only two horns of an insoluble dilemma.

It would take too long, dear confreres, to set out here all the rich contents and daring of this choice of the poor made by the Bishops at Puebla. A careful reading of the documents with this in mind will help us to a more realistic application of our GC 21; it will strengthen our faith in the great Gospel intuitions of Don Bosco, and it will throw light on the steps we must take to bring about a genuine conversion in our pastoral action.

May the Lord help us first to reflect and then to take action.

And I would like to add a final remark before concluding.

The Puebla assembly began its work on Saturday, January 27, in the great Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guagalupe; it proceeded with its work under the explicit and uninterrupted invocation and protection of Mary, and it ended with the official depositing of the Bishops' document at the feet of the statue of the Patroness of Latin America by the President, Cardinal Sebastian Baggio, at

Puebla, and by the Presidents of the individual national episcopal conferences in the principal Marian shrine of their own country.

Mary is the Mother of the Church, who will provide help in the significant time ahead. Pope John Paul II felt this very keenly as he delivered his prayer-homily on the opening day: "O Mother, *help us* to be faithful stewards of the great mysteries of God. *Help us* to teach the truth proclaimed by your Son and to spread love, which is the chief commandment and the first fruit of the Holy Spirit. *Help us* to strengthen our brethren in faith, *Help us* to awaken hope in eternal life. *Help us* to guard the great treasures stored in the souls of the People of God entrusted to us."

You can see, dear confreres, how the Pope shows that Mary, Mother of the Church, is our powerful Helper. Let us too invoke her constantly for the renewal of our pastoral work for the young and of our educative plan of goodness and kindness.

May we all be filled with understanding and trust.

Affectionately,
Fr. EGIDIO VIGANÒ

P.S. - I warmly recommend this daily prayer for vocations. It is indispensable for our renewal. When Blessed Michael Rua was on his death bed, Fr. Cerruti wrote this short prayer which has been said in the Congregation. Fr. Rua had it read to him, then he kissed it. He had the prayer placed under his pillow.

The prayer is the following:

"Cor Jesu sacratissimum, ut bonos ac dignos operarios Piae Salesianorum Societati mittere et in ea conservare digneris: Te rogamus, audi nos."

Let us pray much and with confidence for vocations.