

acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

N. 355

Year LXXVII
january-march 1996

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR THE SALESIAN CONFERENCES

N. 352
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January-March 1996

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MOVING TOGETHER TOWARDS THE GC24

Introduction - 1. An extraordinary event - 2. An event of communion - 3. The significance of the GC24 - 4. Communication between the capitular community and local communities - 5. The community, the subject giving effect to the General Chapter - 6. Two levels of reflection and community commitment - Conclusion

Rome, 8 December 1995

My dear confreres,

When you receive this letter we shall be already on the threshold of the GC24. We are involved in its preparation with the same care and concern shown by Fr Egidio Viganò from the time the theme was chosen, closely scrutinizing the doctrinal and practical problems implied and studying the method of working.

For some time now the members of the Chapter have had available the precapitular document, translated into various languages. It contains an organic synthesis of the contributions sent in by the Provinces and lines of reflection for the Chapter.

It is the result of the work of the Precapitular Commission, made up of sixteen confreres from as many Provinces and thirteen countries, who met together at the Generalate for three weeks under the guidance of the Moderator of the GC24, Fr Antonio Martinelli.

They worked in an atmosphere of brotherhood with a sustained rhythm of study, dialogue and prayer, using modern means of gathering and cataloguing information and expressing it in organized form. This led to a result which was considered positive by all the members of the Commission and by others who read the text before it was approved for despatch.

It is evident from the documentation coming in that the theme of the Chapter has involved the Congregation at the levels of both reflection and practical verification. The diversity of tone and emphasis coming from every part of the Congregation is valuable and has converged, so to speak, in a single effort to embody Don Bosco in the present day.

I am grateful to all those who in the Provinces, at the Generalate, and in the Precapitular Commission, have taken the GC24 to heart, thus enabling us to look forward with well-founded hope to the celebration of the Chapter itself. It is my intention through the present pages to invite confreres and communities to participate spiritually in the Chapter and prepare themselves to accept its guidelines thus creating from the outset the conditions for their prompt application.

1. An extraordinary event

The General Chapters have been milestones in the life of the Congregation. Some of them, after patient and successive revisions, adopted norms and forms of life which, because of the Chapter deliberations, became stable and universal. Others created roles and organisms which led to new and decisive developments in important sectors of acti-

vity. Still others consolidated various aspects of spiritual and cultural formation.

Some of them have been given particular attention by scholars,¹ because of the effect they have had on our history.

Well known to us are the recent Chapters, of greater length and with more members. But a patient study of the individual earlier Chapters followed by synthesis and correlation enables us to see that even those which come less easily to mind have provided thrusts which through the ordinary processes of government have updated or strengthened our identity.

In this sense all of them consolidated the unity of which they were a sign, discerning the suggestions made by the grace of vocation in times which changed at a rate which admittedly was not as rapid as our own.

Preparation and willing acceptance in faith were always, and are still so today, essential conditions for the efficacy of General Chapters. There is nothing automatic about them.

Before all else the General Chapter is an appeal to our freedom which recognizes with simplicity and interior docility that it "has supreme authority over the Society",² and this not only nor even mainly in a juridical sense but especially from a charismatic standpoint: it is the means which best indicates the direction in which we should be moving and the strengths we should apply at this moment in history.

It is sad, Fr Egidio Viganò used to say, when visiting the Congregation, to come across occasional Provinces which for the most varied reasons are some two or three Chapters behind. You become aware at once that their delay is something

¹ Marcel Verhulst SDB, *Note storiche sul Capitolo Generale I della Società Salesiana* (1877) in "Salesianum" 43 (1981) pp. 849-882; Morand Wirth SDB, Don Bosco e i Salesiani, LDC, Torino-Leumann, 1969, chap. XXIV, pp. 291-300

² C 147

affecting not only their own small sector, but the life of the whole Congregation and the ecclesial dimension of the salesian vocation.

It is easy in fact to see how our General Chapters are celebrated in strict connection with essential ecclesial processes. Thus, for instance, if the GC23 represented the particular endeavour of the Congregation to become harmonized with the "New Evangelization", the programme of the GC24 will bring it into line with "Christifideles Laici" and the reflections on consecrated life developed by the Synod of Bishops.

Hence participation in General Chapters is equivalent to entering in our own specific way into the Church's movement.

2. An event of communion

The mass media would often make it seem that General Chapters of Religious or Synods resemble parliaments, constituent assemblies, congresses or electoral colleges. These are categories with which they are more familiar and which, they believe, are more suited to people in general. The resemblance is purely material.

We know by experience that a General Chapter is much more than a technical or juridical organism which meets to carry out such specific tasks as the election of the General Council, the study of a particular topic, or revision of the Constitutions and Regulations.

Introducing the first General Chapter which opened at Lanzo on 5 September 1877, Don Bosco said: "Our Divine Saviour tells us in the Gospel that where two or three are gathered in his name he

will be there among them... And so we may trust that the Lord will be in our midst and will personally lead our discussions to his greater glory".³

³ BM 13, 183

In this way he emphasized the character of the celebration of a General Chapter. He gave us to some extent the profile described in art.146 of the Constitutions when it describes it as a fraternal meeting, the place of a common sensitivity "to the needs of time and place", for giving a response "at a specific moment in history".

The principal dimension of the General Chapter is communion, given substance by months of intense common life, enriched by the variety of places of origin of the Chapter members and of their experience. It is brought about through the authenticity and novelty of personal contacts which foster the joy of finding oneself different and yet among brothers. It is carried on through continual exchange of ideas among people who are all aware that they have something to contribute and something to receive in Don Bosco's house. It is nourished by the strength of the liturgy and the Eucharist. It is able to manifest externally the characteristic traits of salesian joy and happiness. In this way communion becomes expressed in the style of fellowship which is typical of our communities.

Such an atmosphere leads, as though by osmosis, to intense communication with appreciation of the differences and points of linkage between different cultures, to an understanding of the challenges presented by different religions, to the joyful realization that the salesian charism is flexible, and it leads to the solicitous desire to find solutions to problems which beset young people the whole world over. It brings about a convergence which becomes evident in the groups and assemblies, in

discussions and voting.

This expression of communion involves the individual local and provincial communities and links them all together. In it reaches its maximum extension and intensity the search for unity which is manifest in the communities all over the world.

For this reason the General Chapter, while it is in session, wants to be in deep communion with every single confrere. The local and provincial communities, the times and places where they are working, are the essential and continual points of reference for its reflections. From them it begins, of them it is constantly thinking, for them it works.

In convoking the sixth General Chapter, Blessed Don Rua expressed the desire to be in communion with all the confreres of the world, making his own the words of the Apostle: "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (Eph 1,16).⁴ We may well believe that the more we are united, the more efficacious will be the GC24 for the entire Congregation.

⁴ *Circular letter*, 19.3.1892

An experience of communion of this kind and the unity which it creates are not something purely fleeting. They do not disappear with the ending of the Chapter but rather continue to spread afterwards.

Without setting out to do so, but most efficaciously nevertheless, a General Chapter moulds those who witness the event. Participation in it does not end the obligations of the Chapter member.

He is called to make known to the confreres of the houses and his province the experience he has lived through, and to manifest that new salesian heart, which every Chapter inculcates through the sum total of its work. He will pass on the universal

vision of the Congregation, the thousand and one aspects of its presence, and its unity of spirit and purpose.

Every Chapter member feels that he is present at the Chapter in your name and because he has been 'sent' by you; but he also cherishes the hope that you are eagerly awaiting his return, to pass on to you the witness which cannot be adequately conveyed by either a written text, or a videocassette, or by the flow of information which will certainly be forthcoming. The confirmation or development of such information you will probably be looking for in the words of the direct witness.

In his summing up of the work of the first General Chapter, Fr Ceria recounts what was said by Fr Secondo Franco S.J., who had helped the Salesians in its preparation: that its main objective was to form the religious consciousness of the confreres.⁵ Every Chapter is a gift to the Congregation for the efficacy of its mission, a gift to each one of us to enable us to grow in fidelity to our vocation.

If therefore it is a matter of a vocational grace and not just an event which has to take place at fixed intervals, it follows that the preparation, style of communion, and willingness to accept and put into practice whatever it may decide, are the spiritual attitudes we must foster within us from the outset.

3. The significance of the GC24

The GC24 is an ordinary General Chapter. It develops and studies more deeply an aspect of our identity and plan of activity already studied on

⁵ BM 13, 219

other occasions. In particular it will maintain continuity with the GC23 and strengthen the directives concerning shared responsibility with the laity and their formation in the direction of the education of young people to the faith.

Among the members of the General Council as also among the Provincials and members of Provincial Councils, who assessed the various suggestions put forward for themes for the present Chapter, there was a strong desire to maintain an organic linkage with both preceding Chapters and with what has been done during the past six years, which have been marked by such initiatives as the "Lay Project" and the "Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family".

This should lead to a post-Chapter process in substantial continuity but also with significant progress with respect to what has been done so far. The point is emphasized in the Precapitular Document: "The horizon therefore is the mission, and in this sense the theme fits in with the general pattern of reflections made by the Congregation from the Special General Chapter onwards to the launching of the present Chapter".⁶

Looking back to the celebration of the first General Chapter, we find Don Bosco saying: It will give our Congregation a new look. It will be a giant step. How good it makes us feel to see that we are forging ahead year after year".⁷

Don Bosco expected from the first Chapter therefore, and it is helpful for us to believe the same of this our 24th, a twofold result. The giving to the Congregation of a new look, i.e. of shaping more clearly the outlines of its physiognomy and perfecting its identity; and that of taking a step forward in the direction indicated by the signs of the

⁶ Precap.doc. n. 1

⁷ BM 13, 177

times, the indications given by the Church, and the urgent needs of the young.

It hardly needs pointing out that the relationship with the laity, which is the theme of the GC24, touches in very truth on the substantial form of the Congregation and is a point in which the Congregation is urgently called upon to take a real step forward, or maybe several steps. To illustrate the point one need only look back to the space given by the first GC of 1877 to the theme of the Salesian Cooperators.

4. Communication between the capitular community and local communities

From what we have said it is clear that in the GC24 it is the entire Congregation that must gather together and express its opinions. We consider this to be one of the Chapter's most important aspects, and one or two particular points of attention on the part of local communities will help towards its realization.

Prayer and sacrifice

The results we are hoping for from the GC24 make us think back to the sowing of the seed in the Gospel. Here too the parable can be applied: some of the seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it. Other seeds fell on rocky ground where they had not much soil, and they sprang up at once but soon withered. Still other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty.⁸

⁸ cf. Mt 13,4-9

The degree of fertility depends on grace and interior dispositions. Both must be asked for in constant and trusting prayer. I would not want this invitation to be felt as a merely generic or routine exhortation. Thought must be given to the spiritual capacity and dispositions required in each Chapter member to be able to understand, discern, purify himself from improper attachments, reach convergence with others and decide on what best conforms to God's plan. And no less thought must be given to the attitudes of those who receive the message and must give effect to it: willingness to listen, availability, trust, prompt application.

It is in prayer that the Holy Spirit educates us to situate in a context of faith the problems at the centre of our attention, to predispose our hearts to accept and welcome the results of the GC24, to obtain light and grace for the confreres working in the Chapter itself. "If a thought does not germinate in God's terrain, it is destined to get no further than a human dimension, where it will have no more than fleeting success".⁹

We feel the need for prayer especially for the enlightened choice, free of all human consideration, of the Superiors who will have to guide the Congregation in the coming six years. In his letter convoking the Chapter, the late lamented Fr Egidio Viganò asked for "the participation and shared responsibility of all confreres through abundant prayer that the Lord will give to the Congregation the Superiors needed at the present historic moment of the Church, the world and young people".¹⁰ This is perhaps the most important task of every General Chapter, and the one fraught with the gravest consequences.

⁹ Bosco Valentino, *Il Capitolo: momento di profetia per tenere il passo di Dio*, LDC, Torino-Leumann, 1980, p. 86.

¹⁰ AGC 350, p. 6

Information

The Regulations for the General Chapter give particular attention to information. This is entrusted to a capitular commission and will make use of the structures and personnel associated with ANS.

As compared with previous Chapters we are better equipped at the present day for communication purposes: internet, electronic mail, fax, etc. We have entered the era of rapid communication. The GC24 is an excellent opportunity, for those who have the possibility but have not yet taken advantage of it, to set up their own instruments of communication with the Centre of the Congregation.

It is our hope that the increased possibilities for the exchange of information may allow us to experience and savour a greater communion. We are well aware that neither instruments nor the constant flow of news automatically produces such communion. Of this we have daily experience. After seeing a news bulletin on television, we often remain a long way from the real facts and the persons we have had presented to us.

The desired sharing will take place if on both sides, General Chapter and local community, after the style of journalistic curiosity which is always looking for snippets of interest to 'broadcast from the housetops', the effort is made to receive and diffuse salutary news, the kind that takes us to the heart of problems, which gives us the real dimensions of our charism, which helps us to feel the Spirit's presence and which opens our eyes to the occasions and opportunities God is offering us. And especially so if such information is spread and ex-

ploited in local communities, and for the Salesian Family also by suitable means.

Information on the General Chapter, therefore, compels communities to verify and perfect their own internal communication, and to invite every confrere, in the spirit of the Constitutions, to renew his commitment to take part in the more significant community practices.

Study

For the celebration of the GC24 and the acceptance of its results, the terrain needs to be prepared also by an opportune updating in what concerns present phenomena and sensitivities, especially in the heart of the Church. This is an inescapable duty for those coming to Rome, but is also incumbent on those who follow the Chapter from home. It includes the reading of the great documents of the Church's magisterium, especially the more recent ones, the study of salesian history and spirituality, the Acts of the principal lay congresses that have taken place in recent years, the renewed Constitutions and Statutes of the lay components of the Salesian Family.

Remarks are sometimes made about the excessive abundance of such documents. But it is not necessary to read all of them in this brief interval. The unfortunate thing would be to neglect all of them. Taken as a whole they offer a great possibility of choice for the meditation of individuals and communities.

Study will enable us to go beyond the surface facts concerning the laity, to understand more deeply our harmonious relationship with the new figure of the lay person awaited by the Church, to

discover what it is that unites us with many lay people of good will together with whom we are called, even in this secularized world, to work together so as to bring salvation to the young and hope to the world.

In other words it is a matter of not considering finished, at community level, the work of reflection undertaken by the Provincial Chapters, but to continue in the directions indicated the process they began.

The Precapitular Document says in fact: “From a reading of the situations reported by Provincial Chapters, some problems and questions emerge which refer back to salesian history for a comparison and subsequent outlining of a practical framework for the future. Some areas are particularly relevant for this kind of reflection:

- the historical experience of Don Bosco read in the perspective of his relationship with the laity;
- the vast movement of persons involved in the salesian mission, guided by the animating nucleus living at Valdocco;
- Christian spirituality in the salesian interpretation of the secular condition”.¹¹

¹¹ Precap.doc. n. 183

5. The community, the subject giving effect to the General Chapter

It had already become clear in the GC23 that any practical guidelines were based on a necessary premise: the quality of the salesian community. It is a point that follows from the very nature of our vocation.

Activity which is only individual does not attain the fullness, witnessing capacity and power of

transmission proper to the salesian mission. On the other hand, to set up plans for the Congregation or its charism without taking into account the state of the communities, would not go further than generous ideals.

The very insistence over the last twenty years on planning in general, and the Educative Project in particular, suggests an essential reference to the salesian community as the subject of formation, planning and apostolic activity.

With the contributions made by the Provinces in mind, the Precapitular Commission emphasizes the central role played by the local community in giving effect to any indications for change that may be decided on: "The salesian mission is practised, in general, by the daily communal realization of a project by an educative and pastoral community. And so the subject responsible for the project is an ensemble of organized presences in an educative community in which the SDBs constitute the animating nucleus of other pastoral and educative forces, with the groups of the Salesian Family which fully share Don Bosco's charism".¹²

¹² Precap.doc. n. 1

It is not enough to single out the *lay sector* as a sensitive area for the salesian mission, nor the successful outcome of the GC24, nor the stimulating force of a well drawn up and balanced final document to bring about, together with the laity, the leap forward to which we have referred. This will depend rather on the renewed missionary motivation of our communities, on their energy and enthusiasm in giving expression to salesian spirituality, and on their capacity for communication and sharing.

The bringing in of lay people, the sharing of responsibility with them, their animation and forma-

tion will require the provincial and local communities to mobilize themselves and their resources so as to ensure the necessary conditions for the application of whatever the GC24 may be able to decide.

For this reason it will be necessary to verify at once the life of the local communities and their effective union with the provincial community; to encourage the practice of discernment which will lead them to decide to concentrate their resources on the more important and promising aspects; to see what level of animation and shared responsibility they display. The emergency as regards formation, notes the precapitular document, “applies transversely to what is said in connection with protagonists of the mission, environments, initiatives and structures of coordination. Everywhere there emerges an insistent demand for formation together, in which SDBs and lay people are simultaneously givers and receivers of formation”.¹³

This tallies with what is said in *Christifideles Laici*, at the end of a paragraph dedicated to “The reciprocal formation received and given by all”: “Forming those who, in turn, will be given the responsibility for the formation of the lay faithful, constitutes a basic requirement for assuring the general and widespread formation of all the faithful”.¹⁴

It is no exaggeration to say that every Salesian through the ministry entrusted to him – and which extends from the school to catechesis, to the celebration of the sacraments, to assistance and to counselling – is by vocation a formator of formators. And so each one must cultivate “the conviction, first of all, that one cannot offer a true and effective formation to others if one has not personally taken on or developed a personal responsibility for

¹³ Precap.doc. n. 220

¹⁴ CL 63

formation, and this is essentially a formation of self'.¹⁵ The positive habit of self-formation leads to a taste for the continued growth of oneself and others, and becomes a characteristic manner for responding to the impulse of the Spirit who uses every means to mould us to Christ's image.

This relationship between community quality and the possibility of animation is almost taking on the character of a law. This has recently been corroborated by the document "Fraternal life in community" and by the Synod on Consecrated Life. In the former we read: "In order to achieve fruitful relationships, based on bonds of mature co-responsibility (...) it is necessary to have religious communities with a clear charismatic identity, assimilated and lived, capable of transmitting them to others and disposed to share them; religious communities with an intense spirituality and missionary enthusiasm for communicating the same spirit and the same evangelizing thrust; religious communities who know how to animate and encourage lay people to share the charism of their institute, according to their secular character and according to their different style of life".¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Fraternal life in community*, n. 70

6. Two levels of reflection and community commitment

Reflection on the indispensable role of the salesian community leads us to draw some practical conclusions at two levels.

In the first place at the level of animation and government of the Province, where decisions are made about the number of communities, where the

Pastoral and Educative Plan is approved and verified, where the quantitative and qualitative consistency is laid down in strict relationship with the mission entrusted to each of them.

It is the responsibility of the Provincial with his Council to ensure that each community be sufficiently strong to guarantee its common life, the efficacy of the mission, the possibility of providing diversified formative processes, and the ability to foster vocations.

And then at the level of the local community the awareness must be cultivated that "living and working together"¹⁷ is our particular way of "being church", enabling us to live by the Spirit of communion, which prompts us to work as members of the body and branches of the vine. And it is also the only possible way for expressing the rich qualities of the salesian charism and the preventive system.

The family spirit, so dear to Don Bosco and salesian tradition, has at its foundation the experience of a community which feels itself to be God's family, because "it is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity".¹⁸ It is a human family because acceptance and mature affection pervades its relationships and atmosphere. We cannot therefore live and act as individual steersmen. We must behave like apostles who know that communion is their first witness and mission.

We need to examine to what extent the spirit of the 'world' with its subjectivism of thought and selfish approach to life may have eroded our personal style and conscience. We need therefore to renew our commitment so that the salesian community may become a house where the confreres are happy to live together, feel themselves subjects of a mission, and support those who need to see

¹⁷ C 49

¹⁸ *ibid.*

that the Spirit of God, in creating communion, is stronger than flesh and blood: the families, parish communities and groups, and the people who live around us.

Conclusion

Let us approach the GC24 in deep communion with the whole Church. We hear this thought in the words of John Paul II: “A great hope animates the Church on this eve of the third millennium of the Christian era. She is preparing to enter it with a strong commitment to the renewal of all her forces, among which is the Christian laity”. The Holy Father is convinced, and his certainty derives from the pilgrimages he has made to all parts of the world, that “one can speak of a new lay life, rich with immense human power, which plays an ever more active part in the missionary effort of the Church”.¹⁹ In this way a progressive maturing is taking place in one of the results of Vatican II, which pointed out that in the laity is manifested in all its splendour the countenance of the people of God.²⁰

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Address of 21.9.95*

²⁰ cf. LG 32

The GC24 has its place on the highroad opened up by the Council, which runs between a continual return to the sources²¹ for charismatic fidelity and the “reading of the signs of the times”,²² by means of which the Spirit guides his Church and recalls consecrated life to continual renewal.

²¹ cf. PC 2

²² GS 4

At the end of the third General Chapter, which took place at Valsalice in 1883, Don Bosco said to his Salesians: “When you go back to your houses you will greet the confreres and all the youngsters.

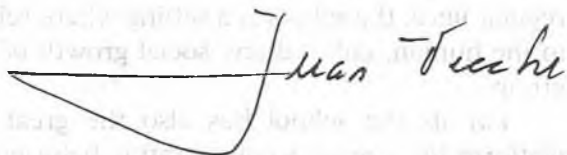
Take with you the thought that the Congregation's glory goes with you: everything is in your hands. God's help will not be wanting"²³

²³ MB 16, 418

And that goes for us too. "Everything is in your hands". Salesians and laity together we are preparing the GC24, together we shall celebrate it, together we shall take responsibility – each according to his possibilities and the ministry entrusted to him – for giving life to its directives for the salvation of the young.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

Fr Juan E. Vecchi
Vicar General

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juan Vecchi". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.