

acts

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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

“DON BOSCO - 88”

Following Jesus Christ. – Don Bosco, apostle of the Oratory. – Prophetic example of his youth. – Father and Founder. – The vast movement of his “spiritual school”. – A centenary to be prepared everywhere. – Some initiatives needing the common support of all.

Rome, 19 March 1985

My dear confreres,

I am writing on the feast of St Joseph. The new text of the Constitutions presents this genial saint as one of the patrons to whom Don Bosco entrusted our Congregation.¹ Every salesian invokes his intercession in the formula of profession.² The goodness and kindness which characterize him, his hidden hard work, his love for Mary and daily familiar contact with Jesus, should be for us too an incentive to grow in the Church through work and daily responsibility with humble hearts always overflowing with joy. St. Joseph, like Mary, leads us directly to Jesus.

1. cf. Constitutions art. 9

2. cf. *ibid.* 24

Following Jesus Christ

The initiative of going more deeply with our young people into the message on the Beatitudes is convincing us of the formational impact which our pastoral activity takes on when linked with more attention to Christ in the Gospel. This is the highway for overcoming every danger of spiritual superficiality. In this sense and in the light of the preparation of the centenary celebrations of the

death of Don Bosco, I invite you to look at our Father, to see him as an engaging and hard working disciple of the Lord who calls us to follow him: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ!".³

3. 1 Cor 11,1

The renewed Constitutions often remind us of the following of Christ and the importance of the Gospel: this was a passion with Don Bosco and provides a window on his spirit.

"To stay with Don Bosco" means to give oneself completely to the following of Christ. "Through our religious profession," we read in the Constitutions, "we offer ourselves to God in order to follow Christ and work with him in building up the Kingdom";⁴ "our living rule is Jesus Christ, the Saviour announced in the Gospel".⁵

4. Const. 3

5: *ibid.* 196; cf. 60

The new text of the Rule emphasizes too that the Preventive System has been passed on to us as a way of living and of handing on the Gospel;⁶ that we walk side by side with the young so as to make grow in them the new man so that they may "discover in the Lord and in his Gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence";⁷ that our mission is concerned "with bringing to men the message of the Gospel which is closely tied in with the development of the temporal order";⁸ that we help those to whom we are sent "to develop their own human and baptismal vocation by a daily life progressively inspired and unified by the Gospel";⁹ that also the whole of our process of formation must be "enlightened by the Gospel";¹⁰ and that even when we come together in a Chapter we have to carry out a communal reflection, precisely so as to keep ourselves faithful to the Gospel.¹¹

6. *ibid.* 20

7. *ibid.* 34

8. *ibid.* 31

9. *ibid.* 37

10. *ibid.* 98

11. *ibid.* 146

It is therefore of great importance that when speaking of Don Bosco we refer him constantly to

Christ, that we see in him a prophet of the Gospel, that we imitate him in his ability to communicate the Word of God with the greatest clarity and effectiveness, that we spread a youthful spirituality firmly anchored in the message of revelation. If we read the Gospel with the eyes of Don Bosco, we too will perceive more clearly "certain aspects of the figure of the Lord"¹² which are particularly significant for the young.

12. *ibid.* 11

So insistent a reminder about following Christ and listening to the Gospel should constitute a point of departure for meditating on Don Bosco and presenting him to the world during these three years of preparation for the centenary celebrations.

Don Bosco, apostle of the Oratory

Don Bosco, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, was a priest, educator, founder, writer, publisher, traveller, famous citizen, man of God, and one who began a school of sanctification and apostolate in the Church. His historical profile as a man of the Gospel offers many aspects deserving of attentive study. But if we ask what was the dominant note in him, the most typical expression of his way of following Christ, the dynamic nucleus of his charism, I would say without any hesitation that it was the radical donation of himself to Jesus Christ, so as to devote himself in Him and with Him to the young through the apostolic initiative of the Oratory.

He felt himself explicitly called by the Lord and sent by him to do this work. He carried it out with an inventiveness and enthusiasm which made him concentrate his pastoral mission in the Oratory as "a house that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a

school that prepared (the youngsters) for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.¹³ It was to this that he was committed; this was the model to be canonized and multiplied.

13. *ibid.* 40

It is symptomatic to note how he himself gave the specific name "the work of the Oratories" to the institutions to which his apostolic zeal gave rise. Induced by Pius IX to put into writing the more significant events of his life for the enlightenment and assistance of his collaborators and those who would come after him, he wrote those very interesting notes to which he gave precisely the title of *Memoirs of the Oratory*. The first thirty years of his life proved to be a providential path towards Valdocco, the cradle of the Oratory, and the later ones founded by the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Cooperators, all of which have been related to that first Oratory, to its vitality, its development, its continuity and its expansion on a worldwide level. Don Bosco, Christ's disciple, stands out especially for his "oratorian heart".

Rightly does the new text of the Constitutions assert that Don Bosco's experience in the Oratory at Valdocco "is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works".¹⁴ It was by this type of pastoral activity that our Father became the sign and bearer of the love of Christ for young people who are poor, and for the poor in general; in the Oratory he put together the practical synthesis of the Preventive System; it was there that he attained the purpose of his vocation, guided always by Mary; there he re-read and meditated on the Gospel, so as to make present in a society in process of evolution the mystery of Christ,

14. *ibid.*

15. cf. LG 46

16. cf. Const. 10

17. MR 11

18. cf. Acts Sup. Council n. 290

"blessing children and doing good to all".¹⁵ The Oratory is the first site of the historic mission of Don Bosco, the place where the first spark was struck which kindled his resolution to follow the Lord; the source from which gushed forth that "pastoral charity"¹⁶ which flows like a river through salesian tradition. The Oratory is the place where is manifested the unique gospel intuition of Don Bosco, his apostolic brilliance, his original kind of spirituality, because it is the privileged place of his "experience of the Spirit".¹⁷ And this "Oratory", "theological home" of the salesian mission, is unintelligible without Jesus Christ and his Gospel.¹⁸

Even some observers who are not believers and who look on Don Bosco only in his capacity as a citizen and human educator, see his pedagogical brilliance expressed in the Oratory as a social and cultural centre providing a response to the new needs of the present day. An unquestionable 'lay' semeiologist has gone as far as saying that with the Oratory Don Bosco has invented not only a new way of gathering people together, but also a new and updated way of effecting social communication.

"The Oratory", he says, "is a perfect machine in which every channel of communication, from games to music, from the theatre to the press and so on, is digested, reused and discussed when news comes in from without. In this sense Don Bosco's project invests the whole of the society of an industrial era with a lively sociological imagination, a sense of the present moment in time, organizational creativity and an overall policy of mass communication which provides an alternative to the mode of operation (often useless and not infrequently positively harmful) of the leading dinosaurs (the main present-

day mass media) which are perhaps of less importance than is generally thought".¹⁹

So flattering an opinion, coming from one solely concerned to point out initiatives which are efficient from an exclusively social aspect, should make us think and should prompt us to shake off the dust of years which has settled on our oratory presence, and should make us give new life with modern applications to a pastoral and pedagogical prerogative which should distinguish us from others. I have heard it said by some hasty exponents of pastoral theory that "the charism of the Oratory" has had its day. To such people we need to show by facts that the oratory is fully alive and valid at the present day, and that it retains its attraction for today's youth. But we must recognize the fact that there is a lot of dust to remove, and a generous investment of intelligence, heart and personnel is called for.

I invite you to freshen up our vocational fantasy by reading again the fine chapter of Fr Ceria on the Oratory in its early days.²⁰

If then in 1988 we want to celebrate Don Bosco in all his original greatness, we must see to it that in our works there emerges ever more clearly his oratorian criterion as the inspiring principle which lies behind our proposals for renewal and which drives us forward. I have referred to this point already in my last circular letter.²¹ I am happy to be able to tell you that some provinces have already put in hand a programme of concrete proposals for a strong relaunching of oratory work. It is important that this example be imitated by other provinces, and that our creative presence in oratory work be everywhere intensified in updated forms and with

19. abbreviated from the communist writer Umberto Eco ("L'Espresso" 15.11.1981)

20. cf Annali I, ch. 59, pp. 622-633

21. ACG 312, pp. 24-26; AGC 312 (English), pp. 34-36

suitable personnel, as a permanent criterion for pastoral work among the young.

The prophetic pattern of his youthful years

And then I think it important to draw attention to another and evocative aspect which enables us to detect in the boyhood, the adolescence and the early manhood of the young Bosco his deep orientation to Christ, his great love for the Gospel, and his passion for the goal of the priesthood as a means of apostolate for youth which he saw as his supreme ideal. John's life before his priestly ordination is a masterpiece of vocational development. As well as the courageous and sensible faith of his mother, and the fascination he had for Jesus and Mary in the dream at the age of nine, we detect in him a convinced choice of ideals, a decisive and determined commitment, his capacity for laborious initiatives, his flexibility in work and love for study, his constancy, his friendship with good companions (the 'Society of Joy and Happiness'), the seeking of a spiritual director for an enlightened evaluation of signs of God's will. The vicissitudes, the events, the misunderstandings, the poverty, the courageous boldness, the joys, the results, the hopes were all enlightened by catechism, by preaching to companions, by the Word of God, by frequent reception of the sacraments, by sincere friendship with Jesus and Mary. All this helped him to overcome very many difficulties, including the lack of a good spiritual director for the choice of his state in life. As he himself wrote later: "Oh, if at that time I had only had a guide to take care of my vocation, what a treasure he would have been for me!"²²

22. *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, reprinted, p. 80

A few years ago some youth groups in Latin

America rightly chose as a youthful biography for discussion and analysis, and as a prophetic model to stimulate their own vocational research, the first twenty years of the life of John Bosco: a cheerful companion, versatile and adaptable, intelligent, someone to look up to, filled with enthusiasm for Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

And there you have a good suggestion for preparing ourselves well for the celebrations of 1988: to commit ourselves with all our strength to a programme of pastoral vocational work which will take its inspiration from the attractive youth of Don Bosco, and bring today's youngsters in a pleasant way to a loyal and courageous measuring of themselves against the Gospel, so as to discover in Jesus Christ that 'new man' who is the true protagonist of our future, and provides us with wonderful motives for our existence and strong ideals to which to commit ourselves.

What a splendid thing it would be if we could reach the centenary celebrations with a big increase of vocations behind us! One of the most serious and urgent problems of the Church at the present day is undoubtedly that of vocations. Following the exhortations of the Holy Father and of the Bishops, I myself have come back more than once on this argument. The harvest is great in every continent; the Lord plants the seed in the hearts of many young people. Let us get down to work: let one of our sacred resolutions be to help them "to discover, accept and develop the gift of a lay, consecrated or priestly vocation for the benefit of the whole Church and of the Salesian Family".²³ Let us profit by the model of the eventful and attractive youthful years

23. Const. 28

of John Bosco to make a concrete and challenging proposal in this regard.

Father and Founder

The inspiration he received from on high and his concern to be faithful to it prompted Don Bosco to give to the pastoral work of the Oratory a permanent form with universal dimensions. It was this that led to the foundation of our Congregation: "I need young men who are willing to follow me in this oratory work. Would you be willing to help me?"²⁴ We are well aware of how much toil and fatigue this cost him: so much in fact that he advised others against embarking on the hazardous task of being a "founder".²⁵ For him such an enterprise was not just a matter of random choice but the culmination to which his personal vocation had been aimed and guided: "How things have turned out I find it difficult to explain, but this I know full well — God wanted it this way".²⁶

Amongst the singular and more significant elements in the founding of the Congregation must be included Don Bosco's labours in respect of the Constitutions which were approved by the Holy See in April 1874. "We should welcome this fact," wrote Don Bosco with satisfaction, "as among the most glorious in the annals of our Society, since through it we have the assurance that in observing our Rules we rest upon a firm and secure basis".²⁷

Today, after twenty years of intensive work, we have a renewed awareness of the value of the Constitutions; we are glad that the re-written text speaks to us more explicitly of the Founder and of his oratorian heart, and stimulates us from the

24. MB III, 548-550;
BM III, 385-386

25. cf. MB VII, 49; BM
VII, 36

26. MB XII, 78; BM
XII, 59

27. Introduzione alle
Costituzioni, Turin
1885, p. 3

Foreword right down to the last article to stay with him so as to follow Jesus Christ.

It would seem only logical therefore that one of the commitments most pleasing to our Father and Founder on the occasion of the celebration of his centenary must surely be the knowledge, love and practice of our renewed Rule. This is a task we have already from the GC22 for the present six-year period, but which needs special emphasis in view of 1988. Let us therefore redouble the commitment we have already partly made and accepted after receiving the new constitutional text.

Let us turn to Don Bosco also in prayer. The fact that our Father and Founder is also a canonized saint cannot leave us indifferent. 'Lumen Gentium' has some stimulating indications about the devotion we owe to the saints. We venerate them because in them, and therefore in Don Bosco, "we are shown a most safe path for reaching perfect union with Christ", and also "in order that the union of the whole Church may be strengthened by the practice of fraternal charity".²⁸ And in addition to their example and communion we must be aware that through these "our brothers and extraordinary benefactors, we render due thanks to God". Further it is only right that we look upon them as powerful friends and "suppliantly invoke them and have recourse to their prayers, their power and help in obtaining benefits from God through his Son, Jesus Christ".²⁹ Let us take to heart these exhortations of the Council; let us intensify our devotion to Don Bosco, our Father and Founder, let us give splendour and renewal to his cult by that wise application of it to the present day that our zeal will surely be able to devise.

28. cf. Eph 4,1-6

29. LG 50

The vast movement of his spiritual school

A fourth way in which Don Bosco recalls us to the following of Christ according to the Gospel can be seen in his function as trail-blazer of a new style of sanctification. It is an original style, born and tested in the Oratory and destined to be extended beyond the Congregation to the whole Salesian Family. It is the spirit of Valdocco, the soul of the preventive system, transplanted to Mornese, to Buenos Aires, to France and Spain, to wherever the salesians are to be found in the world, and extended to innumerable cooperators, past pupils, institutes of consecrated life, and friends. It is a spirit which "has its source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father";³⁰ which is "inspired by the goodness and zeal of St Francis de Sales";³¹ which admires and imitates in Don Bosco "a splendid blending of nature and grace: two aspects which combine to create a closely-knit life project".³² From it flows a simple everyday spirituality, compounded of hard work and good sense, resistant to fatigue, generous in self-dedication and ever open in an atmosphere of joy to horizons of hope. It is a spirituality with a lively sense of Church enlightened by a filial Marian dimension.

In this school and model of sanctification and apostolate Don Bosco has enrolled a "vast movement of persons", leaving to the Salesian Congregation the responsibility for its animation: "to preserve unity of spirit and to foster dialogue and fraternal cooperation for mutual enrichment and greater apostolic effectiveness".³³

It would seem evident therefore that an adequate preparation for the centenary celebrations must involve in all our communities a more

30. Const. 11

31. *ibid.* 4

32. *ibid.* 21

33. *ibid.* 5

convinced and workmanlike sense of animation of the Salesian Family. We urgently need to give more importance to getting a large number of people involved in our mission in a committed way. It would reveal a narrow-mindedness and poverty of vision about the future if we limited ourselves to the works at present existing, and failed to put before people the spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral patrimony of Don Bosco which is indeed a unique gospel prophecy for the renewal of society.

Provincials, rectors and all who are involved in the work of animation should feel that they have a pressing mandate to appeal to the greatest possible number of persons of good will who, in different degrees, can commit themselves to rendering the evangelical project of Don Bosco and his social and ecclesial mission more efficacious for the present day.

1988 is a challenge to us: we must get out of our houses and proclaim in the highways and byways the message of youthful hope planned and witnessed to by Don Bosco for a new society, which the Popes constantly refer to by the new name of "civilization of love". We can and must do more for the Salesian Family.

A centenary to be prepared everywhere

The appeal to prepare for the centenary by adopting a renewed oratory criterion, with more incisive vocational pastoral work, by joyful and faithful witness to our renewed Rule, and with a more intelligent solicitude and spiritual preoccupation for the animation of the Salesian Family, is addressed to everyone, in every province and local community. This active and cooperative

manner of celebrating the centenary must be prepared everywhere. It must be the soul, the overriding aim, of all the other manifestations we may plan for our celebrations.

But let us get down to the preparation of those other manifestations too. It is not a matter of noisy triumphalism: it is a method which is evangelical and was dear to Don Bosco's pedagogical heart: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see the good that you do and give thanks to your Father who is in heaven".³⁴ Don Bosco did not blow his own trumpet to deceive people but to show them that good people exist, that everyone should recognize them as upright citizens, and to remind them (and especially to remind the young) that good is stronger than evil: the Lord guarantees in fact that it will come out on top, even in this present world.

The provincial and his council should see to it that a special organizing and animating commission gets to work. This is an extraordinary occasion for powerful salesian animation and it would be unpardonably thoughtless not to take advantage of it.

Every provincial too should feel jointly responsible with his fellow-provincials for supporting, contributing to and collaborating in some common initiatives at the level of the Congregation as a whole, which will be promoted and organized by the General Council.

**Some initiatives to be realized
with the collaboration of everyone**

The centenary year celebrations will begin on 31 January 1988 and continue until 31 January 1989.

34. Mt 5,16

The time for preparation is not all that long, as you can see. Various proposals had already reached the previous General Council before the GC22, but the elections by the Chapter had first to take place. A special commission of the new Council has already examined the proposals which, after being evaluated and approved in general terms, should now be finalized and put into effect in the hope that sufficient means will be forthcoming for their realization.

Without any doubt the first task to be assumed in every province is the one already referred to, the commitment to the spiritual and apostolic renewal of our communities and the involvement of so many people who take their inspiration from Don Bosco.

There are already proposals for pilgrimages and other initiatives, especially involving young people, on a national and international scale to Valdocco and the Becchi: commissions for this specific purpose have already begun to make plans.

But it is also necessary to set on foot other concrete initiatives which will involve considerable financial expense. It may be useful to enumerate some of the more demanding of these:

— There is the “Colle project” which involves: the prevention of further deterioration to the house of the Boscas at the Becchi, which has already suffered too much from the effects of bad weather; a better organization of the large open space in front of the Temple, with the access road, parking areas, camping spaces etc.; the completion and systematization of the big missionary museum. And parallel with the works at Colle some restructuring will be needed at Valdocco as well, in the Basilica

and in the adjoining facilities for the service of pilgrims.

— Concrete steps are being taken too which will result, we hope, in the production of a television series of high quality (in several instalments) involving artists and technicians of international repute. The series could be subsequently issued also as a film.

— We hope also to stimulate and make concretely available to competent scholars the preparation and publication of studies on the figure of Don Bosco: on his place in history and the culture of his time, on his spirituality and his pastoral and pedagogical principles, etc. Our aim too is to facilitate the production of publications and other means for making Don Bosco better known among the young and among people in general. It is also proposed to organize artistic, literary and musical contests with attractive and appropriate prizes.

— We would like in addition to provide our Pontifical University with an appropriate "Don Bosco Library" as a worthy centre for research, study, elaboration and progress in the sciences linked with our mission.

It is evident that all these initiatives, and others that might be thought of as time goes by, will remain only at the stage of so many dreams, unless they receive financial support at a high level. The Economist General, Fr Omero Paron, who is following up these matters with zealous service and studied hope, has already sent out a fraternal appeal to all the provinces. I exhort you to take to heart his invitation regarding the '88-Fund', to make it known to friends and benefactors, and to keep it in your prayers.

In the time between now and the centenary (less than three years) we must all make sacrifices in order to cooperate (periodically, I mean, not just by a single donation once and for all!) The '88-Fund' can become an expression and yardstick of that communion of goods which has always been traditional among us from the time of Don Bosco himself. Our renewed Rule lists among the provincial's responsibilities that of ensuring "solidarity with the worldwide Congregation, especially at moments and in ways called for by the Rector Major and his Council".³⁵

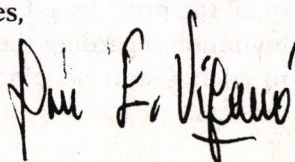
35. Reg. 197

It may be useful to point out that everything we are hoping to realize has a very definite ecclesial purpose, which will have innumerable beneficial effects in the two great sectors of our salesian activity: the young and the missions. Indeed the greater the increase in knowledge, popularity, gratitude and contact with Don Bosco and his charism, the more will the "poor and the little ones" benefit by 'evangelical service and human development.

My dear confreres, let us have frequent and trusting recourse to Mary Help of Christians, the teacher and guide of Don Bosco in his vocation, that she may enlighten and assist us too in this providential return to the sources, on the occasion of the centenary of the death of our dear Father, the friend of the young in all five continents.

I greet you all from my heart and assure each one individually of my prayers.

With cordial good wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Don E. Viganò". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent 'V' and a long, sweeping tail.