

ACTS OF SUPERIOR COUNCIL OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY

YEAR LX - JULY-SEPTEMBER - No. 293

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome
Whit Saturday
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My dear Confreres,

As May runs out this years we are left in the company of Mary and the Apostles in that climate of prayerful expectation characteristic of the days between the Ascension and Pentecost; they are days of contemplation and seeking, days of trusting prayer, days of communion in the presence of the mystery. It recalls the early days of the Church, still small and lacking experience of other peoples, but with its own faithful followers and with the highest possible potential for the future.

If it is true that today we are all called to breathe a new air of Pentecost, let us try to imitate Mary and the Apostles as they wait for the Holy Spirit and strive to put themselves at his disposal.

As my contacts increase with the confreres of so many provinces I become ever more convinced that the Congregation is in harmony with the present moment, which is a privileged one of the Spirit of the Lord.

The relaunching of our devotion to Mary Help of Christians and the "strenna" on Don Bosco's Preventive System are everywhere giving rise to initiatives in depth which lead us to trust in our hearts.

The Holy Father, in his first encyclical "Redemptor Hominis", tells us that "we also are in a certain way in a season of a new Advent, a season of expectation" (RH 1), and he asks us: "What should we do, in order that this new advent of the

Church connected with the approaching end of the second millennium may bring us closer to him whom Sacred Scripture calls 'Everlasting Father', *Pater futuri saeculi?*" (RH 7).

"To awake the dawn"

So many recent ecclesiastical events (the election of the two successors of Paul VI, the dynamic ministry of John Paul II, the Bishops' Conference at Puebla, as well as various earlier events connected with the Ecumenical Council Vatican II and, for us, also the last two General Chapters and other initiatives of the Salesian Family) are manifesting on a worldwide scale a very positive process of resurgence in the christian and religious vocation.

Thus is born in the mind of the believer a spontaneous sense of jubilee which leads him to repeat with the psalmist: "Awake my soul, awake lyre and harp, I will awake the dawn"! (Ps 56).

Truly we have reason to believe that we are witnessing in the Church the dawn of a new era of genuine christianity and evangelical growth.

Now the *beginning period* in a history in which we ourselves are involved in the role of protagonists must mean more to us than being passive bystanders watching in poetic fashion what nature is doing. We too, in harmony with God's Spirit, are called on 'to awake the dawn'. A new era in history is never the result of mere evolution, but is the fruit of conscious effort, or of a firm and definite will; it is up to us to make the effort to build it.

And so to our perception of the initiatives of God and the novel attraction surrounding the birth of a new period of ecclesiastical life, there is urgent need to and the realisation of our own responsibility, the need to find a way of taking part, and the drawing up of a realistic and practical plan for our collaboration.

Prepare a Plan for Active Participation

For the construction of a fast and safe aeroplane an exact and sophisticated technology is required; for the proper training of an astronaut many personal qualities are needed, together with a long and rigorous training period; to change the structure of a society it is indispensable not only to be able to formulate a courageous plan but also to be able to program its realization in a concrete manner and adhere to it at the cost of great sacrifice; to renew the world and save man divine wisdom devised the paschal mystery which includes at its centre self-renunciation, even to the giving up of life itself. There is no salvation, no true love without sacrifice; *there is no rebirth in the Church without the free acceptance of the cross*. The true disciple of Christ watches the birth of a new day not from an armchair but from Mount Calvary, and this not for the purpose of playing down the magic and the beauty but to accept the responsibility for filling the subsequent hours of light with acts of love; and this means an effort needing daily struggle and sacrifice.

At a moment of new beginning and hope, such as we are experiencing, it is indispensable from a pedagogical point of view to centre our attention on *a fact without which we could not be protagonists of the new era which is coming to birth*. It is a question of a methodology which is a *sine qua non* for christian love: *discipline of the spirit*.

Ascetical commitment, which implies the practice of love and renunciation in self-donation, forms an essential part of the very nature of religious life; no Institute has been able to develop the charism of its Founder without the asceticism of concrete discipline.

To have a clear understanding of this very practical element, on which all the saints have laid such stress and about which our own dear Founder has spoken to us in forthright fashion, is of immediate importance.

Don Bosco a Diligent Promoter of Discipline of the Spirit

Don Bosco wanted his Salesians to live a concrete discipline of religious life. In addition to his characteristic pedagogy of 'work' and 'temperance', he insisted on a free and simple but none the less concrete adherence to the Constitutions. "The observance of our rules will cost us a great deal of effort", he wrote in a circular to the confreres in 1884... "My sons, do we expect to go to heaven in a carriage and pair? We did not become religious for our enjoyment, but precisely to suffer and gain merit for the next life; we are consecrated to God not to command but to obey; not to attach ourselves to creatures but to practise charity to our neighbour moved solely by God's love; not to lead an easy life but to be poor with Jesus Christ, to suffer with Christ here on earth so as to render ourselves worthy of his glory in heaven" (MB 17, 15-17).

And in his first circular letter (to which we referred last January, cf. ASC n. 291) Don Bosco was very clear in his insistence. "The primary aim of our Society is the sanctification of its members. On entering it, therefore, everyone must discard any other intention and concern. It would be wrong to enter in order to enjoy a tranquil life, to look to one's own convenience;... this would hardly be a response to Christ's call: 'Follow me'. Such a person would be seeking temporal advantages, not his spiritual good... Our basic motive must stem from the Lord's words that whoever wants to be his disciple must follow him in prayer, in penance, especially in self-denial, in accepting daily crosses... And how far must we follow him? Till death, and if necessary even to death on the cross." (MB 8, 828-9; BM 8, 354-5).

To the Oratory boys themselves, whom he was so skilful in guiding to holiness, Don Bosco recommended the highway of happiness coupled with the fulfilment of each one's duty as the path to travel (cf. for example, 'Life of Dominic Savio', Chap. 18).

And we know that in his work of education Don Bosco, "though remaining always pleasant and agreeable, did not easily overlook indiscipline" (MB 6, 306).

We may also recall his strong warning about the future of our Family: "As long as the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians dedicate themselves to prayer and work and practise temperance and poverty, the two Congregations will do much good. But if by some mischance they become lax and shy away from work to seek life's comforts, they will have run their course; they will begin to decline and to disintegrate" (MB 10, 651-2; BM 10, 296-7).

And there is the strong remark he added at the end of his hand-written Memoirs: "When comforts and ease begin to take root among us, then our Pious Society will have run its course."

I thought it well to quote these warning words, but not indeed to give rise to depressing lamentations which would in any case be at variance with what I said earlier on. It will always be necessary to recall the meaning of the cross in the life of faith and that of asceticism and discipline in religious life, even though it remains true that there will always be defects to correct.

New Aspects of Commitment to Religious Discipline

I want to invite you therefore to reflect on this important matter of 'religious discipline', not because I have been dismayed to learn of any situation of laxity or decline, but rather because I feel impelled by the urgent need we have to take up quickly and intelligently the indispensable positive aspects of a renewed asceticism.

Rather than a lack of fidelity, it is the big changes now taking place that seem to have contributed to a temporary eclipse among religious of the deep gospel sense of a concrete discipline of life, almost like a reaction to a kind of too formal moral

system, to a lack of sensitivity to the new process of personality development, to a certain alienation from the big present-day over-valuing of what is positive in the signs of the times without being on guard against certain ambiguities contained therein, and without paying sufficient attention to the great confusion caused by a secularist attitude on whose flat horizon the outline of the cross no longer stands out.

From a similar reaction can also stem quite easily a state of laxity as the sad consequence of a confused mentality in urgent need of conversion. History and experience, in fact, teach us that religious life regains its strength when it witnesses a rebirth of the consciousness and practice, at both a personal and community level, of the kind of ascetical discipline desired by the Founder.

Pope Paul VI said to the General Chapter of the Rogationists: "May the love of discipline, which a changed understanding of this term at the present day would present as a limitation rather than a guarantee and backing for the apostolate, sustain like an unshakable rock the ideals of prayer, of religious life, of formation and ministerial activity" (28 August 1974).

"In unity is strength", said Pius XI, speaking of the importance of shared responsibility and the ability to work together, "but it is discipline that wakes unity possible" (12 June 1929, to the French National Catholic Federation).

So that our vocation and the intensity of our communion in the Congregation may go from strength to strength, we must lend all our endeavours to check up on and restore Don Bosco's practice of salesian discipline. To help us in this practical reflection I have asked my "closest collaborator", Fr Scrivo — Vicar General, to whom "is entrusted the care of and responsibility for religious life and discipline" (Const. 138), to indicate some of the more essential points that this constructive discipline seems to call for at the present day.

It is precisely because we want to ensure the fine day presaged by the present dawn that we must give fresh vigour

to certain ascetical values stemming from our religious profession.

As prophetic and topical witness we may call to mind the authoritative appeal for discipline in the life of the Church made by the two new Popes.

John Paul I referred to it explicitly in his first address to the Cardinals, and again when speaking to the clergy of Rome. He did not speak of the 'little' discipline limited to purely formal observance, but to the 'great' discipline which exists only if external observance is the fruit of deep convictions and the free and joyful projection of a life lived deeply with God... This 'great' discipline requires a suitable atmosphere" (Oss. Rom. 8 Sept. 1978).

And John Paul II in his inaugural radio-message emphasised the same idea: "Faithfulness implies also respect for the great discipline of the Church... Discipline in fact is not aimed at mortification, but is a guarantee of the correct ordering proper to the Mystical Body; it assures the customary and natural relationship among all the members who make up that body" (Oss. Rom. 18 Oct. 1978).

We Are "Disciples"

In the last analysis, dear confreres, the fundamental meaning of discipline (which goes beyond the etymology of the word) is linked to the concept of "disciple". Our religious discipline belongs on the one hand to our root quality of *followers of Christ*, and on the other to the historical fact, freely and publicly entered into by our act of profession, that we chose to *stay with Don Bosco*, according to the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis of Sales (cf. Const. 73, 74).

To be disciples of Christ, in the religious life, implies an enlightened adherence to the paschal mystery of the cross, reinforced by a concrete plan of life drawn up by the Founder and

witnessed to both by him and by the living tradition of the Institute concerned: *hence for us it implies being disciples of Don Bosco*. There is question here of a charismatic kind of discipline which leads us to heed and follow our Saint as Teacher and Guide, not only as regards the wide objectives of his mission but also in respect of the demands of the practical directives stemming from "his particular style of sanctification and apostolate" (MB 11), which makes incarnate in the Church a specific charism of the Holy Spirit.

Reasons are not lacking to support this manner of being disciples.

— In the first place, when Holy Scripture presents to us the *concept of the Covenant* (and the religious vocation is to be interpreted in this connection), it bases it on two columns: *intimacy with God*, who is the soul of the covenant and helps to mould in man a new heart; and the *observance of the commandments*, as an existential reply and concrete measure of adherence to the covenant. The vital centre of the covenant is found in "friendship", but "law" is the pedagogue that accompanies and defends it.

In this way discipline appears as the pedagogy of a freedom historically committed to a love arising from a solemn pledge. In such circumstances observance without love is dead, but it is equally true that there is no true love without observance.

Remember what St John says: "We can be sure that we know God only by keeping his commandments. Anyone who says 'I know him' and does not keep his commandments is a liar, refusing to admit the truth. But when anyone does obey what he has said, God's love comes to perfection in him" (1 John 2, 3-4).

— A second reason can be found in the encyclical "Redemptor Hominis", in which the Holy Father insists on the *central place occupied in the life of the Church by the Eucharist and Penance*.

Now the *Eucharist* expresses the vertex of the mystery of the paschal covenant in the words of consecration which proclaim the highest expression of love: "this is my body and this is my blood which is given for you": i.e. the sacrifice of oneself for others.

And then *Penance* is the sacrament of conversion to an asceticism which demands repentance and purification of heart: be converted and believe the Gospel! "Without this constant ever-renewed endeavour for conversion — says the Pope — partaking of the Eucharist would lack its full redeeming effectiveness" (RH 20). In addition to the humble acknowledgement of one's own failings, Penance implies the firm intention to behave as a disciple.

Rightly therefore the Pope asserts that "the Church of the new Advent, the Church that is continually preparing for the new coming of the Lord, must be the Church of the Eucharist and of Penance" (RH 20).

— Another reason, not to be discounted, is that *the very youth to whom we are sent have need of our witness to religious discipline*, at both a personal and community level, as an evident and tangible sign of our ecclesiastical mission for their service. They must be able to deduce from our mode of life that for us *baptism* is a radical commitment to a spiritual combat which sets us as Christ's disciples on the road to martyrdom as the highest expression of the gift of ourselves to others; and that *religious profession* has incorporated us into an organised apostolic community which realizes within the Church a well-trying objective of a pedagogical system. The keen and penetrating eye of the pupil soon discerns the need for a wise discipline to permeate the whole educational process, so that "to be trained" automatically implies "to be subject to discipline"; for a mature man, in fact, discipline is something which accompanies him as a permanent quality ensuring a harmonious control of his gifts and strength.

This need to see witness borne to a free and balanced disci-

pline, which strengthens a life of communion and enhances the efficacy of a commitment to service, is greatly felt in modern society, tossed about as it is between the two extremes of totalitarianism and anarchy.

— Finally, *a therapeutic motive (if you like) can be found in the avoidance of that "sinister evil of individualism"* about which the worthy Fr Ricceri spoke to us in a circular of 1977 (ASC n. 286, April-June 1977). Individualism is closely linked with indiscipline, and is a cancer which destroys the very possibility of renewal in religious life. There is great need at the present time for the solid riches of religious obedience to be translated into daily living, and for the realistic significance of the corresponding vow to be retrieved; these lead logically to the practical demands of religious discipline, in the concrete imitation and following of Christ who "was obedient to God unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2, 8). The upswing to a middle-class way of life and the breaking up of the community through individualism are the result of a lack of discipline linked with neglect of the paschal mystery.

Dear confreres, the Pope concludes his first encyclical with a humble but fervent invitation to prayer: "Above all — he says — I implore Mary, the heavenly Mother of the Church, to be so good as to persevere with us in this prayer of humanity's new Advent" (RH 22).

She who lived with joy the wonderful dawn of the history of salvation, who embraced so generously the far from easy discipline of her ministry of Mother of Christ, even to the extent of accompanying him to Calvary, has shown us also by her personal witness that the most sublime love is attained only by following this same road. With great confidence let us ask her to be with us, as the Help of our covenantal vocation, to help us to renew and intensify both the closeness of our friendship with God and our practical commitment to our religious discipline.

My greetings to you all, and I ask you to complement

these reflections of mine on religious discipline by a deeper study of the practical points set out by Fr Scrivo.

May Don Bosco obtain for us both light and courage!

Fraternally in Christ,

Fr EGIDIUS VIGANÒ
Rector Major