

1.1 LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

SAINT JOHN BOSCO: "IUVENTUTIS PATER ET MAGISTER"

The Letter "Centesimo Exeunte". - A title needing deeper thought and interior assimilation. - The designation "Father". - The adjunct "Teacher". - The living connection with "Youth". A spur to a "New Evangelization". - Ecclesial endorsement of the preventive system.

Rome, 24 February, 1989

My dear confreres,

The celebrations of the first centenary year of the death of our Father and Founder Don Bosco have come to an end. News comes in from all over the world of quite extraordinary events that gave rise to admiration, led to thoughtful reflection and opened up perspectives of fresh commitments. We have discovered that the personality of our Saint has an outstanding place in history and is of concern to wide sectors of cultural and social life. We have enjoyed it all, not because of an ingenuous satisfaction of corporate self-esteem, but because we have been able to contemplate more clearly in him the wonders of the Holy Spirit.

We have experienced a great joy of faith, which has increased in us the appreciation of our vocation and our dedication to our mission. And for all this let us be grateful to God.

The Pope's letter "Centesimo exeunte"

It was precisely during the concluding days of the centenary – 24 January last, feast of our Patron St Francis de Sales and the day we commemorate Mary Help of Christians – that the Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II gave us a wonderful gift, all the more esteemed because it was so unforeseen: the official title for Don Bosco of "Father and Teacher of Youth".

It is a gift which, while filling us with joy, must lead us to deeper reflection and a greater awareness of our responsibility, linked with heartfelt gratitude to the Vicar of Christ.

It is a title which we might say has always been used spontaneously in the familiar language of salesian houses. Evidence of this is something Card. Cagliero said in 1922 during the diamond jubilee celebrations of the ordination of his old companion Don Francesca, with whom he had been ordained in 1862. Speaking of himself and his friend he said: "If we have attained an honoured place in society, if we have been able to do some good (and I can tell you that we have always striven to do as much good as possible), we owe it under God to one person alone: not to our fathers, whom both of us lost at an early age, not to our mothers – holy and pious they were, but not able to help us – but to Don Bosco whom we called *father* from the time we were youngsters, whom we have continued to call *father* and *teacher* right down to this very day, and whom we hope to be able to venerate as a *saint* even here on earth before we go to thank him in Paradise."¹

To call Don Bosco "father and teacher" is therefore for us a familiar way of expressing our admira-

¹ E. CERIA, *Annali*, IV, p. 106 - SEI, Turin 1951

tion and affection; I think the same idea is probably applicable also to other outstanding founders and educators.

What is absolutely new about the Letter "Centesimo Exeunte" is the fact that the supreme authority of the Church has declared in solemn and official terms that Don Bosco is not an ordinary father and teacher of the young, but the "Father and Teacher of Youth" par excellence, at the level of the universal Church: i.e. the title extends to all young people of all continents, both today and in the future. In fact Peter's Successor has declared and proclaimed *by virtue of his Apostolic Power* that Don Bosco is the "Father and Teacher of Youth", and has ordained that "under this title he be honoured and invoked throughout the whole Church, not only by the great Salesian Family but by all who have at heart the cause of youth and intend to foster their education so as to contribute to the building of a new humanity."²

² Address to SDB Gen. Council, 4 Feb. 1989; "Oss. Romano" 5.2.89

This precise statement obviously extends to the whole of his rich personality and his unique mission, but it exalts especially his pedagogical holiness and the brilliance of his method as a "landmark in Church history", as the Pope said. Don Bosco in fact, and still in the words of the Holy Father, "has left behind him a concept, a teaching, a method, which have become part of our heritage. He invites us not just to dedicate ourselves to youth in a general way, but to 'educate by means of a specific plan';" or in other words by his comprehensive system which, "while detracting nothing from the enriching contributions made by other past and present educators, provides a solid basis for a successful attempt to combine the complex elements involved in the overall development of the child or young person".³

³ *ibid.*

A title needing deeper thought and interior assimilation

In the first place therefore the Congregation must undertake a deeper analysis of the significance of this title which characterizes Don Bosco so well.

Our cultural centres and our scholars will be able to continue a work which has already been seriously begun in some of their best works, and most recently in such high level initiatives as: the seminar on "The pedagogical experience of Don Bosco", held at the Cini Foundation on St George's island at Venice;⁴ the first international Congress of "Studies on St John Bosco" which took place at our University in Rome;⁵ and the symposium on "Don Bosco the Founder" held at the Generalate, Via della Pisana, Rome.⁶

⁴ 3-5 October 1988

⁵ 16-20 January 1989

⁶ 22-26 January 1989

These were significant moments of reflection, not with direct reference to this title (which had not as yet been proclaimed) but to its essential content and the stimulating perspectives to which it gives rise. Every confrere is called upon to examine himself daily to see how he measures up to the content of the title, looking to Don Bosco as his supreme model of salesian fatherliness and christian pedagogy.

Although the title is formulated in terms which were already to be found in the liturgical texts for his feast and in some of the formulas we use in praying to him, now that the happy expression has been declared an ecclesial title officially conferred on him it behoves us to be able to explain it so as to pass on to others all its rich significance.

A circular of the Rector Major is hardly the place to attempt even a brief study in this connec-

tion, but rather to suggest some spiritual motives for assimilating its significance and feeling it a stimulating enrichment to our mentality.

In this title in fact we can see condensed, unified and set out, as I said earlier, the main values of the living heritage left us by Don Bosco:

- his kind of holiness: practical love;
- his choice of a field of apostolic activity: youth;
- his strategy of approach: the preventive system;
- his programme of action: education;
- the secret of his success: his intuitive knowledge of the juvenile heart.

Here I simply invite you to meditate on some of the contents of the title, referring to the mystery of the triune God as their source; to the love of the Father rich in mercy; to the solidarity of the Son made for us “the way, the truth and the life”;⁷ to the creativity of the Holy Spirit, who is the gift of transforming rejuvenation for the world throughout the centuries.

⁷ Jn 14.6

This would not seem to be a far-fetched notion: the Blessed Trinity is the true supreme and central mystery of our faith, and must be so in our life and reflections. As a theologian of the East has written: “the Saint is an icon of the trinitarian God”. Don Bosco was a saint imbued by this mystery of God. The particular holiness of his “*da mihi animas*” essentially reflects the pastoral and pedagogical richness of trinitarian charity, meriting for him so noble and uniquely distinctive a title.

The designation “Father”

Among his boys Don Bosco was a prophet of kindness; rightly the Holy Father has several times called him a “genius of the heart”. In him kindness

was a constant personal attitude; it was expressed each day in a contemplation of the continuous manifestations of God's love and a consequent methodology of loving kindness which marked all his apostolic activities.

Part of this interior attitude was his ecclesial role of Founder, as a fruitful father who left a gospel heritage to so many sons and daughters who continue his mission among youth.

The apostle Paul assures us that all fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its title from the first Principle of all love.⁸ This means not only that every Family that goes back to a Founder finds in him the fatherhood of God, but also that he is a witness to it and passes on in practical terms his internal feelings and expressions of affection.

God the Father, the all-powerful creator, manifests his divinity especially in the unfathomable riches of his mercy: "he so loved the world that he gave up his only-begotten Son".⁹

Don Bosco has borne witness to the mystery of this merciful fatherliness by giving himself entirely to the young: "for you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life".¹⁰

And this complete self-donation Don Bosco expressed through a constant and familiar attitude of loving kindness: he taught not only how to love, but also – and in a daily and sincere manner – how to "make oneself loved". The ascetical aspect of his holiness led him to give priority to the social virtues which inspire trust and confidence, which open the heart to a family kind of life, which foster dialogue and understanding, and are expressed in the style of relationships which – as the Apostle writes – is "patient and kind; is not jealous or boastful; it is

⁸ cf. Eph 3,15

⁹ Jn 3,16

¹⁰ *Chronicle of the Oratory, RUFFINO, ASC*
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not arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things".¹¹

¹¹ 1 Cor 14,4-7

Don Bosco's apostolic activity in fact "is entirely based on the words of St Paul" who proclaims the mystery of charity.¹²

¹² cf. G. BOSCO, *Scritti ped. e spirit.* - LAS, Rome 1987, p. 194

And pursuing the matter at still greater depth, it must be added that for Don Bosco the term "father" means not only "kind and loving like a father", nor only "*father-founder* of a spiritual Family, but comes to indicate more vitally *the apostolic action of generating new life*, the evangelical awareness and the carrying out of a responsibility which cares for and educates young people and brings about their growth to christian maturity as adopted children. He is the "father of youth" because he felt himself called by God "to be a real father" to so many needy youngsters and generate them to a life of grace as sons of God, in the deep sense of the apostle Paul: "for though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel";¹³ "my little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"¹⁴

¹³ 1 Cor 4,15

¹⁴ Gal 4,19; cf. also 1 Thess 2,11; Philem 10

These brief remarks on the fatherliness of Don Bosco, manifested in his "pedagogy of love" and "loving kindness", are no more than a rapid though stimulating indication of a theme which is central to our salesian spirit. This has been authoritatively stated by his third successor, Fr Philip Rinaldi: "The whole life of Don Bosco is a complete treatise on the fatherhood that comes from the heavenly Father (Eph 3,15) and which he practised here be-

low in a very high and almost unique degree towards the young and towards all, in the thousand and one events of life, in relief of all temporal and spiritual distress, with total dedication and self-sacrifice, in the greatness of a heart boundless as the shores of the sea, making himself all things to all so as to win over young souls and lead them to the Lord”.¹⁵

We may add that the principal daily source of the fruitfulness of his spiritual fatherhood was the exercise of his priestly ministry in the sacrament of Penance.

It is important therefore that we regain and deepen the sense of this characteristically “oratorian” fatherhood in the multiple human and divine aspects that belong to it. This is an inescapable task of every disciple of Don Bosco. Because, if it is true that Provincials and Rectors have the duty of bringing this fatherliness to life in particular and specialized ways,¹⁶ others also – priests, brothers and clerics – since they are educators of young people who want to be loved and helped through the various stages of their development, must know how to behave as real fathers, each according to his own role: responsible, patient, generous and encouraging.

At the end of the Novices’ Retreat at Villa Moglia in 1930, Fr Rinaldi did not hesitate to tell them (novices!): “You too must be fathers to the youngsters entrusted to you; you must love and help them as would a real father”.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Acts. Sup. Chap.*,
26.4.31, p. 939 ff.

¹⁶ cf. respective manuals

¹⁷ Testimony of a novice of the time.

The adjunct "Teacher"

The term "teacher" is closely linked with that of "father". Here again it is not enough to say that Don Bosco was a genial educator who taught an efficacious method of formation: he was not just a competent exponent of a good method.

He was a "teacher" because among his fatherly tasks he gave priority to the inculcating of a true sense of life, of communicating the power and vigour of christian values, the practice of the baptismal virtues, making known above all in a way specifically adapted to the young the genuine way of love, through a pedagogy of holiness.

You need only think of the sense in which he was the spiritual guide of Dominic Savio, of Michael Magone, of Francis Besucco, and of the Oratory boys in general. In these cases too the most convincing part of his teaching was the penetrating exchanges in the confessional.

In him the two characteristics of "father and teacher" were intimately interwoven, lived and applied in an inseparable fashion.

The term "Teacher" refers therefore to the wisdom of heart with which Don Bosco was able to bear witness to and transmit fundamental criteria and his efficacious way of tackling the complex tasks of education.

In his Letter "Iuvenum Patris", John Paul II had already presented St John Bosco as an outstanding "Master in education", because he had been able to produce a vital synthesis between educational practice and pastoral wisdom, between human advancement and evangelization. "Today more than ever before", said the Pope, there is need of an educational method which can take the contributions of the human educational sciences and raise them

to the life-giving level of pastoral charity. There is a real hunger for a pastoral wisdom which is not satisfied with "deciphering" or "interpreting" man, but is concerned to bring about his efficacious transformation in the light of those final ends and the strength of the dynamic forces inserted by God himself in the heart of the Church and humanity".¹⁸

¹⁸ As note 2 earlier.

In this sense Don Bosco goes back to Christ, the "inventor" of pastoral work and the supreme Master of paschal salvation. God the Father sent his only Son into the world as the Word of saving truth: "In many and various ways", says the letter to the Hebrews, "God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son".¹⁹ Jesus, in fact, "came into the world to bear witness to the truth";²⁰ his truth alone "will make us free".²¹

¹⁹ Heb 1,1-2

²⁰ Jn 18,37

²¹ cf. 1 Jn 8,32

The application to Don Bosco of the title of "Teacher" means to recognize in him a particular reading of the event of Christ and a pedagogical ability to communicate his Gospel. This he did by means of an educational system which operates, as the Holy Father has said, within human growth itself by methodological criteria which are in harmony with the lively desires and expectations of youth and the poorer classes.

The idea of "prevention" which is characteristic of his system was described in the recent Letter "Centesimo Exeunte" as "centred on the need to protect the young from negative experiences; to provide a positive education through valid suggestions and examples; to build on the interior freedom with which they have been endowed; to establish with them relationships of genuine friendship; to stimulate their innate abilities by means of reason, religion and loving kindness".²²

²² *Centesimo Exeunte*

Our Congregation has spread the knowledge of the exceptional validity of the singular experience lived by the Founder and passed on by him to be faithfully preserved, studied intelligently at greater depth, constantly reapplied and courageously developed in the many new cultural situations that the future would bring. His first disciples used to say of him what the beloved Apostle said of the Saviour: "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands. We are his witnesses, and this is what we proclaim to you".²³

²³ cf. 1 Jn 1,1-2

"The substance of his teaching remains intact; the unique nature of his spirit, his intuitions, his style, his charisma are unchanged, because they draw their inspiration from the transcendent pedagogy of God. He continues to be our teacher in the present difficult times, and suggests a 'new education' which is at once both creative and faithful".²⁴

²⁴ *Iuvenum Patris* 13

The living connection with "Youth"

The connection of the terms "Father and Teacher" with "Youth" is an explicit indication of Don Bosco's choice of his field of pastoral charity: it is that of young people, and preferably those who are in need or of the poorer classes.

With him his sons and daughters too are called to be, in the words of John Paul II, "always and everywhere *missionaries of the young*".²⁵

²⁵ As note 2 earlier.

And his choice of youth is not only a specification of those to whom his work would be directed but implies a whole gospel climate of life, a sensitivity about the future, a valuable standpoint for the discernment of reality starting from the "the poor and the little ones"; it is a standpoint which be-

comes in fact a kind of daily injection of youthfulness and a good beginning from which he and his educators can begin in reinterpreting society.

We need only reflect on what is said in the recent Apostolic Exhortation "Christifideles laici": "The Church sees her path towards the future in youth, beholding in them a reflection of herself and her call to that blessed youthfulness which she constantly enjoys as a result of Christ's Spirit".²⁶

²⁶ *Christifideles laici* 46

In the famous Message of the Vatican Council II to youth, the Bishops recalled that four years work had been dedicated to rejuvenating the Church's countenance, so that it might better correspond to the design of the Risen Christ who is eternally young: his Spouse "possesses what constitutes the strength and the charm of youth: the ability to rejoice with what is beginning, to give oneself unreservedly, to renew oneself and to set out again for new conquests. Look upon the Church and you will find in her the face of Christ, the genuine, humble and wise hero, the prophet of truth and love, the companion and friend of youth".²⁷

²⁷ 8 December 1965

This nostalgia for the springtime of our life makes us think, as we return to the Mystery of God, of the renewing force of the Holy Spirit who is the power behind novelty and sanctification in history. He is the soul of the Church, the inexhaustible source of its youth, the author of that special reserve of creative power that transforms the world. It is through the work of the Spirit, in fact, that the whole of nature groans in a common travail.²⁸

²⁸ cf. Rom 8,22

The Spirit therefore brings ever new strength and energy. He brings to fulfilment all the exciting communication of God to man, injecting into history the new things that are needed to give it life

and lead it to its objective: "he who sows in the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life".²⁹

This new and eternal life resides in the hearts of all believers: in the young, enriching them with a life of faith which makes them in very truth the hope of the Church and Society (we had a happy taste of this at Turin in the "Appraisal DB88"); in adult educators: endowing them with the freshness of the Gospel, a right understanding of the values of renewal, empathy for the era which is beginning, a welcome acceptance of the challenges of youth, a friendly presence to help young people to discern their plan of life, and a shared perception of the values emerging from justice, non-violence, peace, solidarity and ecology.

The whole Church, says the Pope, is asked to see itself in a special way in youth; it is called to relive the love of predilection which Christ showed to the young man of the Gospel: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him".³⁰

This is one of the more urgent aspects of the Gift of the Spirit for all the People of God, and particularly for us.

A spur to a "new evangelization"

We must consider the title also as a strong appeal and an insistent stimulus for the present tasks of the "new evangelization": we are at a stirring and dramatic point in history.

The preparation of the coming GC23 already has us all occupied in discerning and planning what we have to do in this regard. The Pope too referred with satisfaction to this "task and challenge" we want to address in the General Chapter for the edu-

²⁹ Gal 6,8

³⁰ Mk 10,21

cation of youth to the faith, linking it with the proclamation of the title. It is a theme, the Pope told us, "which touches deeply the entire Church. It has implications which do not depend only on particular characteristics of the prevailing youth condition, but stem from a cultural situation which is passing through a period of great changes as the third millennium of christianity draws near. It is a time of great ecclesial responsibility and of a captivating commitment in the process of evangelization".³¹

³¹ As note 2 earlier.

Don Bosco's option for the young calls for a courageous revision and creativity on our part. "Starting from the lowest", as the saying goes nowadays, provides an approach for interventions which is particularly enlightening. The Italian Bishops have declared that these 'lowest' "are a dramatic sign of the crisis of the present day".³² "In the first place we shall do away with the idols we have built up: money, power, consumerism, waste, and the tendency to live beyond our means and possibilities. Then we shall rediscover the values inherent in the common good".³³ "The country will not grow unless we all grow together".³⁴

³² "Enchiridion CEI", 3, 1980-93, Ed. Dehoniana, Bologna.

³³ *ibid.* 6

³⁴ *ibid.* 8

This line of approach leads to a deep cultural appraisal for an exciting change of mentality in the way we perceive the strategic points of evangelization. Don Bosco launched a pastoral work of renewal precisely because he started from this perceptive standpoint: starting from the lowest enables you to better understand the problems of everyone.

But he concentrated on the young, not only because they were abandoned and in need, not only because they were poor and on the fringe of society, not only because they were at the end of the line and victims of inadequate structures, but also

and intensely – and this is evident in all his methods – because he perceived at their true value their rich qualities of heart which promised new hope for the future.

This is why in living with them he was led to build an environment of joy, based on his conviction that the possibilities of a successful outcome were already there. He was never a prophet of doom or a bitter critic, wallowing in pessimism and stirring up gloom and dejection. He showed himself a joyful disciple of the Lord, the herald of the message of his paschal victory, with confidence in the youthful energies not yet tainted by wrinkles and old age, the guide of new generations looking for the truths of salvation, attracted by great ideals and animated by generous aspirations.

The Archbishop of Turin, Card. Anastasio Ballestrero, in his homily during the concelebration concluding the centenary year, said on 31 January last: “Today people are too sad; we have human beings who are too serious, always tormented by problems, by nightmares, by dark and gloomy doubts; but the joy of Christ, which Don Bosco proclaimed and fostered so much, must find us still faithful: this is an example he gives us, something he has left us, and it is also a hope which takes new life in all of us”.

This too is an important aspect which cannot fail to enter into the interpretation of his title of “Father and Teacher of Youth”.

Ecclesial endorsement of the preventive system

If we think of how much Pope John Paul II has said and written during the centenary year, from

the Letter "Iuvenum Patris" to the homilies and addresses he gave during his pilgrimage to Turin and district, to the document "Centesimo Exeunte" and to his words during the special audience asked for by the Rector Major and his Council to fulfil their obligation to thank him, we cannot fail to conclude that the title sums up in a brief and well-chosen expression the most authoritative statement of the vocation and mission of Don Bosco, and of his charisma among the People of God. We may say that it constitutes an ecclesial endorsement of the preventive system.

The Pope has meditated a great deal on Don Bosco, and on his own personal initiative at the end and culmination, as it were, of the celebrations has conferred on him this title, because he was "fully convinced that Don Bosco attained his personal holiness through an educative commitment lived with zeal and an apostolic heart, and that his life, spirituality, writings and work provide great evangelical lights and valid methodological criteria for the formation of the 'New Man'".³⁵

³⁵ As note 2 earlier.

For the whole Church, and especially for our Family, it is a powerful encouragement to give ever greater value to Don Bosco's pedagogical and pastoral criteria, and to truly live and act as "missionaries of the young".

And then for us Salesians in a most particular way, this title must represent the *motto and slogan of the centenary*, which urges us to gather the greatest possible fruit from the very many gifts we have received in our efforts to give to the priceless charisma of the Founder the maximum relevance to the present day. Let us be its signs and bearers everywhere!

The title's contents should become a living part

of our attitudes, our convictions and our apostolic creativity.

Let us by all means intensify the seriousness of studies on our mission and on the Founder's spirit, but as well and above all let us grow in that natural kindred relationship with the Holy Spirit who makes us witnesses and communicators of the extraordinary gift God has bestowed on Don Bosco for youth.

This will be the most fruitful task in our work of renewal: for our own apostolic mentality and outlook, for creativity in our pastoral work, for the oratorian criterion we want to relaunch, for our system of kindness, for a lively and relevant youth spirituality, for a growing involvement of the laity, for a generous missionary development, for a more efficacious campaign for vocations, for effective competence in the new evangelization, so as to make greater progress with the young on the difficult road that leads to holiness.

Let us turn with trust to our dear Founder and ask him to intercede for us and help us to be faithful; let us say to him:

"O Father and Teacher of Youth,
Saint John Bosco,
teach us to become every day
signs and bearers of God's love for the
young;
and grant that with Mary as our guide
we may follow joyfully with them
the way that leads to Love!"

Before concluding, dear confreres, I want to ask you a favour: that in every house you will express heartfelt gratitude to Pope John Paul II with a eucharistic concelebration offered for his in-

tentions. Some communities have already taken the initiative in doing this, but it is fitting that it be done in every community.

May Don Bosco always intercede efficaciously for Peter's Successor, who guides the Church of Christ in these years which are at once so difficult but promising.

My cordial greetings and best wishes to you all.
Affectionately in Christ,

Don F. Viganò