

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

OUR FIDELITY TO PETER'S SUCCESSOR

An opportune invitation. - Don Bosco's very concrete "Church sense". - A new style of exercising Peter's ministry. - A difficult situation. - Some reflections on Lumen Gentium. - Our attitude of fidelity becomes a task to be carried out. - Mary Help of Christians and the Pope.

Rome, 3 September 1985

Commemoration of St Gregory the Great

My dear confreres,

I am writing after returning to Rome from a visit to our communities in Chile, Bolivia and Peru. In these provinces, which are gaining new life from a promising vocational upswing, I had the joy of handing the confreres the rewritten text of the Constitutions and General Regulations, an event which was felt to be both exceptional and memorable. The communities concerned experienced a moment of profound unison with the heart of the Founder Don Bosco, the beatings of whose evangelical heart were heard again in his "living testament" newly approved by the Apostolic See.

I would like to remind you all of the firm purpose we adopted on that occasion for an adequate preparation for the celebrations of 1988:

to concentrate our initiatives during the intervening three years on the Book of our Rule of life, in study, in deep personal reflection, in community assimilation and in active witness. The whole Congregation should feel the initiative to live a kind of "Second Novitiate" to relaunch in a modern and prophetic way the apostolic spirit of our Father. At a distance of a hundred years from his death we want this spirit to be alive and flourishing in his sons!

As you are aware, the renewed Constitutions were approved by the Apostolic See on 25 November 1984, the Solemnity of Christ the King. This is a date which binds our religious profession more closely to the ministry of Peter, which gives ecclesial authenticity to the life plan we profess and which endorses as genuine the charism we bring to the People of God.

In this light I have thought it opportune to accede to the request of not a few confreres (from various Provinces) to set out some reflections on our "ecclesial awareness", which "we express — as the Constitutions say — in an attitude of filial loyalty to Peter's successor and to his teaching".¹ This theologically based attitude of reverence and "devotion" for the Pope, which Don Bosco has left us as a precious heritage, is a constituent element of our spirit. We want to renew our awareness of this.

1. C 13

I invoke the special intercession of Pope Gregory the Great, on whose liturgical commemoration in the Church's calendar I have begun this letter. May this great Pontiff, who first gained renown in the political life of Rome and then became an exemplary and fervent monk, and who brought several "Roman" virtues to the exer-

cise of the highest ministry in the Church, help us to acquire a deeper understanding and appreciation of the fundamental function of the Papacy in the Church of Christ. It is a specialized service, inserted by Christ in the heart of history to enlighten, exhort, stimulate, guide, confirm and continually bring up to date the emancipating message of his Gospel.

Don Bosco had a very concrete “sense of Church”

The ecclesiastical awareness of our Founder was concretely expressed from a pedagogical point of view in some strong and practical rules of conduct as far as faith was concerned. He expressed them in all simplicity in three great attitudes which gradually took on the name of “devotions”: to *Jesus Christ* the Saviour and Redeemer, present in the central action of the Church — the Eucharist; to *Mary*, Model and Mother of the Church, seen in history as the Help of Christians; and to *the Pope*, Peter’s Successor, placed at the head of the College of Bishops for the pastoral service of the whole Church.

These are really three inseparable aspects which mutually illumine each other, and converge in the person of Christ, the Lord of history. Neither the Marian dimension nor the ministry of Peter can be the isolated object of a particular devotion, and if here we speak specifically of our adherence to the Pope we do so to meet a requirement of method; but evidently we do not consider it a theme detached from the others. Every confrere is invited to meditate on the

Christological and ecclesial mystery in its overall sense.

Blessed Luigi Orione, who was formed in the same sense of Church as was our Founder, wanted the members of his Institute to have a "fourth vow" of total obedience and adherence to the Pope. Because of the difficulties experienced at that time he was not able to obtain this, but his sons have done so in a recent General Chapter, and have thus given to their Institute a more faithful charismatic identity.

We Salesians do not have a fourth vow of obedience to the Pope, but we live the spirit of such a vow. Article 125 of the Constitutions states explicitly: "The Salesian Society has as its highest superior the Supreme Pontiff. Even by reason of the vow of obedience, the members are filially submissive to his authority, and available for the good of the universal Church. They welcome his magisterium with docility and help the faithful, especially the young, to accept his teachings".

The contents of another article of the Constitutions (C.13) help us to read C.125 in greater depth through the life-giving element which animates us.

Worth underlining is the use made in both these articles of the qualification "filial", and also the insistence on availability and docility which must characterize our apostolic activity, especially among young people. All this demands courage and dedication: according to Don Bosco, "No effort should be spared when the Church and the Papacy are at stake".²

2. cf. C 13

The two articles, C.13 and C.125, can be considered the synthetic expression of all the rich

3. ASC, 24 May
1951, n. 164

salesian tradition that here we can do no more than mention. Fr Peter Ricaldone has collected its most significant expressions in his well-known circular: "Know, love and defend the Pope".³ There we find abundant material which enables us, even today, to discern without difficulty in the heart of Don Bosco an extraordinary and courageous commitment to fidelity to the ministry of Peter.

Our Father was convinced of the need for this and gave his conviction explicit expression. He rejected the formula "Pius IX yes, but not the Pope"; nor would he have been any more pleased with that other expression (more in vogue at the present day): "The Papacy yes, but not this Pope". The first was shrewdly political; the second is ambiguous and allows one to sit on the fence.

The successor of Peter to whom Don Bosco adhered was the living Pope ("this" Pope) who guides and teaches the People of God here and now at this particular point in history; he was convinced that to him, the living Pope, refer the words of Christ in the Gospel and the unfailing assistance of the Holy Spirit. The two formulas quoted above do not express the true christian faith; rather do they disguise the implications by favouring subjective interpretations.

Don Bosco, with his practical pedagogy, is unambiguous in bearing witness to the ecclesial dimension of his faith and in educating his boys in the same way. There is no danger of failing to perceive his basic conviction. Even when some of the things he says appear to be linked with the mentality of his own time because expressed in a literary genre no longer current, the eccle-

sial awareness that permeated his heart stands out with ease and clarity.

Hence in the course of the laborious and scrupulous rewriting of the constitutional text carried out in recent years there was no hesitation about asserting our "filial loyalty" to the Pope⁴ and the corresponding "docility" to his magisterium;⁵ and this means that we can conclude without any shadow of doubt that the love and adherence to the ministry of Peter is a component of the spiritual heritage left us by the Founder that cannot be renounced.

4. C 13

5. C 125

In the circular of Fr Ricaldone already referred to can be found ample justification for the many adjectives used to describe Don Bosco's love for the Pope: "supernatural, zealous and conquering, filial and sincere, obedient and submissive, self-sacrificing and heroic. He was, in addition, the Pope's strenuous defender".⁶ These are not just pleonastic expressions; they correspond to different aspects of a solid witness lived out through many long years.

6. *op. cit.* passim

Think, for example, of what Don Bosco wrote on the history of the Popes; of how much he did in connection with the proclamation of infallibility at the time of the first Vatican Council; of his heroic act of obedience to Leo XIII in the unfortunate controversy with Mgr Gastaldi; of what it cost him in the failing health of his last years to fulfil the wish of the Pope that he should build the Temple of the Sacred Heart at Castro Pretorio in Rome. This heavy undertaking, the last of his life, merits a brief comment. Fr Cerruti, who was close to Don Bosco throughout this heroic act of deference to the Pope, testified under oath in the process for beatification: "I

am intimately convinced that the overwork and the sufferings he endured (during the long journeys he made begging for money) shortened the life of a man who was already enfeebled and worn out by work".⁷

Without any doubt Don Bosco wanted to leave his sons the living heritage of a concrete and theological "devotion" to the successor of Peter.

In the "Summary" of the presentation made to the Apostolic See on 3 February 1874 by Don Bosco himself concerning the life and identity of the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales, he writes as follows: "The fundamental purpose of the Congregation, from its first beginnings, has always been *to support and defend the authority of the supreme head of the Church among the less well-to-do classes of society, and particularly among young people at risk*".⁸

And in the first Italian translation of the text of the Constitutions recently approved by the Holy See,⁹ in article 1 of chapter VI (despite the delicate political situation of those years) he writes: "The members shall recognise in the Supreme Pontiff their arbiter and absolute superior, to whom they shall, even in virtue of the vow of obedience, be in everything and in every place at all times humbly and respectfully submissive. Nay more, every member shall apply himself with solicitude to uphold his authority and to promote the observance of the laws of the Catholic Church and of its supreme head, who is the legislator and Vicar of Jesus Christ upon earth".¹⁰

We are speaking, dear confreres, of an attitude and style of spiritual conduct which is suited to the Congregation's specific mission. An

7. op. cit. p. 69

8. Opere Edite, Ri-stampa anastatica, vol. XXV, p. 380: N.XV, Riasunto della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales nel 23 febbraio 1974, p. 44

9. Turin 1875

10. cf. « Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales » - 1858, 1875. Critical text edited by Francesco Motto, p. 113

apostolic movement of universal extent like ours, dedicated by its very charism to pastoral work for youth, needs for its own internal consistency to be in line with the very nature of apostolic dynamism of the Church. To carry out pastoral work means, in fact, to commit oneself to evangelizing activity under the guidance of Pastors in "hierarchical communion" with the Pope, the head of the College of Bishops.¹¹

11. cf. LG 22

A new style of exercising Peter's ministry

But between Don Bosco's time and the present day the exercise of papal service has been going through a practical and progressive process of evolution of ideas which implied revision, clarification and even renewal.¹² The awareness of such a process must also form part of our love for and our adherence to the Pope. If anyone is loath or hesitant to accept this statement, he need do no more to convince himself of its truth than compare the exercise of the papal ministry by a great pre-Vatican II Pontiff like Pius XII, with the present practice of John Paul II.

12. cf. e.g. J.M.R. Tillard, "L'evêque de Rome", Paris, 1984

From the last century to our own decade of the '80s, the exercise of the primacy has had to meet not only the challenges of profound social political and ecclesial transformations, but also new needs of doctrinal maturing and pastoral prospects, which present it at the present day with new situations and circumstances which have provoked tensions and called for serious study. Let us try to recall in synthetic form some of the more significant elements.

— The end of the Papal States, with the complex struggles which had gone before and the delicate problems which followed for decades afterwards, certainly conditioned the way in which the Papacy functioned.

— The successive purification and progressive simplification in favour of a greater pastoral thrust have increased the incisiveness and authenticity of the ministry of Peter, and have intensified its prophetic service, particularly in the field of social teaching.

— The succession of contemporary Popes, outstanding for their high qualification and for their holiness, has clarified and perfected the image of papal service in the face of growing secularist rationalism, and has strengthened the dimension of universality.

— The extraordinary event of the second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican has brought about a deep renewal in the whole of ecclesiology in its substantial aspect of "mystery" and in its constitutive lack of conformity to type, animated by the unfailing presence of the Spirit of the Lord. From that time we are witnessing a continuous renewal of the Church, even in the exercise of ministries and in charisms.

— The simultaneous proclamation by the Council of papal primacy and episcopal collegiality has led to some important innovations, with the possibility of still further developments in the exercise of Peter's ministry. An example can be seen in the establishment by Paul VI of the Synod of Bishops.

— The Vatican vision of the "Universal Church" as a communion of particular Churches

excludes the simplistic caricature of the whole Church as the "diocese of the Pope": the power of Bishops, says *Lumen Gentium*, "far from being damaged by the supreme and universal power, is rather defended, upheld and strengthened by it".¹³

13. LG 27

From this it follows that the exercise of the papal ministry must be a true "service of communion" giving confirmation and direction to its collegial nature and harmonizing interventions of the power of primacy with the proper requirements of subsidiarity.

— An ecclesiology of communion, too, recognizes and respects the lawful diversities which enrich the building of the universal Church. Hence the Papacy, the visible foundation of the unity and catholicity of the Church, is committed to the promotion of a pluriform communion while avoiding the insidious dangers of uniformity.

— Vatican II has also created a new and vast ecumenical context which, among other things, will call for new considerations and dialogue on the delicate topic of the ministry of Peter. This leads to a deeper study and a more understandable formulation of the relevant doctrine.¹⁴ It is true that the Council affirms unequivocally that the primacy of the Pope belongs constitutionally to the mystery of the Church of Christ in its historical structure, but the formulation of such a truth may be susceptible of clarification: "Just as the terminology of the Council of Ephesus", writes a competent scholar, "was profoundly changed by that of Chalcedon so as to say the *same* thing *in a clearer way*, so it is logical to think that the reality (concerning the primacy

14. cf. e.g. "Papa-
to e istanze ecumeniche", EDB,
Bologna 1984

of the Pope) expressed by the last two Councils with their particular terminology can be expressed in other more understandable terms".¹⁵

— Finally, the Council's opening up to non-Christian religions and to the vast throng of non-believers is demanding of the role of the Pope previously unknown innovations of service, which we can see to have been begun both by the widening and reform of the Vatican departments, by the auspicious apostolic journeys of the recent Popes,¹⁶ and by courageous pastoral and cultural initiatives with representatives of different peoples or through some forms of mediation in the field of justice and peace.

The sum total of all these innovations, which are not without associated tensions and problems, is having an effect on the exercise of the ministry of Peter, not in the sense of putting in doubt or diminishing the reality established by Christ, but in order to make its functioning more adequately adapted to the progressive social and ecclesial transformation which has taken place.

The enumeration of these motives for a change of style must help us to reinterpret with diligent loyalty the spiritual testament left us by Don Bosco. Awareness of the present process of renewal in the exercise of Peter's ministry is an indispensable condition for acquiring a renewed sense of Church.

With Don Bosco and with the times! Our filial adherence to the Pope must feel itself rooted today in a living Tradition which is nourished at the crystal clear sources of faith but which move forward in profound harmony with the growth of the knowledge of the Church itself as time progresses.¹⁷

15. von Balthasar, "Il complesso antiromano", Queriniana 1974, p. 221

16. For an example of a reflection on the visit of John Paul II to Turin, cf. ASC 1980, n. 297, pp. 45.65

17. cf. Dei Verbum 8

A difficult situation

The fascination of the above-mentioned innovations, the resulting reawakening of certain tensions, a certain pseudoscientific rationalism, ancient and modern prejudices, would all want to make an attitude of a habitual critical reserve or a leaving out of consideration the magisterium of the Pope appear to be a sign of a mature personality. Anyone on the other hand showing sincere adherence can easily become considered as out of date.

Here it is not only a question of that "anti-Roman complex" already analysed in the well-known book of Urs von Balthasar, but also of a growing animosity to "this" Pope of the present day.

It seems to have become the fashion to give ready credit to malicious interpretations concerning the person of the present Pope: his magisterial statements are played down, sympathy is shown for ideological positions he condemns, gratuitous statements are made about his cultural mentality which is said to be out-of-date and restraining; there are some also who put too high a value on hermeneutical research (which of itself is important and enriching) to such an extent that they steadfastly leave out of consideration any magisterial mediation; they forget that "the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God", as is stated in the Constitution *Verbum Dei*, "has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ".¹⁸

Those who consider the "historical" interpretation of the sources of revelation as a scientific

overcoming of their “dogmatic” interpretation, disregard the nature of the christian faith. They consider the dogmatic view as a kind of prescientific stage which, after their researches, should be placed in parentheses as though it were a hypothesis now become archaic. And so they do not consider that revelation itself, properly speaking, is the true source of what is the object of faith, and that faith is fundamentally an act concluded with the entire Church, within the ambit of its living tradition accompanied by the service of the magisterium.

In fact “the faith is not only a face to face relationship with God and Christ, but also a contact which opens communion with those with whom God himself has communicated. Faith therefore is not only an ‘I’ and ‘thou’, but also a ‘we’. In this ‘we’ lives a memorial which has led us to find again what we had forgotten: God and the One he sent. To put it in other words, there is no faith without the Church. Henri De Lubac has shown that the ‘I’ of the profession of christian faith is not the isolated ‘I’ of the individual, but the collective ‘I’ of the Church”.¹⁹

It is not an attitude of faith to ignore the living presence of the Spirit who unfailingly assists the ministry of Peter, nor to “democratize” his activity within the People of God in such a way as to render practically superfluous the function of the Pope.

The harm caused to people and especially to young people by pastoral workers or professors who oppose, undervalue, or mock the pastoral direction of the present successor of Peter, is serious from a pastoral point of view. Such behaviour bewilders and little by little separates

19. Ratzinger, “Trasmissione della fede e fonti della fede”, Bologna 1985, p. 20

psychologically from the truths of faith and from right conduct people who are still well disposed but lacking in doctrine, and makes them victims of a tidal wave of secularism. Under the effect of such factors a culture which until yesterday was impregnated by the Gospel, seems today to be undergoing a process of self-emptying: at its vertex we find "atheism", then a "demythologized reinterpretation of Christ", then lower down a "popularization" of the Church, then a "reappropriation" of the Word of God, and finally a radical rethinking of the "ministries", no longer in the light of the christological mysteries with the primacy of the Pope, but rather in psychological and sociological terms.

Not without reason is "postchristianity" spoken of, i.e. a mentality which is concerned only with the rationalism that accompanies scientific progress and has no need of historical Revelation. It is not always explicitly felt, nor of the same intensity of conviction, nor always expressed at the same level, but its influence pervades the great means of social communication and extends insensibly, like an oil stain, even in some sectors of believers, and perhaps even among ourselves.

A sign of such influence is precisely that of indifference, of a certain irony or antipathy to the role of the Pope as the unifying centre of ecclesial communion and as the first pastoral guide of the entire mission of the People of God.

It is not a case of denying the possible defects inherent in the human exercise of every ministry. The manner in which a Pope fills his role and even some particular plan of his are not necessarily to be considered objects of infallibility. "Every possible programme", writes von Baltha-

sar in the work already quoted, "remains limited internally by contingencies which are of this earth and debatable (in comparison with the universality of the Kingdom of Christ), whether we are speaking of a plan of Leo I or Gregory I or Hildebrand and Innocent III or the last Popes of the Church's States".²⁰

20. op. cit. p. 56

But it is one thing to try to make a historical evaluation of a pontificate of the past (against the light of a sufficient background), and quite another to dissent from or pay no attention to the pastoral guidelines of the Pope of the present time, and thus contribute to the weakening among the people of his charism of ecclesial direction. At the present day we are witnessing disastrous consequences of criticism of this kind and of dissent, especially in the moral sphere, where the divergence is stronger between the secularist mentality (a "new ethic") and the magisterium of the Pope. One sees public opinion getting ever further away from the very foundations of christian morality, to such an extent that the ethical criterion is no longer the Gospel, but statistics, the civil law, or manners of behaviour accepted by society. There is a widespread easy discarding of values which renders very difficult the ministry of Peter and of pastors, presenting it as something alien to what is considered the present progress of "reason" and to the thrilling future of the "history of freedom".

At a time when the importance of the papal role itself is considered matter for discussion, it would not be acceptable conduct from a pastoral point of view, nor an expression of the genuine sense of Church, nor a demonstration of an objective understanding of faith, to opt out from a

position of filial loyalty, of convinced and updated adherence and of courageous defence of the person and ministry of the Successor of Peter.

In a situation like that of the present day which is so problematical for pastoral work, Don Bosco would certainly not be found sitting on the fence nor a critic of how things are done, but would be outspoken in declaring his own loyalty.

Some reflections on the document *Lumen Gentium*

At a distance of twenty years from Vatican II it is worth looking back to see what the Council had to say about Peter's ministry. The affirmations represent the living thought of today's Church. It is not our intention to go into the discussions on the complex theme of ministries among the People of God. Some publications in this regard based on debatable hermeneutics have been the object of official disapproval.²¹

What we want to do is to re-read from a spiritual point of view the Council's statements, rising above all suspicion of rationalism and getting beyond any antisacramental 'a priori' attitude which excludes mediation from on high. I invite you, dear confreres, to read again with attention, even publicly in community,, the third chapter of the dogmatic Constitution on the Church. It will give rise to a useful and enlightening reflection which may help someone to rediscover the true sense of Vatican II.

As we have already said in passing, the petrine ministry in the Church belongs to its very "sacramental" constitution. In the great "Sacrament of salvation" which is the "Body of Christ" in history, Jesus has placed, as a visible expression

21. cf. e.g. Schillebeeckx, "Il ministero della Chiesa", 2^a edn., Queriniana 1982

22. LG 18

of his irreplaceable role as Head, the apostolic College in which Peter is constituted “the lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion”.²² The believer therefore must be able to look upon the figure of the Pope from this “sacramental” viewpoint of the globality of the Church.

In an ecclesial view of “mystery” (which includes the divine presence in human reality), we can consider with regard to the petrine ministry — as it appears in *Lumen Gentium* — three complementary elements: its institution on the part of Jesus Christ, the sacramental realism of the Collegiality of the Bishops as a reality inseparable from the Primacy, and the permanent assistance of the Holy Spirit.

— In the first place, of vital interest to the conscience of the believer is the fact that *Jesus willed, planned and personally prepared the ministry of Peter*, as the rock and foundation of his Church for all ages. This statement reached its precise and fundamental formulation in the last two Vatican Councils: “This sacred synod”, says *Lumen Gentium*, “following in the steps of the First Vatican Council, teaches and declares with it that Jesus Christ, the eternal pastor, set up the holy Church” and consecrated the Apostles and their successors the Bishops, establishing Peter and his successors as their head. “This teaching concerning the institution, the permanence, the nature and import of the sacred primacy of the Roman Pontiff and his infallible teaching office, the sacred synod propose anew to be firmly believed by all the faithful”.²³

23. LG 18

The whole of Chapter 3 of the Constitution describes in detail the hierarchical structure wil-

led by Christ and animated by his Spirit; particularly significant is what is asserted about episcopal collegiality and the primacy of the Pope.²⁴

Today a Catholic, as von Balthasar writes, "can wriggle as much as he likes, but he cannot go back before Vatican I which was reaffirmed by Vatican II (LG22). As is the case with all definitions, the only way open is that of integration in a bigger and vaster totality. And this totality is the indefectibility of the believing Church, of which the petrine ministry is a particular aspect. It is no exaggeration to say that on this point Vatican I has closed a door, and has done it so well that no one can open it any more without bringing down the whole edifice, the whole structural framework of Catholicism. To behave as though this door could be opened by chance is to live a lie".²⁵

— Secondly, *the sacramental realism of episcopal collegiality as a reality inseparable from primacy* brings the believer to consider that the true "sacramentality" of the Church is expressed in short in a well determined human existence; a reality which one can touch and be aware of, situated in time and space here and now, in relationship to concrete persons and definite roles. Vatican II has helped to give to this "sacramentality" the concept of the objective goal of the efficacy of the seven sacraments. The latter are the intermediaries which lead to the construction of the one true and great Sacrament which is the Church, is so far as it is the "Body of Christ" in the world. Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist make of me, in my concrete human being, a living member of this Body of Christ. We in fact are the definitive sacramental dimen-

24. cf. especially
LG 22, 25, 27

25. op. cit. p. 124

sion because we are the signs and bearers of the mystery of Christ!

Now the sacrament of Order, which consecrates Bishops to the fullest extent, incorporates a historically defined College of Pastors, i.e. it incorporates those who are consecrated into a pre-existing reality which has a peculiar nature of "hierarchical communion" (an "Order") in which there exists and has always existed, by disposition of Jesus Christ, the Primacy of Peter: "The holy synod teaches", says *Lumen Gentium*, "that the fullness of the sacrament of Orders is conferred by episcopal consecration, that fullness, namely, which both in the liturgical tradition of the Church and the language of the Fathers is called the high priesthood, the acme of the sacred ministry. Episcopal consecration confers, together with the office of sanctifying, the duties also of teaching and ruling which, however, of their very nature can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college".²⁶

26. LG 21

This is why it is not possible to conceive of an authentic episcopal collegiality without the primacy of the Pope, nor of a particular Church in detachment from the universal Church; nor of a federation of different and autonomous local Churches, instead of a communion of Churches which are original but gathered together in unity. Moreover, the apostolic College and the body of Bishops (with those consecrated for the subordinate ministries of the priesthood and diaconate) are, in Christ's Body which is the Church, the signs and bearers of the special function of Christ as the "eternal Shepherd", the living head of that Body. They are therefore a sacramental

expression of the function of pastor or shepherd which belongs to him as head; in fact, "in order to shepherd the People of God and to increase its numbers without cease, Christ the Lord set up in his Church a variety of ministries".²⁷

27. LG 18

But if the Lord willed the ministry of Pastors as a collegial body, guided by Peter, this means that pastoral responsibilities must always be accompanied by an impelling inward desire for communion with the Pope, a convergence of conscious solidarity with his function of guidance, agreement with his teaching which, on the other hand, is an expression of the permanent living values of Tradition and of the indefectible intuition of faith of the whole Church.

— Finally, *the permanent assistance of the Holy Spirit* makes of the Pope's ministry an inestimable gift for the People of God: the "charism of direction". Christ himself sends, with explicit decision, his Spirit to the person of Peter and his successors: "I have prayed for you... and you must strengthen your brethren"²⁸; "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do? Feed my lambs, tend my sheep".²⁹

28. Lk 22, 32

29. cf. Jn 21, 15-17

The Holy Spirit is present in history because he has been sent by the Father and by the Son; Pentecost represents the fullness of the mystery of Christ: "The Holy Spirit", says *Lumen Gentium* again, "was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that he might continually sanctify the Church... Guiding the Church in the way of all truth, and unifying her in communion and in the works of ministry, he bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her and adorns her with his fruits".³⁰ The initiative and creativity of the Holy Spirit in

30. LG 4

the People of God are inexhaustible, never in contrast but rather always in favour of the mediations instituted by Christ; charisms and ministries are planned together by the Lord so that they may grow harmoniously throughout history: "The organic communion of the Church", states *Mutuae Relationes*, "is not exclusively *spiritual*, i.e. so born of the Holy Spirit that this spiritual birth is of its very nature prior to and responsible for all the functions of the Church, but the Church is at the same time *hierarchic* since, by a vital impulse, it is derived from Christ the Head. The very gifts that are dispensed by the Spirit are precisely willed by Christ and of their nature they are directed towards the fastening together of the Body, by vivifying its functions and activities".³¹

31. MR 5

The role of the Pope therefore (together with that of the Bishops) is linked to an objective assistance of the Spirit of the Lord in the concrete occasions of the exercise of their ministry: "In order to fulfil such exalted functions, the apostles were endowed by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit which came upon them, and by the imposition of hands they passed on to their auxiliaries the gift of the Spirit, which is transmitted down to our day through episcopal consecration".³² To fail to bear this in mind would be to water down the faith.

32. LG 21

We must remember, at the end of these brief reflections on some points from *Lumen Gentium*, that an urgent need is felt at the present day for a renewed theology and spirituality of the presence of the Holy Spirit in history: it would be a great help to the attitude of believers, even as regards the ministry of Peter.

Our attitude of loyalty becomes a task to be carried out

We have recalled the importance assumed in our salesian life by “filial loyalty to Peter’s successor” and have illustrated it with some reflections from the Council. We have pointed out the innovations in style witnessed at the present day, and have taken note of some practical difficulties experienced in this regard in a secularized society. All this gives us seriously to think and puts us, in a certain sense, in a state of alert.

The two articles of the Constitutions which we have re-read together³³ express the ecclesial dimension of our “spirit” and of our “charism”. Article 13 speaks of adherence to the Pope as a living element of the “salesian spirit”, or in other words of our “original style of life and action”.³⁴ The spirit of Don Bosco animates and inspires our practical activity. And so loyalty to the Pope will not be for us a mere interior attitude, but must become an apostolic task to be carried out. Rightly does article 13 conclude by saying: “We educate young christians to an authentic understanding of the Church and we work assiduously for its growth”.

Article 125 in turn speaks of the “Salesian Society” as such. Considering its apostolic activity as a participation in the mission of the Church, it asserts that our vow of obedience binds us explicitly to the supreme authority of the Pope, and hence we “welcome with docility” his magisterium. Here too, because of the very nature of the salesian vocation, obedience and docility are not reduced to the merely internal life of the communities, but become prolonged and

33. C 13, 125

34. C 10

transformed into an apostolic task. This article too concludes by saying that the members "help the faithful, especially the young, to accept the teachings" of the papal magisterium.

And so our "devotion" to the Pope becomes a task to be fulfilled; it invites us to undertake a true apostolic work in this field.

How are we to do it? If we look at Don Bosco we shall feel ourselves stimulated and set on the right road for doing the job. With his own practical mentality and as a pastor and educator he did it by his writings, by the witness of his life, by social communication, through educational activity, through so many apostolic undertakings, and through widely differing enterprises which went well beyond the immediate interests of the Congregation.

Here I would like to suggest some practical aspects, in which local communities and provinces should feel themselves invited to draw up programmes of concrete initiatives in this regard.

The better to highlight such suggestions I give pride of place to a concrete and stimulating *youth spirituality*, a vigorous and energetic gospel project for the young, capable of animating our presence everywhere and of giving life too to a "salesian movement" drawing its inspiration from the pedagogical and pastoral options of Don Bosco.

It is a question of launching and making attractive those values which express the vitality of the message of Christ at the present day: true ideals, demanding behaviour, practical aims, along the lines of the letter of John Paul II to young people, so as to put paid to the growing danger of the "man without a vocation".

Is it not possible that in more than a few of our works the mystical excitation is lacking in what we are doing for and in youth groups? My use of the word "mystical" does not mean that I am inviting you to promote intimist or eccentric activities; it implies rather a courageous conviction about the force of the Gospel, accompanied by a contagious kind of witness resulting from meditation, perseverance, enthusiasm and spirit of sacrifice.

Our vocation as "missionaries of the young" should intensify in all hearts a true vital energy, a strong faith communication, an enlightened sincerity in challenging the trend towards middle class ways and habits, permissiveness and secularism. A confrere or community lacking in this kind of mystique will never be able to give life to a real present day "movement".

Fortunately we can thank the Lord that among us there has been the development of group experience and activity and that positive and mature conclusions have emerged in this connection (as is clear from the latest aid issued by the Youth Pastoral Department: "The Salesian Plan for Group Activity — A progress report on an ongoing experiment": Document 9).

One of the components of a salesian youth spirituality must be precisely a strong "sense of Church" with appropriate attitudes to be created, developed and translated into lived experience. Certainly in the plan and practice of Don Bosco a privileged place was occupied by a committed adherence to the Pope, based on knowledge, love and the welcome reception of his ministry as successor of Peter. This component, if well presented and promoted will give to the youth spi-

rituality a concrete Church experience, clarity in the shaping of their lives and new motives for prompting activity.

But the transmission of a spiritual project for the young will be the result only of a personal and community intensity of life in the Spirit on our part. Hence the need for a constant enrichment of ourselves by updating and developing the sense of Church of our Founder. Here is a basic task for all of us.

For this purpose I now set out some points which I think to be strategic but which, unfortunately, I have noticed are ignored here and there to some extent.

— First of all there is *the concept of the Church as a "Mystery"*, as presented by Vatican II: "The society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element. For this reason the Church is compared, not without significance, to the mystery of the incarnate Word".³⁵

A truly conciliar ecclesiology, which shows up the sacramental nature of the Church, is the foundation of our adherence to the Pope. We know that there are some deviant ecclesiological ideas about, which, even in the best of cases, favour a minimalist interpretation of the ministry of Peter.

At the present day, to be attentively aware of the real presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, in its life, in its mediations, in its mini-

tries, in its charisms, is an indispensable condition for being in tune with the Council.

As a consequence of a genuine ecclesiology of the Mystery we must update our *image of the Pope as the first and supreme Pastor*.

Vatican II presents the hierarchical dimension of the Church, not in a sociological context — neither “monarchical” nor “democratic” — but rather from a “sacramental” standpoint, as a reality of service to the People of God enlivened by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and therefore considered and understood only by the intuition of faith. The figure of the Pope is of one who has a power which is not despotic but a service of truth and charity in a special participation of the saving authority of the risen Christ, who is the true living and actual Head of the Church, its “Eternal Shepherd”.

The Pope is not alone; the universal Church is not a diocese; episcopal collegiality, as we have seen, is not a joint-stock company but involves of its very nature the primacy of Peter.

We know, I repeat, that the manner of exercising the primatial ministry is at the present day passing through an interesting process of renewal. Such an innovation must intensify our attention and our study so that we can remain up to date and competent in a vital aspect of our spirit. There are too many people about who see the present evolution as no more than a social and cultural phenomenon, leaving aside its sacramental reality as a mystery instituted by Christ. It is another motive therefore for deepening our cultural and ecclesiological knowledge together with a constant reflection of faith.

— Another point we have to attend to is the

inclusion of the teaching of the Pope in our evangelizing activity. The magisterium of the Pope is expressed in various ways. We must be able to accept and retain it according to the sense he himself intends, which can be deduced both from the matter concerned, the tenor of its verbal expression and the kind of document, in accordance with the well-known and proper norms of interpretation.

Importance must be given to Encyclicals, to Apostolic Exhortations, to certain particularly significant guidelines, to the Notes or doctrinal Instructions issued particularly through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and to addresses and interventions of special significance. To follow attentively the magisterium of the Pope is one way of keeping oneself up to date on problems and on the directives of the Church, to practise the faith in dialogue with the challenges of the times, to rethink the Gospel as a message of salvation and not just as a fact of religious culture.

Here we have a vast field of urgent and indispensable commitment, at a time of epoch-making changes in which appear uninterruptedly unpublished theories, deviant practices, and complex problems. Every community should find a way of keeping itself well informed and up to date.

If we did not live this continual effort to keep in tune, we could not say that we were truly bearing witness to the spirit of Don Bosco.

— Finally, in welcoming the teaching of the Pope, I think that pride of place must be given, because of the pastoral and pedagogical character of the salesian vocation, to his "*moral directives*"

and his "*social teaching*": two sectors of extraordinary educational urgency, the first more strongly present in developed societies permeated with permissive ideas, the second felt to a greater extent in the third world thirsting for liberation.

As pastors and educators we must be competent in the matter of christian criteria for human conduct. One hears worried references to the "moral drama", to radical about-turns made acceptable by anthropological sciences, to new values emerging in a post-christian culture, to the waning of the traditional ethic.

It will certainly be far from easy to solve all the moral problems of the emerging cultures; adherence to the teaching of the Pope concerning right human conduct will provide doctrinal light and valuable pastoral guidelines.

And then, the maturing of the process of socialization, which presupposes the awareness and active participation of citizens in the management of the common good, has given extraordinary importance to themes of justice and peace and to the political dimension of the life of individuals and peoples as a whole. Ideologies have sprung up in this field which tend to influence and dominate culture. Hence the attention and circumspection with which the social teaching of the Church, especially through the ministry of the Pope, must be handled. If we want to bring a gospel influence to bear on structural changes, to prepare young people for the world of work and to animate political administration with christian spirit, educating to solidarity and peace among people, we need accurate knowledge and adequate ability for communication of the social

teaching of the Church. I have the impression that this is unfortunately a field in which many just limp along. We need to remedy this situation as a matter of urgency, not least because the Constitutions move us in that direction: we Salesians, "while not getting involved in ideologies or party politics, reject everything that encourages deprivation, injustice and violence; we cooperate with all who are trying to build a society more worthy of man's dignity".³⁶

36. C 33

As you see, dear confreres, if we look upon our "devotion" to the Pope as an apostolic "task" for the present day we shall feel a concrete invitation to commit ourselves more as believers, as pastors, as educators. I ask Provincials and Rectors to show constant concern that in every house there be due updating about the Church's magisterium.

The Help of Christians and the Pope

The treatment of a theme so expressive of the spirit of Don Bosco would be incomplete without some reference to the strict linkage which unites the figure of Peter's successor with that of Mary.

I said at the beginning of this letter that the three peculiarly salesian "devotions" to Christ in the Eucharist, to Mary Help of Christians and to the Pope are the practical expression of the ecclesial awareness of our Founder, and constitute three inseparable and complementary aspects of a courageously committed faith.

The so-called "dream" of the two columns narrated by Don Bosco in May 1862³⁷ presents

37. MB VII 169-171;
BM VII 107-109

from a prophetic viewpoint and in the stylized form of a historical event the ship of the Church guided by the Pope in a tempestuous sea. It finds safety in a double recourse to Christ and to Mary, present in history as the Host of salvation and the Immaculate Help of Christians, represented in the two solid columns furnished with anchors and mooring chains.

We know that it was precisely in the 1860's that our Father, moved by his intuition of what lay ahead in the social field and by his acute Church sense, intensified his devotion to Mary in her role of "Help of Christians": "It is the Catholic Church itself that is under attack", he wrote. "It is attacked in its functions, in its sacred institutions, in its head, in its doctrine, and in its discipline; it is attacked precisely as the Catholic Church, as the centre of truth and as the teacher of all the faithful".³⁸

38. cf. ASC 289 (1978), p. 22

From this point of view Don Bosco sees the Madonna as the Mother of the Church, concerned especially to assist and protect the indispensable ministry of the Pope and the Bishops. And history bears witness to her innumerable interventions.

Here we can do no more than make some brief ecclesial reflections which illustrate the mutual relationship between Mary and Peter within the Church seen as "mystery".³⁹

39. cf. von Balthasar, op. cit. pp. 203-225

"The Marian and Petrine principles are coextensive in the Church": the whole Church is both Marian and Petrine, even though in an analogous and complementary sense.

Mary and Peter, in different ways, are entirely at the service of the People of God in the total gift of themselves; both of them join the aware-

ness of their lofty mission with the humility "of the immolation" of their own lives.

Mary is a mother for all the Church; Peter is the foundation for all the Church.

Mary is "immaculate", the prophetic model of the life and sanctity of the whole Church; Peter is "infallible", the prophetic shepherd of the profession of faith and moral conduct of the whole Church.

Mary lives in the resurrection as the tireless "helper" for all the Church; Peter lives in the apostolic succession as the "guide and animator" for all the Church.

Mary is the spouse of the Holy Spirit in the fertility of charisms for the Church; Peter, assisted by the Holy Spirit, is the judge of the authenticity and ordered exercise of charisms for the Church.

Mary participates in the fullness of the paschal mystery which renders her "queen" throughout the ages for the building of the Church; Peter shares in the authority of Christ the Lord with a sacred power which makes him the "minister" (vicar, servant of the servants of God) in history for the building of the Church.

Mary is entirely turned to Christ so that the Church may be his mystical Body; Peter is the sign and bearer of the "headship" of Christ the Shepherd, so that the Church may be the great Sacrament of Salvation.

Mary and Peter therefore, the Help of Christians and the Pope, from different points of view and with complementary functions are now vitally directed to the Church, so that in it the mystery of Christ may attain its fullness.

If Mary ("Mater Ecclesiae") supports and helps

the Pope, Peter's Successor entrusts himself to Mary ("totus tuus") and witnesses to her regal motherhood.

Dear confreres, we, who have taken the Madonna into our home to ensure through her presence the renewal of the Congregation⁴⁰ and who solemnly entrusted ourselves to her in the last General Chapter,⁴¹ must never forget that salesian devotion to her as "Help of Christians and Mother of the Church" implies, on theological grounds and according to the spirit of our charism, a "filial loyalty to Peter's successor and to his teaching" so as to educate and promote a genuine and concrete sense of Church among the poorer classes of society and especially among young people exposed to danger.

May Don Bosco be our inspiration and encouragement.

Our sincere and updated "devotion" to Peter's successor will add enthusiasm to our consecration, timeliness to our pastoral planning, and will lead to a flourishing of vocations.

I greet you in the Lord, and it is my earnest wish that in preparation for 1988 you may all grow constantly in your study, assimilation and witness of the renewed Constitutions and General Regulations.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,



40. cf. ASC 289
(1978)

41. cf. GC22, n. 126