

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

"Strengthen your brothers" (Luke XXII 32)

Rome, 8 December 1979

My dear confreres,

The feast of the Immaculate Conception is always a reminder to us of our Salesian origins and an occasion of fresh hope for the future. This year I spent the 8th of December with our boys at Arese, and I found it a deeply moving and disquieting experience.

Surrounded by poor boys at Arese (as in India, Latin America, Africa, China — anywhere) one is overwhelmed by a veritable host of thoughts: how beneficial our vocation is; how important it is to be totally Salesian, to increase our sincerity, our courage, our inventiveness — and our numbers too (yes, indeed, the need for far greater numbers is really urgent).

1. A disquieting challenge

Our vocation has its origins in the travail of our Mother Mary and our Mother the Church — both distressed and concerned for the salvation of the ever-growing numbers of youngsters in need. Like Mary, the Church has the strong love of a mother, fearless, untiring, constant; a love that resists rebuffs, that has its own special kindness, understanding, patience, generosity, intimacy; a love that only a mother knows.

The motherly love the Church and Mary have for us is a love so real and palpitating that it touches the very fibre

of our being, especially as we are Salesians and so close to Mary. The Holy Father, in his letter to priests, reminds them that they have “another fatherhood and, as it were, even another motherhood, recalling the Apostle’s words about the children whom he begets in suffering (*I Cor IV, 15; Gal IV, 19*)” (Letter to all priests, 8).

To consider the vastly increasing numbers of our charges in the various continents, the responsibility of Holy Mother Church, and our own specific mission within that Church, is indeed a startling and disturbing thought. We used to number 22,000; we are now 17,000. What has happened?

We certainly live in a confused world: divorce, birth-control and abortion are now acceptable; child-bearing and motherhood are rejected. Fortunately the Church is of God and bonded to the Paschal mystery; though enfleshed, she enriches every culture at all times without ever becoming entrained in transient modes.

Our vocation gives us a share in the Church’s motherhood: so we have to examine this unprecedented attack on fertility and fidelity.

Why do we lose so many Salesians after their perpetual profession? Why are so many priests laicized? Why do so many Religious have psychological problems and faith crises? Why are vocations so few, especially in many Western countries? How can courage and perseverance be increased? Is it a question of being influenced by harmful and worldly ideas both now and in the past?

This indeed proposes a disquieting challenge to our Religious fidelity.

2. “Strengthen your brothers”

Last November there was a meeting of the Union of Superiors General at Villa Cavalletti to tackle this problem. Papers were presented by specialists, experiences and ideas were

pooled, and there was an optimistic hope of good helpful results. The study centred on the responsibility of Superiors, but each confrere must apply the findings to his own sense of responsibility: for each one of us without exception has the duty to help and encourage his brothers (*Luke XXII, 32*).

We are weak and inconstant, but God is strong — indeed he alone is the source of our courage, our safety and our strength (*Rom XVI, 25*); he alone will keep us firm to the end (*I Cor I, 8*); it is he who has set us on the solid foundation that is Christ (*II Cor I, 21*); he is faithful and will save us from evil (*II Tb III, 3*); he is strong forever (*I Pet V, 10*). Still, we need to remember that God acts through us; his strengthening presence and active grace come to us through his chosen ones. This is seen in the mission of Peter and the Apostles, the mission of those in charge of communities, and indeed the mission of every man towards his neighbour. It is through man himself that God channels his empowering help to man.

Paul told the Thessalonians that he had sent Timothy to them to strengthen and encourage them in the faith so that none would fear the problems to be faced (*I Thes III.2*).

It is plain then that God has bountifully gifted each of us with the ability to strengthen and reassure others in their Baptismal and Religious vocation. With this gift comes commitment and discernment; we shall need to show initiative, and there will be times of tribulation. But there will also be the deep joyousness of a love that bears fruit. Peter writes in his first letter, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder... Tend the flock of God that is your charge... willingly... eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory" (*I Pet V, 1-4*).

With this letter I wish to make everyone more efficaciously aware that he has a personal responsibility to strengthen his brothers and that there is a lively satisfaction that such action brings. This goes for Provincials, Rectors, confessors, those in

charge of formation, and indeed every single confrere. To encourage our brother is to share a little in Christ's solid foundation, to work with Peter the Rock, to experience the fruitful maternity of Mary and the Church, and to share with Don Bosco the certainty of our God-given vocation.

The age we live in demands that we adapt our methods to meet its special problems. The crisis in fidelity and personnel makes it essential that we encourage one another; and we shall need to tap new sources of energy for this. Some thought and resolution will be needed.

3. Appraising the crisis

The great number of Salesians who have left the Congregation in the last few years is a part of the overall picture of the Western Church, with its crises, Religious and sacerdotal defections and distressing drop in vocations.

A study has been made of the reason given by Superiors and laicized members for such a step; interviews have been conducted with those still in a state of anxious doubt and re-assessment; the attitudes of those who are resigned or indifferent have been pondered; observations of the unbalanced reactions of inert conservatives or superficial progressives have been weighed; and a close examination has been made especially of the great majority who have continued to persevere in their commitment and who make the effort to cope with their many problems. All this has led to two levels of interpreting the crisis: the *personal level* of each individual and his own circumstances (to be taken case by case), and the *cultural, social and ecclesial level*, which needs an overall vision, with help from Superiors and wise, competent and gifted men.

In practice these two aspects overlap, but to treat them separately will help towards a more understanding appraisal of the crisis.

THE PERSONAL LEVEL

Here we are chiefly interested in those who have abandoned their vocation. Their crises and the extreme decisions they have taken should help us understand others and their problems. It is well known that the leavers have been extremely numerous, and in an overall view a number of practical reasons stand out: human weakness, eccentric ideologies, professing unsuitable candidates, poor formation, institutional problems, out-of-date customs, and casuistic approaches to the vows and the Holy Rule.

There are a few further ideas I should like to add; and in this I acknowledge the help of Father Dho (Councillor for Formation) who has made certain analyses of the dispensation requests of the last ten years.

Reasons for these dispensations are gathered from two sources: the interested subject, and superiors and witnesses; each supplements the other. The subject presents his case: his disposition of mind and practical circumstances; the witness describes the subject's behaviour as it appears to him or other members of the community.

Special attention must be paid to the profound significance of the free act of the will involved in making the final profession, or in asking for a dispensation. It is a matter of a choice made in freedom, an overall option affecting one's whole life, penetrating to the innermost consciousness of a person, and yet cloaked in such a way as to be hidden not only to outside observers but even to the subject himself. Hence it is that we may know the motives for leaving without knowing the cause for leaving. To quote Father Dho, "Motives and causes are not exactly the same thing. Discussion of *causes* covers a much wider field and includes innumerable situations of various kind both objective and subjective. On the other hand, *motives* are limited to those elements which here and now lead to a decision, and are seen by the subject as a 'reason for such a decision'".

Let us begin with the motives presented (both subject's and witnesses').

As far as mere numbers go (and here more research is needed so as to avoid superficial and erroneous judgements) most problems are in the area of chastity, the emotions and sexuality. Lower down the list, in decreasing numbers, come problems of personality and character and psychological upsets; next, general immaturity, abandonment of prayer, lack of interest in the spiritual life, loss of the significance of one's vocation, ideological fixations, unadaptability to life in common, loss of contact with Superiors, discord and the spirit of contestation; and lastly (this is important) even the finding that no vocation exists. Apart from these motives there are also concrete cases that have reached the point of being quite irreversible.

The frequency of the motives of chastity, emotions and sexuality should not be judged as a "cause" of the present crisis. It is not to be seen in isolation: its significance is closely interwoven with the other motives and must be found in the overall context of a particular individual living in a host of individual circumstances and in a particular culture and spiritual ambience.

It would seem more objective and exact to treat the various motives given as one whole and thus achieve a clearer picture of this desertion-crisis. An overall appraisal could be summarised by describing a fairly complex state of mind. The case generally presents itself something like this: a state of mind unhappy and frustrated with the priestly and religious vocation, and rejecting norms, guidelines, directives and structures. All this is closely concerned with the three following problems:

- *a weakening of the sense of the supernatural* and a general spiritual debility;
- the acceptance of *ideologies* that tend to justify defection;
- *emotional needs that are immature and compulsive*, accompanied by more or less frequent falls in the matter of chastity.

In assessing the disposition of an individual, one would need to take into account his life-history right from childhood: family conditions, social environment, education, studies, religious formation, adjustment to community life, etc. Then consideration would need to be given to the vast cultural upheaval about us; it too has its own history of development more or less accelerated and variously characterised by each individual country. Finally there is the vigorous renewal in the Church initiated by Vatican II, with its difficult changes and its pulsating energy for the apostolate. These too vary in their practical manifestations according to the different regions in which they are found.

An analysis of these motives brings to the fore two very distinct categories of defection: firstly, the *lack of a genuine religious vocation in the first place* (and this could be latent for years and surface violently in circumstances that vary for each individual); and secondly, a *progressive deterioration of the vocation and the final collapse in perseverance*.

When we consider these two groups of leavers we must all feel we have much to answer for. Their motivations involve us too, and in the following ways: too facile admittance to vows; superficial discernment of vocations; overlooking the dangers of certain unorthodox ideologies; acceptance of comfortable living; lack of spiritual and apostolic animation; community improprieties or injustices; discord and lack of understanding; overtaxing or unsuitable work; suspicious attitudes, back-biting and calumnies; exploitation of confreres' talents; repression of initiative; and loneliness and frustration resulting from not finding in the community that genuine communion and understanding that charity demands.

Indeed considerable responsibility must be laid at the door not only of those who leave but also of those who remain. We are speaking, of course, objectively: nevertheless no per se justification from these problems may be assumed. Still, we must bear in mind that personal freedom is cloaked in a mantle of

mystery; it defies total analysis; and so we certainly have no call to condemn.

Yet even though our freedom is influenced by circumstances, it cannot be thought that personal crises are beyond the ambit of free will; there is no question of determinism. Every vocation is a two-way affair, enmeshed in personal relationships with God. It implies an individual rapport with him that is free and sincere; and it is through the daily events and vicissitudes of life and the mediation of others that we achieve this rapport. One thing we can be absolutely sure of, however: God is always faithful to the call he has given us, and his loving mercy is always at hand to sustain our waning efforts. Our responsibility is not negated by the circumstances in which we live, even though these circumstances will certainly be a frame of reference in the assessment of each individual's freedom.

With this distinction behind us, it is now up to us all to accept our personal responsibility not only for the part we may have played in quite a few of the complex and objective motivations, but above all to take up the challenge of this crisis and attack it with wisdom, perseverance and optimism.

THE CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND ECCLESIAL LEVEL

Modern man is developing in an ambience of vast changes in culture, in society, in the Church; and this is in accord with the signs of the times that surfaced in this century and ran wild particularly after World War II.

Humanity is going through an unprecedented era of enormous change: greater social activity, deeper awareness of the dignity of man, rejection of myths and superstitions, greater efforts for social justice, amazing growth in the sciences and technology. These phenomena have set us on the road to achieve a new vision of the overall development of man.

Social and political conditions have undergone rapid changes in their aims to build *a new society*. Into these plans has gone

a lot of thinking taken from ideologies that are often non-Christian and foreign to the spirit of the Gospel. The net result is tension, strife and cultural pluralism: aberrations naturally follow.

The sum total of these phenomena bespeaks a new era of *human development*; their signs show we are on the brink of a new chapter in history. "Gaudium et Spes" tells us "ours is a new age of history with critical and swift upheavals spreading gradually to all corners of the earth. They are the products of man's intelligence and creative activity, but they recoil on him, upon his judgements and his desires, both individual and collective, upon his ways of thinking and acting in regard to people and things. We are entitled then to speak of a real cultural and social transformation whose repercussions are felt too on the religious level. A transformation of this kind brings with it the serious problems associated with any crisis of growth" (GS 4).

Then there is the profound renewal in the Church set in motion by Vatican II. Its impact is seen in the deepening mystery of the Church in its communion and mission, the prime importance given to the Scriptures, the complementing service of ministers and charisms, the revival of the Local Church (with its resultant need for decentralisation and pluriformity), the apostolate of the laity, ecumenism, dialogue with non-Christian religions, religious freedom, the new aspect of the priest's ministry as "pastor" and "guide" in the community, collegiality of Orders, the Church's profound understanding of man as she assumes her new presence in the world, her sacramental nature and the rediscovery of religious consecration in the ecclesial sense. This vast movement has touched the nerve of Christian life — with a loss of some tranquillity, true, and even causing many to be deeply upset with so many subjective interpretations, variant opinions (especially in reference to what used to be regarded as solid and sacrosanct), and abuses and deviations.

Such profound changes have brought about uncertainties resulting in feelings of insecurity about certain matters of Faith; doubts, vagueness, equivocations, aberrations; and even a crisis

of identity within the Church herself — and generally speaking in the Religious life too: right down to every single Institute.

The *new presence* of the Church in the world has provoked a crisis in spirituality and ways of carrying out the apostolate: the relation between human development and Gospel salvation has been challenged and various interpretations given to the ascetical vision of “fleeing from the world” and to Christian morality.

The *laicizing process* has thrown into crisis the values of every consecration; the growth in democratic thinking has questioned authority; and the general accelerated pace of history has turned structures and institutions topsy turvy.

So it is that many Religious agonise as to whether there will be a different kind of future for the Religious life, or indeed whether there will be any future at all. The very principles of Religious life are under discussion: the real worth of perpetual profession, the essence of each vow, the Founder’s Gospel vision, the importance of community life and the methods of formation.

When speaking of crises and defections, this enormous complex of values, problems and difficulties has a far greater influence on individual confreres than can be explained simply by the personal motives adduced.

Nevertheless the Council, despite the increasing contradictions and distortions rampant in the world (GS 8), does not speak of human catastrophe but rather of the opening up of a “new chapter in history” (GS 4), and of the positive commitment of the Church and all Christians to be ever more generous in helping men in today’s world to build a new society and a new era. Vatican II is clearly urging us to view the overall situation in a positive way, in spite of the manifold woes, uncertainties, insecurities, deviations and negative influences that militate so heavily against Religious and priestly vocations.

So let us lift up our eyes in hope, well aware of the challenge to the stability and future prospects of Religious life in this modern world.

4. Our approach to a critical appraisal

The cultural transformation which we are witnessing prompts us to rethink and make a new start. It is not difficult to see in it the riches inherent in the mystery of history which enshrines the living presence of Christ its Lord. Our overall reading of its dramatic events could quite easily become a meditation on the hidden designs of God. In its ups and downs we can discern the Lord passing by and awaking us, correcting us, urging us on, helping us to grow, inciting us to persevere and make progress.

No Religious Institute at the present day can remain faithful in masterly inactivity; nor can it do so in an activity that is aimless and which becomes an end in itself and which impugns or disregards the vital force of the original charism. As he passes by, the Lord calls us to a “balanced activity” which combines fidelity with progress at a rate appropriate to the requirements of the existing situation. In this way the obligation to make proper and necessary changes becomes a vital part of authentic religious commitment.

But to be able to be aware of and interpret the Lord’s passing, there is need of prayer, objective analysis, a lively relationship with the beginnings, attention to the signs of the times and to the condition of those to whose good the Institute is directed (which exerts a profound influence on the way its mission develops), a continual and enlightened reference to Vatican II, to the guidance of the Church, to the directives of the recent General Chapters, and to the practical stimulation of those who bear the chief responsibilities in the Congregation.

It is important to be able to develop this kind of meditation in community solidarity, without individualism or self-sufficient attitudes, and without the influence of ideological pressure groups.

SOME POSITIVE SIGNS

At the Rome meeting, the Superiors General were able to pinpoint certain positive elements which throw some light on the scene and allow us to look forward to a future of fruitful perseverance. Here are some of them.

— There are facts that make us aware that this new “season of God” is truly moving in the direction of renewal and not towards an agonizing death and burial.

— The greatly increased practice of examining in the light of faith the signs of the times, and the giving of proper weight to the vast changes that have taken place in human development (due to the great contributions of the human sciences) have made possible for us a synthesis at a higher level without equating fidelity with simple restoration.

— The increasing efforts to understand more deeply the deposit of faith in both its personal structure and its social implications have roused us to important initiatives with regard to ongoing intellectual formation.

— The Council’s image of the Church as a mystery is restoring to Religious life the primacy of its contemplative dimension.

— Sensitivity to the young and the poor is leading to the salvaging of the witness value of the vows and to a greater awareness of communion.

— The challenge of so many changes has prompted General Chapters to clarify and spell out the vocational identity of the individual Institutes.

— The need for intelligent future-planning has brought about a return to the charism of the Founder which is both objective and penetrating.

— Instability and soul-searching have prompted a revision, renewal and reaffirmation of the value of the Constitutions as a Gospel project enshrining religious profession.

— The falling numbers of professed members have led to

a more careful examination and concern regarding the *quality* in the various essential aspects of vocation: selection, admission, early formation.

— The crisis in general has aroused responsibility and encouraged the study of the spiritual and pastoral priorities to be cultivated.

It is true that with these hopeful signs, as the Holy Father says in his encyclical “Redemptor Hominis”, there still remains the spectacle “of disquiet, of conscious or unconscious fear or of menace, which in various ways is being communicated to the whole of the present-day human family and is manifesting itself under various aspects..., in various directions and various degrees of intensity” (RH 15).

Hence the importance and urgency to find a way in this time of transition to encourage and give heart to all our brothers.

5. Some primary obligations

Meanwhile, from an analysis carried out with hopeful prospects, there are some tasks that are urgent and may not be delayed. We must point them out because they become the main object of our obligation to plan our renewal. Our findings show that these are the keypoints that call for determined and efficacious action.

— In the first place comes a deepening of the *meaning of the faith* and its doctrinal content centred on the paschal mystery of Christ in the context of present day concerns. For us this means the giving of special attention to the theological study of the Religious life and a renewed awareness of its salient values, especially *perpetual profession*.

— Secondly there is the *quality* of the formation both initial and ongoing given to the candidates after an accurate and discriminating selection. The formation process must be aimed at reaching “the person in depth, and not only his intellect

and external behaviour, to help him freely understand and rectify his motivations” (G. Dho).

— Furthermore, analyses point to the urgency to salvage and give practical importance to *spiritual direction*. The Union of Superiors General considered this a vital necessity and have asked that means be found to alert all Religious Institutes to the problem. Likewise, emphasis was given to the image and role of the Superior as *spiritual director*, as described in the document “Mutuae Relationes” (Directives for Mutual Relations between Bishops & Religious) (MR 13).

— And then there is the importance of *brotherly fellowship* and *human relations* both inside and outside the consecrated life. This takes on a special urgency in religious communities in order to keep people well-balanced and encourage fidelity (one of today’s problems). If it is true that each member has an obligation to the community, it is even truer to say that the community should take care of every member (*Const.* 4, 50-53, 54). The great possibilities of prevention and therapy that can be provided by genuine living fellowship need to be emphasised in these modern times. Every community must become “a strengthening community” to encourage and give new heart to its members.

— Finally attention needs to be given to mental and spiritual health. Mental health no less than physical health needs to be preserved and nurtured by a combination of conditions. “Many defections are clearly seen to be linked with a series of tensions, conflicts, worries, which frequently reveal an underlying way of life (both at a community and personal level) which is unacceptable to every norm of mental health, and even to common sense” (G. Dho). It is well to keep in mind that there are suitable modern therapies acceptable to Christians that are available if necessary.

On the other hand a vocation has need of spiritual hygiene as well: “a constant style of life out of tune with authentic

vocational values cannot fail to induce a progressive weakening” (G. Dho).

6. The foundations of strength and courage

Our attempt to understand the present day religious crisis has opened up horizons of hope, but it has also confirmed our distressing worries, for it presents us with a great and complicated problem far beyond our human powers of solution, and which on that account retains all oppressive and daunting aspects. The question here is not whether we are optimists or pessimists, but whether we are men of faith.

Perseverance and fidelity are possible: indeed they provide the only valid attitude that can look forward to a positive future.

In fact, the ability to remain faithful and give new heart to others, to bolster up their courage, does not stem from the ingenuous enthusiasm of one who has no inkling of the real problem and who is unaware of the corrosive effects of giving in and the complex dangers menacing the future of Religious life. But even taking for granted the natural upheaval and the insidious and subtle secularism that pervades all things and violently attacks the Gospel meaning of consecration, we can still be indisputably certain that we can persevere. We know from the Gospel that Christ is the ruler of history (“I have overcome the world” - *Jn XVI, 33*) and that our faith is indeed a victory (*I Jn V, 4*).

The ability to strengthen our brethren flows from the saving presence of God within us; and this presence is rooted in the grace that sanctifies us and enables us to act through the theological dynamism of faith, hope and charity.

These are the three great hinges that support our *efforts to strengthen our confreres* — truth enlightened by faith; looking to the future animated by hope; and kindness sustained by charity. Let us reflect briefly on these sources of energy offered us by God.

Here we shall have to take for granted the great Christian horizons of faith, hope and charity and limit ourselves to some of their tactical aspects that reflect back on the Religious life and which call for special attention and practical application.

From faith we can deduce certain strategies concerning truth, from hope some implications for our mission, and from charity a few basic points regarding communion.

TRUTH, ENLIGHTENED BY FAITH

First and foremost, to instil new heart and courage in our communities we must be able to make the *truth of the Religious life* crystal clear.

The Council, the Magisterium, and the Superiors at Congregational level have in recent years provided abundant material to make this plain. Noted theologians have also pinpointed the problem areas of religious consecration.

Unfortunately strange ideologies, superficial and ill-founded interpretations, and worldly attitudes have spread abroad and deceived the weak or immature. Let us recall how caustically the Apostles condemned false teachers who led the brethren astray (cf *2 Cor XI*, 1 et seq; *Tim VI*, 3 et seq; *Tit I*, 10 et seq; *2 Pet II*, 10 et seq; *Jn II*, 18 et seq; *Jd I*, 3 et seq).

It is essential that the values associated with certain basic truths of our vocation be clearly understood and conscientiously accepted.

For practical purposes we shall concentrate on two of these: *Religious Profession* and the *Distinctive Character of the Congregation*.

— First, *the rediscovery of the full meaning of the Religious profession* understood as a fundamental and definitive choice on the part of the subject, and a specific consecration on the part of God and the Church. By perpetual profession the Religious launches his whole existence, so to speak, into a particular ecclesial orbit. Perpetual profession is an all-embracing option

and consecration, which becomes the yardstick for every subsequent choice; it imposes a totally new outlook and demands a special witness that penetrates every aspect of one's life; nothing escapes its all-embracing survey. There is no such thing as an intermittent Religious. The oblation and intimate consecration inherent in profession is for the Religious the root commitment that defines every aspect of his life.

In the formula for our perpetual profession (*Cons* 74) we find the characteristics of the ancient Biblical covenant: fidelity of both parties meeting in a living pledge; a kind of nuptial entente which pervades the whole life and gives direction and drive to all actions; it is the fusion of two freedoms, full-time and all-embracing.

Rightly St. Thomas spoke of a "vow of profession" in the singular (cf *St. Thos* II-II, q 186), seeing the act of one making his profession not so much as three separate vows but rather as one single act made explicit by the threefold distinction of the individual vows: this he called the "vow of Religion" (cf Tillard: "Devant Dieu et pour le monde", ed. du Cerf, Paris 1974).

The motive force in perpetual profession, the secret of its vitality, all its mystique, is the "sequela Christi" — walking in the footsteps of the Master. Love and enthusiasm for Christ constitute the starting-point and goal of the life of every Religious.

The ceremony of the perpetual profession has an important *public dimension* which authoritatively places the Church's stamp on that profession and shows forth its social and community character. In fact this ceremony manifests a special intervention of the Lord through the ministry of the Church. In the past this intervention was called "consecration" — and even today the new "Ordo professionis religiosae", pp 30, 49, 73, 92, uses the term "consecratio seu benedictio" for perpetual profession. And it is precisely in this sense that the Council speaks of the "consecration" of the Religious: "(He) is consecrated more intimately (by God) to the divine service" (LG 44 - Latin text).

To the action of God (consecration and blessing) coming

from above there corresponds the act of the one making his profession (oblation and holocaust) rising from below.

Each one's vocation is an *individual divine call* evoking the free and personal response of a *decisive oblation*; God endorses it by a *special consecration*; as a result, a man's whole being receives a *new entitlement, a new union of friendship with him* that embraces his whole life and activity, and assigns to him a *particular role in the general sacramental action* of the Church.

It is not without significance that perpetual profession takes place as an integral part of a liturgical celebration; and its deepest import "is born of worship and is inseparable from the liturgy" (G. Philips, comm. on LG). Through profession the Religious is *consecrated by the Lord among his people* (in His role of Sacrament of Salvation) so that the newly professed may play a more specific part in His mission among men. Thus Religious life acquires a "sacramental" dimension, sharing in the Church's nature, to manifest and communicate to men an aspect of the mystery of Christ (LG 46), not simply as a private project of an individual or group, but as an official task — or rather as a public and ecclesial charism for the good of all. In this way the Religious, by his profession, becomes part of a "special corps" (of a Religious group) — a "witnessing sector" in the living Body of Christ which is the Church.

Hence we must discover once again the real significance of perpetual profession, so as to prepare for it and live it consistently; this is one of the main ways to strengthen and encourage the members and reveal the grandeur and responsibility of their vocation. It will help combat indifference, superficiality and certain ideological interpretations which alter the very nature of religious life or (more commonly the case) weaken perseverance.

We may quote here the pertinent and profound observation of the Holy Father in his letter to all priests: "One must think of all these things, especially at moments of crisis, and not have recourse to a dispensation that is understood as an 'administrative intervention', as though in fact it were not rather

a matter of a profound question of conscience and a test of humanity. God has a right to test each one of us in this way, since this earthly life is a time of testing for every human being” (Letter to all Priests 9).

The “Strengthen your brothers” is closely linked to the exposition of the true nature of perpetual profession: it is faith that sustains the certainty of hope and blessings of charity.

— *Sincere support for the distinctive character of the Congregation.* Another aspect of the true nature of the Religious life which is in urgent need of clear emphasis nowadays is the charismatic identity of one’s own Institute — to ensure the development of a practical and decisive sense of belonging. Religious profession is not made in the abstract, but according to a definite way of living the Gospel as conceived and lived out by the Founder and authoritatively set forth in the Constitutions. In the very early days our first confreres expressed their idea of Religious life in the simple but intensely personal phrase, “I am going to stay with Don Bosco”!

The identity of an Institute is not to be found in an idea or a definition, but in an experience of “life in the Spirit”. The Congregation into which one becomes incorporated by profession is an historical reality with names of people, dates and traditions; with its own style of holiness and apostolate; with specific objectives to attain and appropriate norms to this end. Religious life in the Church is not something *sui generis* or solitary, but the sum-total of various and well-defined Institutes perpetuating in a living way the spiritual heritages of St Benedict, St Francis, St Dominic, St Ignatius, St Alphonsus, Don Bosco, et al.

The specific character of an Institute is born through the action of the Holy Spirit in giving the Founder a particular charism. This is not something fabricated anew in each successive generation: it follows through uniformly from the beginning. Indeed the charism of the Founder “appears as an *experience of the Spirit* transmitted to his followers to be *lived* by them,

to be *preserved, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in a process of growth*. It is for this reason that the *distinctive characters* of the various Religious Institutes are preserved and fostered by the Church (LG 44; cf CD 33; 35, 1; 35, 2 etc.). Each distinctive character also involves a *particular style of sanctification and apostolate* which creates a definite *tradition* so that its *objective elements* can be easily recognised" (MR 11).

There is therefore in the distinctive character of the Congregation a very substantial layer which does not depend on ideological interpretations and which cannot be left to the mercy of individual judgements or pressure groups, but which is anchored to two very solid realities: *the Founder*, i.e., a clearly defined person who received a special gift of the Holy Spirit and translated it into his practical living; and a *community* of followers, continually enriched by the same spirit with new members, and *organically structured* so as to look after and develop the abiding nature of the Founder's charism.

With the passing of time, inventiveness and growth need to be attuned to these historical facts — to avoid distortions due to materialistic sociopolitical ideas or to subjective spiritual judgements claiming personal inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Experience shows only too well that abuses exist in both directions.

The task, therefore, of giving new strength and courage demands a clear understanding of the "distinctive character" of the Congregation. Thus new and energetic planning can be launched into a well-defined orbit so as to bring about a sound and uniform growth of the Founder's charism.

FUTURE PROSPECTS ENLIVENED BY HOPE

To give new heart and courage to our brothers, we must attend to another fundamental point: we need an outlook that emphasises the importance here and now of our mission among men.

Today we look to the future, to the new Advent of the year 2000, to the genuine promises of a new Gospel millenium. Such an attitude means being aware of the future without being overawed and conditioned by it. It is we who largely mould the future. We do not walk in a rigid predetermined path but one that admits of originality of thought and action based on valid criteria which take account of both the charism of the Institute and the signs of the times, so that our own efforts may fashion a better, vital and integrated future.

We have had ten years of crisis. Still, when we speak of restoring certain values, or of being tired of so much instability, we do not simply mean to return to the past: that would only prevent proper progress and show a lack of fidelity by inaction. Nor is it a question of a passing weariness, a kind of work-break, without positive efforts and clear aims for a better integrated future.

It is plain that we are witnessing a reassessment of many former values. There is an ever-growing and deeply felt criticism of change for change's sake. It is not a matter of weariness or a brief pause, but of a definite step forward.

The salvaging or recovery referred to is the sign of the beginning of a higher integration between the great permanent values and the new positive signs of the times. One begins to see a greater balance between the ever valid principles (equally true today as they were yesterday — because they transcend fleeting fashions) and the new values emerging from human developments. It is not the static balance or equilibrium of a statue on a pedestal, but a truly *balanced movement* where the very motion itself is one of the factors ensuring progress that is stable.

The cultural development towards a new era is only just beginning. The Church, Bishops and Religious Institutes must see their mission within a society in a state of transition. They must realise there is some courageous research to do.

Balanced movement or change demands that there be certain

points, fixed and clear, which provide a kind of launching-pad for many different orbits in space; it requires the ability to live a stable life in an unstable situation. The saint, for instance, by his obedience, his chastity and his poverty, is a man for all seasons; he is a bearer of perennial values; he is a focal point not only of the past but also of the future. What then are the unchanging principles that make him tick? We need to identify them so that they can be combined with the signs of the times, and so that we may achieve the better integrated future we are aiming for.

It is in this direction we shall find the elements of certainty we need in our research. Hope is of its nature projected towards the future, but it is founded on present certainties. It relies on the all-powerful kindness and mercy of God who loves us and is with us always; it relies on the living and active presence of Christ who guides us through the centuries; it relies on the intercession and motherly intervention of Mary who, in the Resurrection, shares the zeal of our Lord for the building of the Kingdom of God through the ages.

To provide a courageous and enthusiastic outlook for our mission we need these buttresses of Christian hope: they will keep us on an even keel during what is still to be a long period of transition.

It will help us here to recall two points that follow from the above, and which I consider strategic and urgent: practical attention to the "call of the young", and the renewal of our apostolic standards of judgement.

— *Practical attention to the "call of the young"*. It is indispensable for our apostolic work that we attend to the call of the young. We deem ourselves at the service of man precisely because the Father has sent us to be missionaries to the young. Our future is balanced on two closely-linked bases: God's sustaining and impelling help, and the stirring call of the young in all their urgent reality.

Our presence among the young is in obedience to God. We study their youthful problems: indeed we see Christ himself calling us through them. It is among the young in need that our mission feels truly at home. Their problems are the measure of our hope and dedication, sublimating our efforts and urging us to revise and replan constantly.

Today's apostolate certainly clamours for a "new presence". This does not mean of course that we have to condemn existing enterprises: but we have to be big enough to examine their worth, and, if need be, come up with some brand new ideas, study them carefully and try them out. The last two General Chapters made this abundantly clear.

This line of action is no cure-all: in fact it is likely to land a load of new problems at our door. It offers us no quiet armchair, but rather reawakens within us a truer discernment of our apostolate. Christ our Redeemer is summoning us to assist him in the difficult task of leading the young along the road to wholesome freedom. Acceptance of the easy life will soon kill off whatever energy and courage we have, for these thrive where there are problems and needs (especially among our chosen ones). Our vocation was born in troublous times, and it will flourish when we live it out amidst the stresses and perplexities of the here and now.

— *Renewing the criteria of our apostolate.* This is essential if our apostolate is to be valid for tomorrow's problems. As GC21 has pointed out, the answer lies totally in the Preventive System. The excellent document tabled by the Chapter urges us to be zealous in putting new life into its fine basic principles. This must be an indispensable feature of any apostolic planning we take on.

It is in the Preventive System that we find that particular "brand of holiness and apostolate" (MR 11) that the Spirit of the Lord evoked in Don Bosco; this is indeed the God-given basis of our hope.

The problems of transition-periods cannot be solved by set formulas — they need practical norms for thinking up and guiding the kaleidoscope of planning required. We need criteria that will pour new life into our pastoral dedication — not despite but because of the fact that we live in a social and cultural ambience that is so full of uncertainties.

Let us then arm ourselves with strong, well-proven, workable principles of pedagogy. They will be the practical boost our hope is in need of (cf circ. lett. ASC 290).

The more we study and practise these great pastoral and pedagogical criteria given us by Don Bosco in the Preventive System, the better will we be able to “strengthen our brothers”.

KINDNESS, SUSTAINED AND PERMEATED BY CHARITY

Finally the third basis for our “strengthening and encouraging our brothers” is kindness, sustained and permeated by charity.

Kindness is an attitude that does not condemn or attack. It is understanding, forgiving, discerning, patient, trusting, serene, warm-hearted, comforting, encouraging. It knows how to hearten and praise; and it corrects with humility and confidence. It is good to call to mind the paean in praise of charity in the First Letter to the Corinthians: “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor XIII, 4-8).

Assuredly, in an environment imbued with this kindness, communication is easy and encouraging dialogue gets results. When the young bricklayer, Bartholomew Garelli met Don Bosco at the Church of St. Francis of Sales, the kindness of the newly ordained priest led to a friendship that was the first step in the Salesian Family’s historic new mission on behalf of the young.

Of course, all of us are convinced of the importance of kindness; and we are quick to bewail the fact that Don Bosco’s

kind heart does not always beat in our communities. It is easier to lament the absence of kindness than to co-operate in its growth.

It is obvious that a kind person spreads warmth and hope in all about him. Of course the problem is to discover how to foster its growth.

And here I should like to dwell a little on two main facets that help in the diffusion of kindness. They have their roots in that charity infused in us by the Holy Spirit, namely the revival of “the primacy of contemplation” and a deep concern for “brotherly communion”.

— *Restoring the primacy of contemplation*: this means increasing our charity in our relations with God: listening to his word, meditating on the mystery of salvation, pondering his loving mercy, his amazing and heroic sacrifice, admiring his kindly firmness, rejoicing at his generosity and enthusing over his gratuitous love.

The kindness that comes from charity is not just an expedient affability among people living in community: it is the fruit of our profound love of God, conscious and demanding.

If the Congregation becomes tainted with a way of acting in which God has no part, then our confreres will not know what true kindness is.

The kindness that is at the heart of the Salesian spirit comes from God, from a close friendship with him; it flows from a real charity in loving contemplation of the Father. In this kind of contemplation, the intellect subjects itself to love, and the will makes its resolves as a witness of service, sharing in the worship of the mystery that is God.

Our kindness must be a means of increasing the strength and encouragement we give to our brothers: and so we must intensify our ability to be in continual converse with God; he must be the earnestly loved friend of our Religious profession. It follows that personal and community prayer is of the utmost urgency: Holy Mass, Confessions, meditation on the

Word of God, the Divine Office, devotion to Mary — these are the indispensable means for fostering our kindness day after day.

Our ability to encourage others rests entirely on our vivid awareness of the friendship of God.

— *Deep concern for brotherly communion.* Another practical way of increasing our kindness is to practise brotherly communion.

So much has been said in the last few years regarding dialogue, friendship, brotherly communion, the ideal community. Let us keep our feet firmly on the ground and resist the temptation to fantasize about the community. The perfect community just does not exist in this world: it is to be found only in the Heavenly Jerusalem. We are only pilgrims in quest of perfect brotherly communion and trying to build up this ideal. Its development will be aided by the kindness each confrere contributes to his community: generous and unselfish kindness cradled in the mystery of God.

The defections and crises of quite a few confreres have brought to light a particular facet that we tend to overlook in the pressures of our daily work: from time to time and in varied degrees we are all weak and sinful and sometimes under mental stress; even among so-called normal Religious there is a variable level of such illnesses; we are not paragons of logic and mysticism.

Our very real weaknesses and failings, our moments of imbalance and illness, are reminders that kindness is understanding, forgiving and healing. Every community in its ongoing formation programme should set aside an important area for the “healing process”: often this therapy will prevent or cure the symptoms and downfalls of various members. Quite a few confreres need an intelligent dose of this therapy: and this is truly “strengthening and encouraging our brothers”. The renewal of each community should include dealing with personal feelings and crises with kindness, with understanding and respectful love; and we must

be motivated in this by the strength and constancy of God — not by indifference, permissiveness, connivance or fear of correcting.

7. Conclusion

My dear confreres, in these pages we have raised a number of issues rather rapidly and summarily in an effort to appraise the crisis we are going through, seize upon some signs of hope and point out the priorities of our activity. We have borne in mind the defection of many, the discouragement of quite a few, the wavering of others, the drop in vocations, and the anxiety of all for clearer future prospects.

The times we live in certainly put our growth and fidelity to the test. How should we react? Who will give us the strength and courage to tackle such problems?

It is the Lord who is the source of fidelity; Mary and the Church proclaim to us the Christian mystery of maternal increase and growth. All who are consecrated have the onus of bringing confidence and joy to their brothers. This *duty to encourage* is hinged on faith, hope and charity — and with these virtues we put the confirming stamp of validity on our life of consecration, our future mission and on the kindness inherent in our way of life.

The practical conclusions following from faith, hope and charity add up to a programme of renewal already formulated in the deep considerations of the last two General Chapters. The Spirit of the Lord certainly helped the Chapter members to draw up a valid series of tactics for the future, to clarify our identity and what it stands for, and to stimulate our perseverance and dedication.

Let us use these tactics with intelligence and generosity so that our fidelity may be renewed and our numbers increased.

Indeed Don Bosco's whole life was a witness to fidelity, growth and encouragement for the Congregation. He lived in difficult times, but they were only a spur to him to carry out

his vocation. Maybe we have forgotten that the very purpose of our vocation is to solve problems, small or great. The Church herself exists for the purpose of tackling difficulties and overcoming evil.

Great thinkers of centuries ago used to pose the question whether Christ would have become man if there had been no sin: we know, of course that his Incarnation is a redeeming and freeing act in a hand-to-hand conflict against the mystery of evil.

Our special devotion to Mary too is a reminder to us that she is our help and patroness when times are hard, and will help us fight the good fight and persevere to the end.

With confidence and hope let us renew our enthusiasm and deepen our understanding of our vocation, mindful of St. Paul's words to the Corinthians: "God will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord"! (*1 Cor I, 8-9*).

Warmest greetings and courage and strength to all.
You have a place in my daily Mass and Rosary.

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ,
Rector Major.