

# acts

of the General Council  
of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### 1.1 IN MEMORY OF Fr EGIDIO VIGANO: A MESSAGE OF HOPE

Rome, 1 July 1995

On 23rd June last our Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò, 7th successor of Don Bosco, went home to God. He passed away at the Generalate, assisted by his brothers Frs Angelo and Francesco, strengthened by the prayer and affection of confreres and sisters, and surrounded by marks of esteem on the part of many friends. The Holy Father had telephoned him personally on the previous day with words of comfort and his blessing.

The funeral ceremonies highlighted the gratitude of confreres and members of the Salesian Family to Fr Viganò for his tireless service of guidance and animation. They showed very clearly the esteem he had enjoyed in both civil and ecclesial environments for his theological preparation and his willingness to give his collaboration.

They bore witness especially to the communion the Congregation has been able to create in the world through its communities and works. Fax messages, telegrams and letters of condolence and comments on the personality and work of Fr Viganò poured in from all over the world, from both lofty personalities and simple people of low estate.

I take this opportunity to send my sincere thanks to provincials, salesian communities and individual confreres who have sent messages of adherence and participation.

There have been commemorative functions in numerous places where the Salesians are working, with both ecclesial and local authorities present and large numbers of the faithful. Of particular significance was the one on 30 June at Sondrio, where Fr Viganò

was born. At this the Vicar General was present with several members of the General Council.

The legacy left to us, in continuity with those of former Rector Majors and General Chapters, constitutes an invaluable family treasure. Speakers and writers have followed one another in emphasizing its most outstanding aspects. Friends and the Press have recalled his contribution to the pastoral reflection that has followed Vatican II and the educative enterprises which inspired it. It would be premature at this stage to make a more exhaustive assessment, even for meditation purposes. That will be done in the obituary letter now in preparation. And it will also be of use to us for the report on the State of the Congregation to be submitted to the coming General Chapter.

It would seem more appropriate at the present moment to let you know the content of the last pages written by Fr Egidio. During his illness he frequently spoke of his desire to leave to the confreres a meditation on suffering as a unique moment of pastoral charity. On Good Friday he had dictated a message in which he said: "Dear members of the Salesian Family throughout the world, I feel united to you in a special way on this sacred day of mystery and sacrifice. I have now been in hospital for some weeks and never before had I felt the experience of Good Friday as a particular day of Don Bosco's charism. To be immersed in the love of Christ, to be crushed by sufferings of the flesh: I do not think there could be a more appropriate moment for being with the young, for animating confreres and sisters, for intensifying the Salesian Family. What I can offer you is very small but I offer it in today's context of mission and suffering. I thank you for your many prayers and I offer each of you with brotherly affection my good wishes for Easter blessings. Let us ask Don Rua to let us feel his own 'going halves' with Don Bosco. In the victorious Christ."

It was now a question of developing this message, with the tone and worth impressed by personal experience.

We encouraged him, in the awareness of the value that such mature reflection would have in the prevailing circumstances. The days he spent in the UPS Infirmary, when it seemed that some

degree of recovery was taking place, seemed ideal for collating the notes made previously. He began to develop them and give definitive shape to his letter and message.

But his strength did not stand up to the strain. The same symptoms returned once more, with a consequent further general weakening which made it impossible for him to deal fully with the topic.

On his table we found six handwritten pages. They do not form even a first point, but are only indications to be developed. In them there appear ideas that were dear to him: Jesus the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his flock, and so is raised up again by God, pastoral charity, the grace of unity, “da mihi animas”, salesian contemplation.

It has seemed to me and to the other members of the Council that, though only in embryo, these pages constitute a kind of testament sui generis, clearly understandable and of value for those who have known Fr Egidio directly or through the letters he has written.

Continue to recommend him to the Lord.

Fr Juan E. Vecchi  
Vicar General

\* \* \*

My dear Confreres,

I imagine you are all very busy in preparations for the coming GC24; it will mark another leap forward in the vitality of Don Bosco's charism. Let us concentrate our prayer, our sacrifices and our reflections for a growth in fidelity to our origins and to the times in which we live. In recent months I have experienced at first hand what new elements are brought into our lives by sickness and the approach of old age. It is a kind of inculturation in suffering which opens up a new vision, penetrating and unavoidable, of the

identity of our vocation and the more vital aspects of our specific charism.

To throw some salesian light on this particular experience I have been reading once again what we know of the last four years of the life of Don Bosco: his old age accompanied by so much suffering from 1884 to the beginning of 1888, or between the ages of 69 and 72. When he reached 70 his weakness and general degeneration were such that a doctor exclaimed: "He looks like a man of 100". I found myself contemplating a "Founder" who insisted on fulfilling his lofty responsibilities as the bearer of a concrete charism that had been entrusted to him. When Pope Leo XIII suggested that he find a successor, he preferred to have a Vicar with the right of succession, continuing to attend in this way from the depths of his suffering to various vital aspects of the life of the Congregation.

The description of his state of health is impressive: from his eyesight to his legs, from his lungs to the failure of various vital organs. Nevertheless he did not go into hospital for treatment, but rather showed a spiritual courage and even recklessness in undertaking exhausting journeys, despite the orders of doctors and the resistance of confreres. He went first to France (March '84), then to Rome (April-May), then the long journey to Barcelona (April-May '86), then to Milan (September '86), and finally to Rome for the consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart.

What is most striking about this manner of facing up to suffering is, without any doubt, the giving of himself for the care of the vast work that had been started. At first sight it seems that he was worried about financial matters (for the building of the Sacred Heart in Rome, for the missionary undertakings, for the needs of the poor youngsters in his works, his concern not to leave his successor burdened with debts), and indeed these were urgent problems; but there were other things of quite a different nature that were worrying him: the business of the Congregation's privileges, the authenticity of the Preventive System (cf. the famous Letter from Rome), the missionary commitment, fidelity to the Pope and defence of his magisterium, the spiritual testament to be

left for the confreres, and the dreams of the future of the Congregation. He remained always the head and heart of his work; the responsibility of "Founder" was always in the forefront of his mind, confirmed by the Calvary he was enduring: the light of the cross on the authenticity of the charism.

For my own part, as I meditated on such exceptional testimony of our dear Father and Founder, I thought it well to concentrate our reflections and direct our thoughts to a central theme of our spirit which needs to be studied at greater depth, especially after the celebration of the recent Synod on the Consecrated Life.

On his way back from the long journey to Barcelona, Don Bosco stopped at the seminary of Gr noble, and in welcoming him the Superior of the seminary said, among other things: "No one knows better than you do the great sanctifying power of suffering". And Don Bosco shrewdly replied: "No, Monsignor Rector; it is not suffering that sanctifies but patience!"

In this expression lies a spiritual depth which reveals the identity of the true salesian spirit, centered on *pastoral charity*. *Contemplative in action* is certainly a fine expression, but it does not express the totality of the secret of Don Bosco's spirit. In him during his sickness the motto he had chosen to identify its secret was radiantly clear: *da mihi animas*, or in other words the gift of himself for the salvation of the young which gives life to the whole of existence: that of activity and that of patience. Therein lies the true vibration of the salesian soul, as Don Rinaldi has written. In the physical helplessness of our Father we see clearly and powerfully his unceasing and exhaustive attitude of *da mihi animas*: "For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life"<sup>1</sup>. Rightly did Don Rua say: "He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> cf. C 14

<sup>2</sup> cf. C 21

His remark about the importance of patience leads us to single out the true meaning of pastoral charity.

And here we must perforce refer our reflection to the mystery of Christ himself, to his heart and to the events of his life.

Rather than speak of *pastoral charity*, as a subject for abstract reflection, we want to address ourselves to the existential witness of Jesus Christ as the *Good Shepherd*, i.e. as the living presentation of a historic fact which is at the origin of the whole Christian vocation and which we must perceive and understand more deeply for the most radical identifying of our spirit.

It is a reflection of an explicitly Christian kind which does not begin from mere concepts, sublime though they be, but from the realism of history: persons, events and hard facts.

Let us never forget that the Christian faith has its basis in history; it links us with a lived reality that existed before conceptual elaborations and even before sacramental structures themselves.

To understand pastoral charity we must feel in the first place the heartbeats of the Good Shepherd in his earthly existence, just as to understand the Eucharist we must first refer back to the historical events of Calvary.

And here our reflections make a qualitative leap of lofty realism. The explanation of conceptual considerations and of the objective significance of the whole sacramental order must be found clearly and objectively in preexisting historical reality.

The Synod on the Consecrated Life has offered us a platform for making this rewarding leap. In fact if the Consecrated Life is constitutive of the nature of Church, we must refer back to the mystery of Christ in himself to explain its origin and identity.

We can synthesize such a consideration by declaring with certainty that Jesus Christ is the founder of the Consecrated Life and the originator of the Pastoral Dimension of the New Covenant. The two aspects in him are inseparable and are expressed in the most intense *grace of union* that can possibly be imagined.

Let us recall what John Paul II says in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*: “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ (Lk 4,18). The Spirit is not simply ‘upon’ the Messiah, but he ‘fills’ him,



penetrating every part of him and reaching to the very depths of all that he is and does. Indeed the Spirit is the principle of the 'consecration' and 'mission' of the Messiah: 'because he has anointed me and sent me to preach good news to the poor...' (Lk 4,18). Through the Spirit Jesus belongs totally and exclusively to God and shares in the infinite holiness of God, who calls him, chooses him and sends him forth. In this way the Spirit of the Lord is revealed as the source of holiness and of the call to holiness"<sup>3</sup>.

And here we find the key revelation of what pastoral charity is in its primary origin, the fundamental vocation of Jesus to be the Good Shepherd: He is risen as the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.<sup>4</sup>

"The essential content of this pastoral charity is the *gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church*".<sup>5</sup>

In the heart of Jesus we find that consecration is organically and vitally bound up with pastoral activity.

In his public ministry he was concerned to form a band of committed persons for the Kingdom, choosing the Twelve for their service of pastoral charity, and giving them a power of animation and influence for an increase in vigour of the grace of unity between consecration and mission.

It is important to emphasize that between consecration and apostolic ministry there is, in the historical reality existing prior to sacramental structure, a vital sense by which there is no consecrated person who is not in union with the apostolic ministry and, viceversa, apostolic ministry is fully at the service of the consecrated.

If during the Synod the Bishops in speaking of consecrated persons, several times repeated *de re nostra agitur*, so those who are consecrated, when speaking of the apostolic ministry, must repeat with joyful conviction *de re nostra agitur*.

Fr. Egidio Viganò  
Rector Major

<sup>3</sup> *Pastores dabo vobis* 19

<sup>4</sup> Roman Missal: communion ant. 4 Sunday of Easter

<sup>5</sup> *Pastores dabo vobis* 23

## 1.2 THE MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER AND THE HOMILY OF THE VICAR GENERAL DURING THE FUNERAL MASS

*The solemn Funeral Mass in suffrage for Fr Egidio Viganò was celebrated on Monday 26 June in the Don Bosco Temple in Rome. Fr Juan E. Vecchi presided, flanked by the two brothers Frs Angelo and Francesco Viganò and some five hundred concelebrants, including several salesian bishops. Eight Cardinals were present: the three salesian Cardinals resident in Rome, Rosalio Castillo Lara, Antonio Javierre Ortas and Alfons Stickler, and also Cardinals Eduardo Martinez Somalo, Pio Laghi, Eduardo F. Pironio, Achille Silvestrini, Adrianus Simonis; also present were some thirty other Bishops, the Mother General of the FMA with her Council, representatives of all the Groups of the Salesian Family, together with numerous young people and members of the faithful, all of whom had come to pray for the 7th Successor of Don Bosco. Among the civil authorities present was the Secretary General of the Presidency of the Italian Republic, representing the President, the Hon. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, who was out of the country and unable to take part.*

*We print the message contained in the telegram sent by the Holy Father, which was read at the beginning of the celebration by his Eminence Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara:*

“Having learned with emotion the sad news of the passing of the Very Rev. Fr Egidio Viganò, Rector Major of the Salesian Society of Don Bosco, I send my heartfelt condolences for the loss which the Congregation has suffered. While I remember with affection and sorrow his deep cultural preparation as a highly esteemed teacher of the theology of the consecrated life and as an

enlightened educator of the young following the method of the venerated Founder, I give thanks to God for having bestowed on the Church such an outstanding and exemplary figure of a zealous priest, generously committed to the new evangelization of the contemporary world and a precious collaborator of the Apostolic See. At the same time I raise fervent prayers to God that he may welcome his good and faithful servant into the eternal joy deserved by all those who, like him, have spent all their life in continual self-donation to the glory of God and the good of souls. As a sign of my intense participation in your sorrow, I send to you, to the whole Salesian Family and to all who share in the sorrow at his passing the strengthening Apostolic Blessing.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II''

The following is the text of the homily preached by Fr Juan E. Vecchi during the celebration:

It is striking to hear the Beatitudes proclaimed around a dead body and addressed to a community which is feeling the suffering of a great loss. The Beatitudes are in fact the recognition of a happiness already attained; they are congratulations for a benefit that has been achieved and cannot be taken away, rather than a code of conduct for the gaining of a prize.

They proclaim that God renders happy here and now those who are open to his presence and entrust their whole existence to him. Life is then manifested as a gift greater than anything we could expect or hope for, and we grasp its truest dimensions: grace, justice, and the joy of self-giving.

The root of this happiness, we are further told by the Word of God, is the Spirit who dwells within us, and acts and speaks in us. He brings about and matures the awareness that we are children of

God. He prompts us to turn to God and call him Father and to see life in the light of this relationship.

We begin therefore to live in history in a different way, because it is full of the same presence. Through the event of Christ the whole of reality is like a woman in childbirth about to experience motherhood, or like a sentinel with head erect and eyes fixed on the horizon awaiting a sign of liberation.

This is God's testimony in favour of life. Neither fleeting difficulties nor the exhaustion of our strength can have any effect against it.

Death in Christ does not destroy happiness, but brings its seed to maturity. It is not the destruction of what we have tried to do, but its fulfilment.

Today, therefore, for Fr Egidio and for us, what he sought to accomplish and offer us in his earthly existence reaches its fullness.

— We thank God in the first place for the *call to the salesian life* which the Spirit planted in his heart as a boy, and for the response he gave to it.

Fr Egidio was a spiritual son of St John Bosco: a son and convinced disciple, a convincing interpreter and prolongation of his fatherliness. Much is being said at present of his qualities and accomplishments, but the salesian vocation is the grace which brings them all together in a certain physiognomy. This is his particular characteristic, his genetic code, the centre around which his identity is moulded.

His vocation, prepared in a family of simple but substantial faith, blossomed in the lively environment of the oratory. This experience in the native soil of the salesian charism remained indelible in his memory, in his thought and even in his language. "Oratorian" is a key reference in his charismatic reflection, and some gestures and likings of an oratorian kind he preserved even to his last years. But especially he explained and demonstrated the pastoral and spiritual values of the oratory as a pattern of life and action.

His missionary experience, in its particular expression, gave to this germinal vocation a wider opening to cultures, geographical

areas and problems. He came to realize that under simple appearances were concealed riches valid for the most diverse contexts, wherever mankind was to be found.

His response matured in his commitment to formation, in community experience and in pastoral activity. But above all he was led to an organic and well founded reflection in a tireless study of the guidelines of the Church, cultural tendencies and the challenges of youth.

This patrimony of life and meditation on the charism remains for us the legacy of his period as Rector Major. His circular letters, annual commentaries on the Strenna, preaching of retreats, personal dialogue, guidelines for government, all transmit a clear and youthful enthusiasm for the singular experience of God that began with Don Bosco.

The vicissitudes of the Founder, the unique evangelical inspiration which forms its foundation, the reading of the signs of the times, were all like so many reflectors concentrating light on a reality which he always considered as a gift of the Spirit to the Church, a gift open to unexpected expressions.

He was convinced that before him was a mine that could yield ever new riches, and to their discovery he applied serious thought, the vibrations of the heart, ability for their communication and the effort to translate them into practice.

For the charism he had a great love: he was proud of it. He had no doubts at all about future accomplishments. He sought to understand it, following the down-to-earth life of the Congregation and the Salesian Family, which he always considered an area in which the Spirit moved and gave rise to innovations: questions, challenges, undertakings, trials, the developments proper to our time.

He had an almost spontaneous feeling, noted by some of those who were closer to him, that we may recall with a certain discretion: for Fr Viganò, without descending to comparisons, salesian things and persons were always "the best" in the sense that children are the "best in the world" for their parents. It was a classification based on membership, on affection, on desire. He

thought of his confreres as wonderful people, and that is how he wanted them to be, culturally and pastorally, especially among the young. And he thanked God for having made him the Father of such a Family.

From this love, guided by intelligence and always seeking realization, are born some synthetic expressions which have become a kind of concentration of salesian spirituality: the grace of unity, the oratorian heart, the ecstasy of action, interior apostolic conviction, pedagogical charity, the method of kindness, pastoral creativity, and “evangelizing by educating”.

— We thank God, secondly, because by his word and activity he has rooted us more solidly in Christ.

The salesian character, which was second nature to him, had another source of nourishment: Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who dedicated his life for the young. He taught us to contemplate him and love him.

Asked by a journalist to say what was his favourite prayer, he confessed that it was the Eucharistic invocation: “We proclaim your death, O Lord; we proclaim your resurrection, as we await your second coming”. It was the subject of his daily meditation expressed in a thousand and one different ways in relation to experiences, events and personal circumstances – the death of Jesus as the supreme expression of God’s love for man, and as a criticism of what is going on in the world to close man off from life’s horizons; the resurrection as the grafting into history of divine energy, the definitive transfiguration of human existence, the guarantee of victory for every individual and, for humanity as a whole, the effective plenitude of the new life.

This theme of the resurrection was the one he preferred. To cultivate the joy of the love of God and the certainty of the triumph of good over evil seemed to him the most fitting for an educator of the young: for this reason he warmly encouraged, together with the Via Crucis (the Way of the Cross), the representation and practice of the Via Lucis (the Way of Light), a journey of youthful meditation on the resurrection. For the same reason he wanted a

“Hill of the youthful beatitudes” in the place of Don Bosco’s boyhood.

With the mystery of death and resurrection as the centre and starting point, his reflections moved in many directions: Christ the model of our pastoral charity; Christ the revelation of man, from which the educative project draws inspiration; Christ the source from which springs the vitality of our consecration; Christ the energy of the transformation of the young through education, the mysteries celebrated, and the witnessing friendship of adults.

His talks about Jesus are forthright and vibrant, personal professions of faith rather than lessons. An extract is worth repeating: “In Jesus the whole of the Word has been made present for ever. He is the new man, the Lord of history, the centre and source of every further prophetic dimension. Christ is the absolute newness of God’s intervention in becoming man... In his light one can perceive from within cultural mentalities the Christian aspect of so many themes relevant to the present day: love, solidarity, liberation and justice, truth and conscience, the sense of sin, conflict and pardon”.

— We are grateful again because *he has situated us in the living movement of the Church.*

His adherence and conformation to Christ led him to live ever more deeply inserted in the Church, the seedbed of charisms, the privileged setting for the Spirit’s activity, the sign and instrument of salvation. He looked upon it as his family, as his home. He followed its life and vicissitudes with faith and joy, without naivete but also without useless criticisms for pastoral purposes, aware of its human limitations but also of its divine dimension; the point of meeting between the mystery of God and the history of man. In his journeys he had frequently discovered it to be an indispensable factor in humanization as well as the bearer of the sense of God.

He had a unique experience of the Church in the four sessions of Vatican II, which he lived intensely as an event of the Spirit in our present century and he spoke of it time and again without any lessening of enthusiasm. His habitual expression for describing its setting was: “In the orbit of the Council”.

His mentality and religious teaching was indelibly marked by theological, cultural and pastoral conversion. From this he drew his inspiration for the doctrinal guidelines and practical directives for the Salesian Family, seeking in prayer, in meditation and in the exchange of experiences, to discern the lasting elements of renewal concealed in fleeting fashions.

He had also touched at first hand the life of the Church in its task of communion and in dramatic events by participating in the three successive Latin-American Conferences of Medellin, Puebla and Santo Domingo, and in the Synods of Bishops. He considered such participation not as a personal privilege, but as a gift of God for confreres and sisters.

His aim and his dream were, in fact, that we should not live in separation or without concern for what the Spirit is doing in the Christian community: charisms, holiness, evangelizing movements, dialogue between the Christian mentality and modern problems.

His sense of Church included an affectionate gratitude to the Pope for his service of animation of the Christian community, and an adherence in faith to his magisterium. This was not just a criterion of discipline. He considered it an indispensable aspect of pastoral charity, which could not be understood outside communion and its points of reference. He saw it too as an indispensable point of salesian tradition. But because he was not unmindful of the difficulties involved, he enlightened it by examples and motivations relevant to the present context.

— And we are grateful too because *he has pointed out to us in a most efficacious manner Mary Help of Christians as the model of our vocation to the consecrated apostolic life*, directed to bringing Christ to birth in the hearts of the young by an education inspired by kindness and gentleness.

He opened his period of office as Rector Major with a letter: “Mary renews the Salesian Family”. It was inspired by an idea that came to him on Good Friday while contemplating Our Lady at the foot of the Cross. It began with a rather striking invitation: “Let us make a place for Our Lady in our home!”, in our communities, but



also in our pastoral projects, in our spiritual experience, in our educational programmes. In her is seen the model of complete availability to God for the service of the young, the image of the Church in its virginity and motherhood.

The Help of Christians is the Madonna of great beginnings like the Incarnation or the revelation of Jesus at Cana; she is the Madonna of Pentecost and of renewal, the Madonna for difficult times. She is the stimulus of apostolic courage and fortitude, beginning from the time of Don Bosco, without the certainty of material means because the Word is always born in a virginal manner.

In 1984 he instigated the entrustment to Mary of the entire Salesian Family, in which was incorporated the Association of the Clients of Mary Help of Christians.

Each of his letters concluded on a Marian note, and this was not just a simple matter of style. Anyone reading them today will find in them the point of convergence of the three motives which are at the centre of our vocation: Christ, mankind and the Church.

\* \* \*

The beatitudes proclaim the full realization of all this in the case of Fr Egidio. But they proclaim too the historical fruitfulness of what he has sown among us, in poverty which is trust in God, in purity of heart which is availability to the voice of the Spirit, and in peace which is service, communion and love.