

acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

YEAR LXXVII
october-december 1996 **N. 357**

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Juan E. VECCHI The Exhortation "Vita Consacrata" Incentives for our postcapitular journey	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	(none in this issue)	
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	3.1 Criteria and Guidelines concerning the role of coordination of the Regional Coun- cillor for "Africa and Madagascar"	33
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major	39
	4.2 Chronicle of the General Council	41
5. DOCUMENTS AND NEWS ITEMS	5.1 Strenna of the Rector Major for 1997	48
	5.2 Recognition of the Institute of the Daughters of the Queenship of Mary Immaculate, as members of the Salesian Family.	48
	5.3 The new General Council	52
	5.4 New Provincials	56
	5.5 New Salesian Bishops	66
	5.6 Deceased confreres	69

Editrice S.D.B.

Edizione extra commerciale

Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco

Via della Pisana, 1111

Casella Postale 18333

00163 Roma

Tipografia Pio XI - Via Umbertide, 11 - 00181 Roma - *Finito di stampare: Ottobre 1997*

THE EXHORTATION "VITA CONSACRATA" INCENTIVES FOR OUR POSTCAPITULAR JOURNEY

1. In the movement of the Church - 2. Our reading of the Exhortation - 3. The gift of our consecrated life - 4. Spirituality: a primary requirement: *Programme and process - A pastoral spirituality* - 5. The many areas of communion - *Experts of communion* - 6. Our 'areopagus': education - Conclusion.

Rome, 8 september 1996
Feast of Our Lady's Birthday

My dear Confreres,

At the time I write this letter the GC24 has been consigned to all the Provinces. To the first communication which took place while the Chapter was still in progress by means of our organs of publication, there followed further transmissions by those who had taken part in the Assembly. Finally the official edition was sent out through the Acts in various languages. It carries not only the documents promulgated in accordance with the Constitutions¹ but also other useful texts for a fuller understanding of the event and of the capitular guidelines.

I imagine that the Provinces and local communities are busy getting to know and absorb the motivation which the documents offer concerning the participation of lay people in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, and in trying out already the possible applications in relationships, structures, organization of the work, and in ongoing formation programmes.

¹ cf. C 148

I remind you that it is urgent that we put into practice in our lives in an organic and communal manner, the decisions of the GC24 in line with what I said in my final address: "It will be necessary for the indications of the Chapter to be integrated into a unified project and be converted into processes which foster their vital assimilation (mentalities, attitudes, capabilities, experiences). It is a question of bringing broad visions down to earth in daily life. And here we face a challenge: to find an efficacious mediation between inspiration and practice, between the document and its practical application".²

The GC24 is a challenge to each one of us: it is an invitation to awaken and activate apostolic resources which lie dormant within us, in our charisma, in the Christian and educative experience of the many lay people who collaborate in our initiatives or whom God is moving internally towards the mission to the young.

1. In the Church's movement

The GC24 places us in the heart of the Church's pastoral project for this last part of the century. It takes up its motives, objectives, contents and plan of action.

The project has a name: *new evangelization*. We have heard and repeated the expression many times and we have grasped its general implications and demands. But perhaps we still need to go more deeply into its sense and practical consequences for our life and educative activity.

It is a question, in fact, of becoming aware of modern culture in its realizations and tendencies, in the light of the Gospel and the vocation of the human person, so as to better understand the significance of salvation which the event, the actual presence and the word of Christ can have in it, and in consequence renew the

² GC24, 256

Christian testimony, the proclamation of the Gospel and the intervention of the disciple of Christ in history.

This implies a further meditation on the Christian mystery, a careful reading of many phenomena and the rigorous screening of the many opinions which challenge our convictions and our experience as consecrated persons. Faith in fact leads us to confess that Christ is salvation for all times: yesterday, today and always.

In this movement for a new evangelization particular importance has become attached to the reflection on the Church, proposed again and again in the documents of the Magisterium and celebrated in significant events like the Synodal Assemblies at the level of the Universal Church or of continents: this has produced a new ecclesial awareness and a progressive renewal in the manner of conceiving the relationship between the Church and the world.

The Church knows herself to be the people of God. She proclaims and expresses in human history the mystery of God's active presence. She bears witness to, teaches and helps in the living out of the divine filiation revealed in Jesus Christ. Her mission is to gather together, guide and unite individuals and humanity to live this vocation and accept all the consequences which derive from it, even temporal ones. She knows therefore that she must express in the world and in history a form of life, a proclamation and historical option which apply to persons in so far as they are God's images and his children in Christ.

In this context the Church has decided to look more deeply, in the light of the Word, her centuries of experience and the present trends, at the three fundamental conditions in which those who have been called to the faith live to the full their vocations as disciples of Christ: the lay state, that of ministry, and that of religious consecration.

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, which contains the reflections on the third case and is the result of a long process of preparation and realization of the IX Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and of careful subsequent refinement, was published

while our GC24 was in the midst of its work. It provided inspiring principles, proposed a frame of reference for understanding the relationships between the different realizations of the salesian charism, and exercised a decisive influence on the practical guidelines. You will find traces of it all through the capitular text in abundant quotations and references.

It will be of help, therefore, at this time of study and application of the GC24 to take up the Exhortation for a reading which goes beyond what is prompted by a first lawful curiosity. And that is what I propose to do in this letter, after having studied it with the members of the General Council for our personal profit and in order to share with you some of its perspectives.

This, I think, will have two beneficial results. It will place us more deeply in the communion of the Church which is everywhere called upon to reflect on Consecrated Life as a matter of general interest. Rightly in fact did the Synodal Fathers use an expression which was subsequently frequently repeated and emphasized: "De re nostra agitur"³ the whole Church.

Moreover, it will help us to focus more clearly on certain crucial points in the GC24, the adequate understanding of which will condition the quality of our life and the efficacy of our praxis.

2. Our reading of the Exhortation

There is no need for a systematic presentation of the contents of the Exhortation. They are organized in three chapters around *consecration*, *communion*, and *service*, and set out in non-specialist language intelligible to all consecrated persons.

The various standpoints from which the Exhortation can be read: biblical, theological, historical, juridical and pastoral, have been studied abundantly in meetings, seminars and publications,

³ *Propositio* n. 2

especially those promoted by religious. They offer material useful for personal or communal reading.

In the Exhortation mention is also made of doctrinal and practical problems still to be clarified, which have been entrusted to appropriate study commissions. Among these we have a particular interest in those regarding mixed Institutes and the new forms of evangelical life.⁴ We are following them and awaiting further developments so as to decide, when the time is ripe, on a guideline in conformity with our charismatic identity. This was indicated by the GC24 in a deliberation concerned with the form of our Society: "In the light of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (n. 61) and of the juridical developments now in progress on the "form" of Religious Institutes, the GC24 considers it important that a study be made of a possible "mixed" form of our Society, and that there be a deeper investigation to see whether the innovations in such a form respond to our charism and to the original project of the Founder".⁵

But rather than dwell on these aspects, I want to run through the text with you to gather and absorb certain incentives, comparing them with our own experience and looking at them in the light of the context in which we are at present living as a Congregation.

Such a reading requires interior acceptance, preferential attention to some points which are substantial and certain, and comparison with our practical life and mentality.

Some have pointed out the limitations of the Exhortation. They remind us that we are living in time and that, after this far from indifferent effort at reflection, we must follow the road that lies ahead of us. To take commensurate note of the point forms part of the shared responsibility which religious have in respect of the whole of the experience of consecrated life. But it would be

⁴ cf. VC 61, 62

⁵ GC24, 192

ungenerous and useless to get bogged down on this particular point in face of the riches offered by the Exhortation. Wisdom indicates that each element be given its just weight as regards life.

Similarly the communities will be helped by a *creative* reading which does not stop at a mere noting of the contents, but tries to reformulate them by a comparison of what is said with our own living experience. The text must serve as a stimulus for verification, for rethinking and for conversion.

Finally, we are interested in a *pastoral* reading. Consecrated persons have received with gratitude this Exhortation of John Paul II. They consider it an instrument for revision and re-launching within their own Institute, but also as an opportunity for becoming more aware of the gift of consecrated life in the ecclesial community and in human history. Its essential significance is often little known, even in situations where consecrated persons are in daily contact with other people. We wonder whether our language and signs are adequate for making it understood, or whether we have not failed to communicate our experience.

We are particularly interested in presenting it to the young in the splendour of its perennial significance and its unequivocal validity. This is part of the journey of faith we have been trying to make explicit over the past six years; it responds to the particular moment of definition of life through which young people are passing and comes to grips with their great desire to know the best ways of meeting the problem. For this reason we must once again examine our experience to make of it a message we can efficaciously communicate.

3. The gift of our consecrated life

It is remarkable how often the word *gift* occurs with reference to the totality of the consecrated life, to each of its historic manifestations or charisms, and to many of its components or partic-

ular aspects: the vows, community, and the service of charity. A gift received is a gift offered. The abundance of modulations with which such references are repropounded leaves after the reading the impression that the category of 'gift' is one of the fundamental categories for perceiving in its proper light the nature of consecrated life. The gift refers back to the gratuitousness and love which is there at the beginning, to the joy of feeling oneself an object of predilection, to excellence.

We often pause over questions concerning our identity as consecrated persons. More often too we have to listen to and try to analyze the difficulties which have to be overcome if we are to succeed in being meaningful. We are provoked by the secular environment which is ill-inclined to recognize the value of options and motivations which go beyond what is functional, temporal and practical. We are also challenged by the apparently inefficacious nature of our efforts in respect of the great phenomena of our time: the loss of religious sense, ethical disorientation, poverty which increases and becomes ever more extreme, discrimination and conflicts which degenerate into continued violence. We are also worried about the poor vocational response, especially where rationality, wellbeing and development are the order of the day. And last but not least, we are aware of our personal and institutional limits in the realization of a project which is attractive in its ideal presentation.

We Salesians in particular wonder how we can live and recount our experience to the young, who are open to what is significant and available for spiritual experience, but at the same time distracted by many fleeting stimuli, attracted towards more immediate projects, different from us in tastes, language and style of life. Often they question us on the significance and reasons for our consecrated existence.

This confrontation with the world is not something extraneous to the experience of the believer and the consecrated person. We find abundant traces of it in the Bible. The Psalms express it with

unusual efficacy and in a deeply-felt form of invocation when they quote the challenge of the sceptic: "Where is your God?"⁶ In fact the presence of God and the experience it provokes in man cannot be reduced to a purely temporal vision, and its signs are to some extent extraneous to human perception: they are wrapped in mystery and call for faith and grace.

The Exhortation has not ignored this kind of analysis which is not only sociological and short-term in nature but is also theological. You have to read between the lines, but it has not made a big deal of it either. It has not even considered as negative the need to measure itself against a secularized context in which we are called to bear witness to the choice of the primacy of God and of charity; nor has it indulged in complaints, justified or mere pretexts, of deviations from consecrated life in the complex process of renewal which followed Vatican II.

Its outlook is positive and stimulating and concentrates the gaze on consecrated life, which it enlightens with new perspectives.

Some of these recall the personal experience of those who have felt called to this kind of life: the particular brilliance with which Christ has appeared to us and the fascination it has exerted on us, the rich nature of the perspectives it opens up to existence when concentrated in God, the peace which accompanies loving with an undivided heart, the joys of self-giving in mission, the privilege of enjoying an intimacy with Christ and consciously participating in the Trinitarian life. It is all signified in the icon of the Transfiguration of Christ in the presence of the disciples he had chosen to witness his glory.

It is an invitation to look back on our moments of Tabor, the best aspects of our personal experience, interpreting them in the light of God's word, making them the motivations for a courageous fidelity.

⁶ Ps 42,4

The value of consecrated life is manifested also in and through the Church. It produces copious fruits of holiness and service in every season of the Church.⁷ Rapid surveys of history reveal the persistence, richness, diversity of expressions and correspondence with the urgent needs of the Christian community which has characterized the appearance of different forms of consecrated life which is open to new expressions even today. A Gospel unfolded as times develop! It proposes holiness again, respects Christ's life style, helps in discovering the signs of the Kingdom and continually spurs on towards the definitive realization of man. For this reason it is indispensable not so much for the practical organization of the Church but for the substantial experience of the mystery of relationship with its Lord.

The consideration of the value of our consecration, in the interchange with other ecclesial vocations in an "harmonious exchange of gifts", is particularly relevant to the time in which we are living. The GC24 reminds us of this when it describes the role of the religious community within the CEP: "The Salesian SDB, by his very life, translates the Gospel into language accessible especially to the young; through the values of consecration he raises questions and indicates possibilities of sense; through his dedication he proclaims that the secret of happiness is to lose his life so as to find it again; through his style of life he makes attractive the spirit of the beatitudes and proclaims the joy of the Resurrection; through his living in community he becomes an image of the Church, the sacrament of the Kingdom".⁸

As educators committed in human advancement and culture, we are stimulated also by those perspectives which speak to us of the incidence of consecrated life in human history, not only through service but also by means of the horizons which are opened up, the values which bear witness, and the attitudes created.

⁷ cf. VC 5

⁸ GC24, 151

This fixing of attention on the gift of God and the discovery in it of the depth of wisdom, the brilliance of life, the radiance of experiences, the joy of encounters and the generosity of love, places us in an atmosphere of contemplation.

Superficial readings of the reality can in fact leave impressions of something irrelevant, of inefficacy and insignificance. Going back to the sources of our existence, to the great presence which brought it into being, to the word which enlightens its sense and its destiny, the awareness of the mystery at work in us is strengthened, and we get a deep grasp of the facts which challenge us.

The element of thanksgiving therefore permeates the whole of the document starting from the opening words. It has been remarked that the text passes continually from theology to doxology, from reflection to praise of God. From the contemplation of God's gift flows a calm trust and confidence in confronting present difficulties and future hope. Certainly there are questions concerning significance, of pastoral adaptation, life style and cultural dialogue. We are in a period of reaping and sowing. But we are encouraged by the words of John Paul II: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.⁹ Ours is "a hand 'touched' by the hand of Christ, a life where his voice is heard, a life sustained by his grace".¹⁰ It unravels like an exodus from the light of the Transfiguration to the definitive light of the Resurrection.¹¹

4. Spirituality: a prime requirement

Spirituality appears as the fundamental dimension of consecrated life, the point of convergence of all the perspectives from

⁹ VC 110

¹⁰ VC 40

¹¹ cf. VC 40

which it gains its deep effect: theological, historical, biblical and pastoral. It is therefore a transverse element which pervades the entire Exhortation.

But it is concentrated nevertheless in certain paragraphs which present it in direct and practical form. The headings to these paragraphs constitute a summary which is easily understood: a transfigured life - the call to holiness,¹² a decisive commitment to the spiritual life,¹³ continuing formation,¹⁴ spirituality as a response to the search for the sacred and the desire for God.¹⁵ It is never separated from, and still less is it opposed to theological reflection and apostolic activity, but is solidly rooted in the former and gives its characteristic form to the latter.

Anyone who has made a deep study of the Exhortation will rightly affirm that if a strong note be emphasized immediately in the document, that note will be the embodiment of a realistic spirituality, which appears in both the almost "mystical" nature of the doctrine, and in the many explicit references to the need for spirituality and commitment to it.¹⁶

From the Spirit, as the source of the germinal gift, takes shape the particular configuration of the consecration, the style of the mission, the communal life, and the specific manner of practising the vows.

Spirituality is therefore like a principle of individuation, from which develops the identity. Consecrated life in fact is not born of a general project thought up by someone in theory, but by singular experiences of life in the Spirit, through which is accepted, felt, matures and is expressed the love of God and neighbour, revealed in its fullness in Christ. The Exhortation endorses this in several points, but dwells on it especially in the introduction when it

¹² cf. VC 35

¹³ cf. VC 93

¹⁴ cf. VC 69

¹⁵ cf. VC 103

¹⁶ cf. CASTELLANO CERVERA J., *Dimensione teologica e spirituale della vita consacrata: tradizione, novità, profezia*, in AA.VV. *Vita consacrata*, Rogate, Rome 1996, p. 38

traces the spiritual nature of various forms of consecrated life which have appeared in the course of time.¹⁷

Rules, plans and regulations all converge to provide the complete expression of an original spirituality. "All these elements, which take shape in the different forms of the consecrated life, give rise to a specific spirituality, i.e. a concrete programme of relations with God and one's surroundings, marked by specific spiritual emphases and choices of apostolate, which accentuate and re-present one or other aspect of the one mystery of Christ. When the Church approves a form of consecrated life or an Institute, she confirms that in its spiritual and apostolic charism are found all the objective requisites for achieving personal and communal perfection according to the Gospel".¹⁸

The spiritual life is therefore "a primary requirement, inscribed in the very essence of the consecrated life by the fact that like every other baptized person, and even more so those who profess the evangelical counsels, must aspire with all their strength to the perfection of charity".¹⁹

On this depends the apostolic fertility, and the vocational attraction exerted on new generations. It appears as the energy and starting point for the development of the renewal which in recent years has been at the centre of studies, plans and expectations: "To tend towards holiness is, in brief, the programme of every consecrated life, particularly in the perspective of its renewal on the threshold of the Third Millennium".²⁰

This insistent request, repeated after the verification made by the Synod, seems to point to spirituality as the "last frontier" of the consecrated life, the only possibility for rendering it significant and fruitful. It seems in fact to be the only element capable of making the ethical proposal credible, because it is animated by

¹⁷ cf. VC 5-11

¹⁸ VC 93

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

the truth and by love to overcome through pastoral activity catechetical initiation and organizational aspects, inspired by the logic of grace and the sacraments, and to enliven by charity proclamation, celebration, testimony and service.²¹

Programme and process

What has been said about the priority of the spiritual life becomes concrete when we remember the dimensions and requirements demonstrated by secular experience of consecrated life.

In the first place there is the fidelity to the *spiritual patrimony* of each Institute.²² It is a matter of a creative fidelity and not of material observance or rigid conservation. We must refer back to the soul, the attitudes and the Gospel options of the Founders and Foundresses to respond to the challenges arising from the dominant mentality or actual problems of living together. Every charism in fact implies a form of relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, expressed in history. Such creative fidelity finds its basis not only in apostolic initiatives but primarily in the style of life of individuals and communities. From these arise the invitation to evangelical transparency, to radicality and apostolic courage. In the context of this fidelity, declares the Exhortation, "there is a pressing need today for every Institute to return to the Rule, since the latter provides a map for the whole journey of discipleship",²³ and contains the genuine spiritual tradition of the Institute. It is an invitation to a continual exploration of our patrimony and to extract from it new riches.

First among the dimensions to be cultivated with particular care is the *contemplative* element, which is expressed in the sense

²¹ cf. note 16 above.

²² cf. VC 36

²³ VC 37

²⁴ C 12

of the presence of God welcomed with love and gratitude. To this our Constitutions refer when they say: "As he works for the salvation of the young, the Salesian experiences the fatherhood of God and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work. He cultivates union with God, aware of the need to pray without ceasing in a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father, whom he feels close at hand. Attentive to the presence of the Spirit and doing everything for God's love he becomes like Don Bosco a contemplative in action".²⁴

We all have a permanent need of this dimension: "theology, to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil; commitment, so that we will refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness".²⁵

The contemplative dimension permeates all forms of consecrated life, though each charism has its own typical moments and manner of manifesting it. The way it is taken up and practised by the Salesians is expressed in two texts which closely connect prayer with educative activity. The first is in Const.95: "His need of God, keenly felt in his apostolic commitment, leads him to celebrate the liturgy of life, attaining that 'tireless industry made holy by prayer and union with God...'. The second sees educational activity as the characteristic setting for our experience of God: "Don Bosco has taught us to recognize God's operative presence in our work of education, and to experience it as life and love... We believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer us the grace of meeting with him... In this way our work of education becomes the preeminent context in which to meet him".²⁶

The contemplative dimension is nourished and strengthened at the sources which ward off stress and strain. The Exhortation

²⁴ C 38

²⁵ VC 38

²⁶ GC23, 95

emphasizes the Word of God, communion with Christ in the Liturgy (particularly in the Eucharist and in Reconciliation) and spiritual direction. It dwells on the value of the *Lectio divina*: "When practised according to the possibilities and circumstances of life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life".²⁷ As is evident this requires an attentive approach to the text, an internal absorbing of God's word, comparison with life and sharing. It is also a suggestion for exploiting moments and forms of spiritual communication which will lead to placing in a more evident manner the Word of God where art. 87 of the Constitutions would have it to be: "For us the Word, listened to with faith, is the source of spiritual life, the food of prayer, light to see God's will in the events of life, and strength to live out our vocation faithfully"

The *apostolic* dimension emerges from the internal unity between consecration and mission: "The task of devoting themselves wholly to 'mission' is included in their call; indeed, by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission as was the whole of Jesus' life",²⁸ understanding and cultivating a spirituality of action, "seeing God in all things and all things in God",²⁹ expressed by means of an illustration which makes the significance immediately obvious: the washing of the feet in which "Jesus reveals the depth of God's love for humanity".³⁰

Spirituality implies also an *ascetical* dimension, of resistance or spiritual combat, represented by Jacob's struggle with the Angel. "Asceticism, by helping to master and correct the inclinations of human nature wounded by sin, is truly indispensable if

²⁷ VC 94

²⁸ VC 72

²⁹ VC 74

³⁰ VC 75

consecrated persons are to remain faithful to their own vocation and follow Jesus on the Way of the Cross".³¹ This is an aspect not very congenial to current sensitivity which tends to the satisfaction of its desires and seeks justification for doing so. Every Institute has a tradition of asceticism consistent with its own spiritual style. In our own Congregations there are certain key words which define it: work, temperance, loving kindness and competence in our educative task, fraternal relationships.

An important aspect of such asceticism is to integrate into the plan of life in God some tendencies which, if left to develop in autonomous form, would compromise the quality of the spiritual experience and the purposes of the mission: a frantic quest for efficiency and professional approach disjoined from pastoral objectives, secularization of mentality and life style, nationalism (even in hidden forms) or the excessive affirmation of cultural peculiarities.³²

Spirituality, as a process, leads to the assuming of the whole of existence in its various phases. "At every stage of life a person seeks and finds a new task to fulfil, a particular way of being, of serving and of loving".³³

Some writers speak of the possibilities and risks present at different ages of man, and the effort they call for: spiritual emptying in the phase of intensive activity, habit, disappointment and the danger of individualism in the mature years, diminishing activity in advanced age or sickness. Each phase nonetheless is accompanied by a particular grace of God and includes a strong invitation to grow and respond in mature form through continuing formation.

Since the seventies we have been running courses in ongoing formation which by now have spread to every region. The GC23 launched an aspect which is already being put into practice: the local community is the setting for daily continual formation, espe-

³¹ VC 38

³² cf. VC 38

³³ VC 70

cially through the quality of relationships and communication, moments of prayer, community planning, and the shared responsibility for the realization of the mission.

The importance of systematic personal commitment must not be undervalued, and perhaps this is the best place to speak of it. Our life needs to integrate reflection and practice, study and activity, silence and meeting together, though we are not bound to a rigid programming in this regard. It is one of the keys for tending to that spiritual, pastoral and cultural quality to which I referred in my closing address to the GC24.³⁴

A pastoral spirituality

A novel point in the Exhortation is found in the statement that the spiritual life is not only a precondition, basis or preparation for the service which consecrated persons offer to mankind, but that it is an essential aspect of their mission. They are urged to become expert spiritual guides and to multiply initiatives which have as their purpose that of accompanying the faithful in their pilgrimage towards God.³⁵

In this light those parts of the Exhortation should be read attentively which entrust to consecrated persons the task of inspiring "in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbour, especially the most needy".³⁶ It is not a matter of an individual commitment but of a communal understanding and an institutional objective: "Every Institute and community will be a school of true evangelical spirituality".³⁷

³⁴ cf. GC24, 242-243

³⁵ cf. VC 39

³⁶ VC 39

³⁷ VC 93

Service to the dimension of spirituality goes beyond the confines of the Christian community and appears as an accompaniment and support for all who are seeking sense and direction. "All who embrace the consecrated life, men and women alike, become privileged partners in the search for God which has always stirred the human heart and has led to the different forms of asceticism and spirituality".³⁸

This is our undertaking for the next six years. We are aware that we have been through a process of change of mentality, that we have rethought the content and method of pastoral work, and have brought up to date the structures of community life and of government. At present we are committed to calling in lay people, sharing responsibility with them and engaging together in formation, but as I pointed out in my closing address: "The GC24 arrived at the discussion of spirituality in its search for a source of communion between laity and Salesians. There is a widespread awareness in the Congregation that our linkage with lay people needs a more robust spirituality if we are to face up together to the difficult challenges which the salesian mission presents at the present day".³⁹

The Exhortation itself had anticipated this approach when it declared: "Today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes".⁴⁰

To facilitate this task, frames of reference have been drawn up which give an adequate idea of our spirituality. The Salesians have their Constitutions and in them the chapter on the salesian spirit, which is the starting point and basis for other presentations. Fr Egidio Viganò has set out certain traits which form the common patrimony of all the Salesian Family,⁴¹ included and fur-

³⁸ VC 103

³⁹ GC24, 239

⁴⁰ VC 54

⁴¹ cf. AGC 324

ther specified in the Common Identity Card. For young people manifestoes and suggestions have been formulated from the eighties and the GC23 made them authoritative as communally shared proposals. Recently a new presentation has been prepared by those responsible for the combined SDB and FMA Pastoral Departments.

The GC24 sought to highlight what is best for bringing us to share the mission with the laity: a preferential love for the young and especially the poorest of them in the form of pastoral charity,⁴² the quality of educative activity and the family spirit,⁴³ the commitment for the Church and the world prompted by "da mihi animas",⁴⁴ the daily round of duties, relationships and professionalism lived in the presence of God,⁴⁵ the educative practice of the continually renewed preventive system.⁴⁶

In this way our spirituality has been formulated for religious, for the young and for the laity: We have available texts for meditation and guidance: "We conclude the GC24 with the conviction that to propose the salesian spirituality to them is the proper and adequate response to a pressing appeal and the offering of a desired gift. In any case, the demand for spirituality prompts us to discover our family treasures, to develop and analyze more deeply those traits which Don Bosco has left us and which are so extraordinarily efficacious".⁴⁷

But it must be recognized that we become initiated into a spirituality through an encounter with someone who has had experience of it and lives it with joy and conviction, and through membership of a group which communicates it with the ability to involve others, under the guidance and spiritual direction of someone who knows its ways and resources.

⁴² GC24, 89-90

⁴³ GC24, 91

⁴⁴ GC24, 95

⁴⁵ cf. GC24, 97

⁴⁶ cf. GC24, 99

⁴⁷ GC24, 240

Once we know formulations and perspectives, it is on these points that we must put the emphasis: lived experience, community, communication and direction.

5. The many areas of communion

Another main line of thought of which to take advantage in reading the Exhortation concerns the community. Its novelty lies in the mission of communion which is entrusted to consecrated persons. The reflection moves in fact along two lines: one, which looks towards the internal aspect of the community, takes up and confirms what was included in the earlier document *Fraternal Life in Community, Congregavit nos in unum*;⁴⁸ the other concerns external aspects.

Starting from Vatican II, all Institutes have brought about the change from community, understood prevalently as living in common, to the experience of communion. The former emphasizes the importance of the structures which regulate the common life. The latter is concerned with mutual love, the sharing of projects, deep communication and shared responsibility.

We too, through a process of accent and balance, have brought into charismatic unity the two elements indispensable for a real and testifying community presence: the spiritual element (brotherhood in Christ expressed in unity of hearts and quality of interpersonal relationships); and the other more visible, the "common life" or life in common, which consists in living together in a particular religious house, in taking part in common activities, and in fulfilling pastoral commitments with common resolve. "It is clear that 'fraternal life' will not automatically be achieved by observance of the norms which regulate common life; but it is evident that common life is designed to greatly

⁴⁸ cf. CIVCSVA, 2 Febbraio 1994

favour fraternal life".⁴⁹ Our charism, our praxis, our mission and our characteristic family spirit lead to a close union of the two aspects: communion of spirit and community life.

To this blending, which calls for human maturity and spiritual depth, are attributed by our Constitutions significance and a certain pastoral impact, even to the extent of becoming an indispensable element in the mission. "To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation. This is why we come together in communities, where our love for each other leads us to share all we have in a family spirit, and so create communion between person and person".⁵⁰

The GC23 sees it as a sign, school and environment of faith for the young,⁵¹ the preferential place for ongoing formation for the Salesians,⁵² a testifying presence in the locality,⁵³ a centre of communion and participation,⁵⁴ the centre for organic pastoral work,⁵⁵ and the promoting of vocations.⁵⁶

The GC24 went on to specify, from a theoretical standpoint and practical applications, what is meant by *animating nucleus* and the internal conditions needed for its realization: charismatic identity, unity in spirit and in planning, the knowledge and practice of the preventive system, interior apostolic conviction, creativity, and the ability for communication. It also studied the concrete forms for exercising such an assignment: care to get involved, participation, distribution of responsibilities, formation processes.

While this stimulating picture is being absorbed by the common mentality, we too are experiencing the impact of the ex-

⁴⁹ Congregavit nos in unum, 3

⁵⁰ C 49

⁵¹ cf. GC23, 216-218

⁵² cf. GC23, 222

⁵³ cf. CGC23, 225-226

⁵⁴ cf. GC23, 232-234

⁵⁵ cf. GC23, 239-246

⁵⁶ cf. GC23, 252

ternal and internal phenomena which are testing the community and communion. Among the former is the demand for more personal freedom, the consumerism which leads to the personal possession of goods, and the communications explosion. Among the others we find the reduction in numbers, the broadening of the real and potential fields of work, the pressure of new and urgent needs, and a new relationship with external elements.

The Exhortation strongly emphasizes the indispensable value of fraternal life for the renewal and efficacy of the mission.⁵⁷ John Paul II had already made the point some years ago in an address to the plenary meeting of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: "The whole fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life in common. Moreover the present renewal of the Church and in religious life is characterized by a quest for communion and community".⁵⁸

The confirmation of this is found in a deeper analysis of the Trinitarian dimension, from which come the ecclesiological and anthropological consequences put forward once again not only as a paradigm of reciprocal relationships but of actual presence, the cause and origin of communion among religious. "Even fraternal life is put forward as an eloquent witness to the Trinity. It proclaims the Father, who desires to make of all humanity one family. It proclaims the Incarnate Son, who gathers the redeemed into unity. It proclaims the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity in the Church".⁵⁹

The community functions therefore not only with regard to work. It is a human space in which dwells the Trinity",⁶⁰ where God is present and brings about through the memory of the Lord, the love in which we commit ourselves and want to be rooted, and the unity of those who present themselves as followers of Christ.

⁵⁷ cf. VC 72

⁵⁸ Giovanni Paolo II, Address to the CIVCSVA, 20 Nov. 1992

⁵⁹ VC 21

⁶⁰ VC 41

Experts of communion

Communion is also the content and end of the mission. "Before the coming of fraternal life, perhaps never was known so great a mission in so explicit a manner".⁶¹

Fortified by a personal experience which is God's gift, consecrated persons, whether as individuals or communities, are called to expand, strengthen or recreate communion: they become "experts of communion",⁶² the leaven of unity and workers for reconciliation.

Multiple are the environments in which they work. In the universal Church communion is given greater power by the fraternal testimony and work of all consecrated life, by the practical solidarity with which consecrated persons head for the frontiers of evangelization, by their availability for meeting urgent needs of the Church, by their union with the Holy Father. We should not overlook the impact on the universal communion deriving from our presence, from the action between young people and adults, from the profession of faith, and from our words and firm attitudes. The giving of a daily personal contribution to the unity of Christ's body stimulates our spirituality: "Our love for Christ necessarily gives rise to our love for his Church, the People of God, the centre of unity and communion of all the forces working for the Kingdom".⁶³

"A significant role", says the Exhortation, "is played by consecrated persons within the particular Churches. ...The charisms of the consecrated life can greatly contribute to the building up of charity in the particular Churches".⁶⁴ This is a second environment where communion becomes a task of our mission. As practical methods for this are quoted "cooperation between consecrated

⁶¹ CIARDI F., *La Comunione in "Vita Consecrata"*, in *Religiosi in Italia*, n. 294, p. 120

⁶² cf. VC 46

⁶³ C 13

⁶⁴ VC 48

persons and Bishops for the organic development of diocesan pastoral life",⁶⁵ the care and inserting of one's own spiritual patrimony and pastoral practice, dialogue between superiors and bishops, care by the latter for the charism sought and welcomed by the religious.⁶⁶

This is a necessary aspect in view of the education of youth to the faith, in which ecclesial experience is indispensable but not at all easy. It is interesting to recall how in his particular Church, tormented by doctrinal and pastoral tensions, Don Bosco did not side with either party but adhered to the crucial point of communion. In the solution of personal conflicts he saw to it that the good of the Church prevailed over any natural desire for justice.

The Exhortation presents the mission of communion also in another setting: that of the *relationships between consecrated persons*. "Those who are united by a common commitment to the following of Christ and are inspired by the same Spirit cannot fail to manifest visibly, as branches of the one Vine, the fullness of the Gospel of love. Mindful of the spiritual friendship which often united founders and foundresses during their lives, consecrated persons, while remaining faithful to the character of their own Institute, are called to practise a fraternity which is exemplary and which will serve to encourage the other members of the Church in the daily task of bearing witness to the Gospel".⁶⁷

For this too, practical indications are given: knowledge, friendship, active participation in the organisms of animation and coordination, communication and inter-exchange so as "to discern God's plan in this troubled moment of history, in order better to respond to it with appropriate works of the apostolate".⁶⁸

In the report on the State of the Congregation I wrote: "There is a much greater sensitivity and openness to a broader communion

⁶⁵ VC 48

⁶⁶ cf. VC 48

⁶⁷ VC 52

⁶⁸ VC 53

realized between Institutes of Consecrated Life. Attention is being given to what is happening in the area of religious life, and valid contributions are being made in events and organisms of coordination (CISM, CLAR, preparation of the Synod, common commitments, etc)".⁶⁹ It is a criterion to be maintained and a path we must continue to follow.

The possibility must not be undervalued of establishing systematic and stable forms of collaboration with other religious for specific enterprises which call for convergence of techniques and resources. This has been shown already through study-centres. The complex nature of the present context and the new demands of evangelization lead not only to bringing about a concordance of settings and lines of action, but also to the launching of some common initiatives.

There is then also the aspect of the *locality* or the human community, considered immediately and in a broad manner: sector, town, country, world. In these there emerges the need for aggregation, the call for peace, the desire for reconciliation and for dignified and reassuring living conditions. To the old situations of conflict now present in new family, social and political forms, are added new examples typical of our time, such as cultural extraneousness, emargination, various kinds of fundamentalism, and the opposing theories. Often they end up in real or psychological divisions, rejection or inattentive oversight.

To be experts of communion means being able to create moments and motives of aggregation, to mediate in daily situations of conflict, to inculcate the desire for peaceful living together, to foster humanizing structures and circumstances, to be peaceful in the strong sense of the word, to concentrate on the quality of relationships, to work for the overcoming of social or ethnic prejudices, to becoming ever more able to dialogue with people of different mentalities. Some are hoping for the setting up of interna-

⁶⁹ VECCHI J. E., *La società di San Francesco di Sales nel sessennio 1990 - 95*, 4.3 n. 276

tional and intercultural communities which will be workshops for the welcoming and exploitation of diversities, and of gaining experience in this line.

There is a final indication given in the Exhortation, to which we need to give attention at the present day because it links up with the commitment asked of us by the GC24: it is that of the *laity*, and particularly in the case of "associates and volunteers".⁷⁰

Let us read again the passage I quoted earlier in connection with spirituality: "Today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes".⁷¹ The affirmation is supported by a rich collection of charismatic, ecclesial and pastoral motives.

I will not delay on a comparison of indications and motives with those put forward in our capitular document on the same matter. The convergence is too evident to pass unobserved. Our purpose in going through this part of the Exhortation has only been to emphasize that what we are trying to realize is what the Church herself proposes and to show that all these aspects are linked together and mutually reinforce each other. Within them are working those who, according to the same Exhortation, are living and spreading the "spirituality of communion"⁷² and become "witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design".⁷³

A mission field ('areopagus') for us: education

It will not have escaped your notice that the first field enu-

⁷⁰ cf. VC 54-56

⁷¹ VC 54

⁷² cf. VC 51-57

⁷³ VC 46

merated for the mission of consecrated persons is the "world of education".⁷⁴

Education is understood here in its widest and comprehensive meaning: as the growth of the individual and as the sum total of the mediations at his service to make him aware of his being and his destiny, to give him an adequate knowledge of reality, to develop his ability for evaluation and choice, to open him to sense and mystery, and to proclaim to him God's word.

The model of the educator is in fact "the Master of the Church's inner life, who penetrates the innermost depths of every human heart and knows the secret unfolding of history".⁷⁵

In this broad perspective is to be understood the educative function of the Church in the world. The education of individuals and of humanity is not an optional manifestation of charity or one partial aspect of the mission; it is at its very heart and a way it cannot fail to follow. As God saves man by educating him in what concerns his conscience and from it awaits a response, so the Church exercises her ministry by enlightening, proposing and challenging his freedom. She becomes the mediator for the educating action of God, the prolongation and realization of the teaching Christ gave to his disciples and to the crowds, the sign of the action of the Spirit which transforms hearts.

And so everything in her has an educative character: presence, proclamation, celebration and various services. It all tends to give to man the consciousness of his being, to help him to discover and embrace what is good and noble and eternal which the Creator has placed within him, and to open him to the relationship which constitutes him to dignity with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In this context is inserted the educative commitment of consecrated persons, first and foremost because of their choice of the

⁷⁴ cf. VC 96-97

⁷⁵ VC 96

life of the specific Institutes which require it, or of the professional requirements they take on. In this sense all forms of consecrated life are strongly educative in respect of man and in the first place of Christians.

The sign they offer, the values they make their own, the service they provide, are all a thrust and help towards growth in humanity and faith.

Some consecrated persons take up their educational work by profession and make of it the setting where they live their radical option for God and the service of their neighbour, especially those most in need.

The mission leads these religious to work in three settings. The first includes everything concerning the *integral advancement* of the person, according to the needs realized in concrete situations. Their work in this field, inspired by the love of Christ and as his followers, is true evangelization.

The second setting covers *Christian initiation*, the education of those who have made the faith option or show themselves disposed to consider it. Here it is a matter of accompanying those concerned as they live in history as children of God, incorporated in the existence of Christ and members of his people. Catechesis and the formation of an evangelical mentality are its principal parts.

The third setting is the humanization and *evangelization of culture* as a collective form of education following the process described by *Evangelii nuntiandi* "for affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life".⁷⁶

This frame of reference is indispensable for grasping in a realistic manner the challenges made to the mission of religious who are educators, and the responses they can make.

⁷⁶ cf. EN 19

Education understood in this way is not limited to the scholastic sector nor only to institutions specifically known as such, even though these represent the hard core of the social effort, to offer opportunities of prevention, retrieval and growth to all. The kind of society in which we are living has multiplied the problems of both young people and adults. To the pattern of education which for so long was served up for the majority has been added the need for adaptation to a host of situations which become ever more differentiated as society becomes more complex. Rightly does the Exhortation link with education a "renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life",⁷⁷ on the part of religious, and their presence in the world of social communication.⁷⁸

This field of education has been sometimes called an "areopagus", a place of open dialogue and not just an institutional system, precisely because of the need to set up a dialogue on the sense of an open life, with participants of various orientations and with no axes to grind, because we need to face up to the new demands of life and culture with new initiatives.

For us, all this that we have said points to a professional field of application: *young people, and especially the poorest of them*. They are the test of the realism of our love and our ability to proclaim the Gospel. It is providential for them and for the Church that someone will come down to street level to start up a dialogue with them.

The Exhortation recognizes that consecrated persons, "because of their special consecration, their particular experience of the gifts of the Spirit, their constant listening to the word of God, their practice of discernment, their rich heritage of pedagogical traditions built up since the establishment of their Institute, and their profound grasp of spiritual truth..., are able to offer a specific contribution to the work of other educators".⁷⁹

⁷⁷ VC 98

⁷⁸ cf. VC 99

⁷⁹ VC 96

Don Bosco's words: "The youngsters should not only be loved, but they themselves should know that they are loved"⁸⁰ has a place in the memory of the "admirable examples of consecrated persons who have sought and continue to seek holiness through their involvement in education, while at the same time proposing holiness as the goal of education".⁸¹

It reminds us that for us education is not only a consequence of the quest for sanctification but the human setting in which it acquires its typical physiognomy, because it contains, in line with the nature of our vocation, also the moment of grace. The primacy we give to God in our life and the following of Christ becomes translated into a desire to bring them to life in the heart of the new generations, so that they may find there sense and happiness.

The unity with which we live the two aspects moulds the physiognomy of our spirituality which is identified with the preventive system and creates the style of our communion as "family spirit".⁸²

John Paul II had already pointed this out to us in the letter *Iuvenum Patris*: "I want especially to consider in Don Bosco the fact that he realized his personal holiness through an educative commitment lived with zeal and an apostolic heart, and that at the same time he knew how to propose holiness as the practical objective of his pedagogy. An interchange between "education" and "holiness" is indeed the characteristic aspect of his personality".⁸³

Conclusion

Dear confreres, I wanted to recall your attention to the Exhortation which sheds light on consecrated life to encourage you to read it receptively and creatively on your own account. I have

⁸⁰ Letter from Rome 1884, MB XVII, 110

⁸¹ VC 96

⁸² cf. C 16

⁸³ IP 5

dwelt only on some aspects of it which I consider more immediate at the present moment in view of the actuation of the GC24.

I think in fact that when we look at the more fundamental implications of the GC24 we need to express hope in the resources of our vocation, give preferential attention to our spiritual life and its communication, become men of communion, and rethink the contribution which education brings to the realization of vocation, spirituality and communion.

I finish this letter on 8 September, Mary's birthday. In many Provinces professions take place around this feast. From the information we receive from around the world we see once again that "the Lord loves the Congregation, wants to see it vibrant for the good of the Church and never ceases to enrich it with new apostolic energy".⁸⁴ I myself have had the satisfaction of receiving ten first professions in our novitiate of Oktiabrskij, near Moscow, and another twenty-two at Smarhon (Belarus).

This is an encouragement to us to present with confidence to young people the consecrated life and our experience of it as followers of Don Bosco.

May Mary most holy, who welcomed God's gift and sang his praises in the *Magnificat*, help us to live with joy our experience of pastoral charity, so as to share it with simplicity in our communities and communicate it efficaciously to the young.

My cordial greetings to you all

and may your work be rich in fruitful results.


 A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Juan Tucki". The signature is written in a cursive style. To the left of the name is a large, stylized, looped flourish that starts from the bottom left, goes up and around the first part of the name, and then loops back down to the left.

⁸⁴ *Cost.* 22